
The Transformation of Religious Authority: A Critical Review of Fanaticism and Intellectual Freedom in Indonesian Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstrak

Transformasi otoritas keagamaan di pesantren Indonesia dan implikasinya terhadap fanatisme serta kebebasan intelektual. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan hermeneutik-kritis dan analisis wacana Foucauldian, penelitian ini menafsirkan hubungan kiai–santri sebagai praktik kekuasaan/pengetahuan yang membentuk kebenaran agama dan mereproduksi struktur epistemik yang hierarkis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa otoritas pesantren memiliki fungsi ganda: mempertahankan tradisi keilmuan dan moral Islam sekaligus berpotensi membatasi otonomi intelektual santri melalui ketaatan epistemik. Representasi simbolik kiai dalam media modern dan munculnya bentuk-bentuk resistensi halus dari santri menunjukkan pergeseran dari otoritas karismatik-hierarkis menuju model partisipatif. Strategi pedagogis dan kurikuler, seperti pembelajaran dialogis, halaqah reflektif, pembelajaran berbasis masalah, serta integrasi tradisi Islam kritis seperti ijtihad dan munāzarah, direkomendasikan untuk mendukung transisi ini. Dengan menggabungkan teori kekuasaan atau pengetahuan Dengan menggabungkan teori kekuasaan dan pengetahuan Foucault dan prinsip kebebasan intelektual dalam

epistemologi Islam, kerangka humanistik dan emansipatoris dihadirkan untuk pendidikan Islam. Pendekatan ini menempatkan pesantren bukan sekadar sebagai penjaga ortodoksi agama, tetapi sebagai ruang belajar reflektif yang mendorong kesadaran kritis, dialog etis, dan pengembangan spiritualitas partisipatif dalam masyarakat Muslim kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Otoritas Keagamaan, Pesantren, Fanatisme, Kebebasan Intelektual

Abstract

The transformation of religious authority in Indonesian pesantrens has significant implications for fanaticism and intellectual freedom. Using a hermeneutic-critical approach and Foucauldian discourse analysis, the kyai–santri relationship is interpreted as a practice of power and knowledge that shapes religious truth while reproducing hierarchical epistemic structures. Findings indicate that pesantren authority serves a dual function: preserving Islamic scholarly and moral traditions while potentially constraining students’ intellectual autonomy through epistemic compliance. The symbolic representation of kyais in modern media, along with students’ subtle forms of resistance, signals a shift from charismatic-hierarchical authority to a participatory model. Pedagogical and curricular strategies such as dialogic learning, reflective halaqah, problem-based learning, and the integration of critical Islamic traditions—such as *ijtihad* and *munāẓarah*—are recommended to support this transition. By combining Foucault’s theory of power and knowledge with the principle of intellectual freedom in Islamic epistemology, a humanistic and emancipatory framework for Islamic education is presented. This approach positions pesantrens not merely as guardians of religious orthodoxy but as reflective learning spaces that foster critical awareness, ethical dialogue, and participatory spirituality within contemporary Muslim communities.

Keywords: Religious Authority, Islamic Boarding Schools, Fanaticism, Intellectual Freedom.

Introduction

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) are Indonesia’s oldest Islamic educational institutions. They have played a key role in shaping the character, morals, and scholarly traditions of Muslims (Hefner, 2001; Mujahid, 2021). Since colonial times, *pesantren* have served as centers of religious knowledge and guardians of traditional religious authority, embodied by the *kiai* (religious leader) (Zaman, 2010). Today, curriculum reform, digitalization, and growing demands for critical and dialogical learning challenge these authority structures (Eickelman, 2000; Rosidi et al., 2024). Thus, *pesantren* are now both

moral bastions and sites of contest between conservative values and intellectual freedom. It is increasingly urgent to understand the dynamics of religious authority, as religious fanaticism and the crisis of freedom of thought have become paradoxes within contemporary Islamic education (Hefner, 2022; Subchi et al., 2022).

In global discourse, the concept of religious authority has undergone a transformation with the spread of mass education and communication technology (Eickelman, 2015; Zaman, 2012). In various Muslim societies, religious authority is no longer singular and hierarchical, but rather fragmented and negotiated through public discourse (Anderson, 2019; Hefner, 2022). Eickelman's (2000) study asserts that the emergence of mass literacy and mass communication has displaced the ulama's monopoly over religious knowledge, while Zaman (2010) describes the ulama's transformation as "custodians of change." Within this reformist landscape, Islamic education institutions, including pesantren, are increasingly required to renegotiate authority in ways that align tradition with pedagogical innovation and intellectual openness. A similar phenomenon is evident in Indonesia, where Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) have become social laboratories for transforming Islamic authority, balancing conservatism and rationality (Rahman, 2022; Marzuki et al., 2020). Thus, Indonesian pesantren contribute to the global discourse on how Muslim communities negotiate religious authority amidst the pressures of modernity and plurality.

Various studies on Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Indonesia show that religious authority remains a dominant factor in shaping fanaticism and students' freedom of thought (Khoiriyah et al., 2024; Ju'subaidi et al., 2024). However, most studies still focus on the curriculum and religious ritual practices without deeply examining the power relations between kiai (Islamic scholars) and students (Nurtawab et al., 2022; Arroisi et al., 2025). More importantly, existing research rarely situates these power relations within the broader context of educational modernization and reform, where pesantren are increasingly pressured to adopt critical, participatory, and student-centered pedagogies (Nurtawab et al., 2022). As a result, the epistemic roots of fanaticism and the structural limitations on intellectual freedom remain insufficiently problematized within reform-oriented Islamic education discourse. Studies on fanaticism often stop at describing social behavior, rather than examining its epistemological and relational roots to authority (Wahid et al., 2021). On the other hand, the aspect of intellectual freedom in Islamic education is often marginalized (Thoyib et al., 2024). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by critically examining the

transformation of religious authority and its implications for the emergence of fanaticism and freedom of thought in Islamic boarding schools.

This research's conceptual framework combines Michel Foucault's (2020) theory of power/knowledge with the concept of intellectual freedom in Islamic epistemology (Al-Attas, 2002; Arkoun, 2013). Foucault emphasized that knowledge is always intertwined with power, so the relationship between kiai (Islamic scholars) and santri (Islamic students) can be read as a practice of power in the production of religious truth. Meanwhile, Al-Attas (2002) and Arkoun (2013) emphasize the importance of intellectual freedom in Islam, which allows for creativity and constructive criticism of scientific authority. The main problem this research addresses is the epistemic tension between religious fanaticism and intellectual freedom in the Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) education system in Indonesia. Although *pesantren* have long been centers for the transmission of Islamic knowledge and morality, their hierarchical authority structures often reproduce forms of epistemic obedience that hinder the emergence of critical discourse and knowledge innovation. Within the context of ongoing Islamic education reform and modernization, this condition becomes increasingly problematic, as traditional authority models frequently clash with growing demands for participatory, dialogical, and emancipatory pedagogical approaches. In this context, a fundamental question arises: how does the transformation of religious authority in Islamic boarding schools influence the dynamics of religious fanaticism, and to what extent does it open space for students' intellectual freedom? This study, therefore, problematizes how far such transformations respond to or resist the imperatives of educational reform aimed at fostering intellectual autonomy and critical consciousness.

This research aims to critically analyze the construction and transformation of religious authority in Islamic boarding schools, focusing on how relations of power and knowledge shape patterns of obedience, fanaticism, and the limits of freedom of thought in traditional Islamic educational environments. Using a critical-hermeneutic approach and Foucaultian discourse analysis, this research seeks to reinterpret authority from a charismatic-hierarchical model to a participatory model that supports intellectual emancipation and scientific dialogue. Thus, the analysis focuses on the epistemic relationship between power, knowledge, and intellectual freedom within the Islamic boarding school tradition, while simultaneously formulating a more reflective, humanistic paradigm for Islamic education, free from structural fanaticism.

This research portrays Islamic boarding schools not simply as traditional institutions but as spaces of epistemological transformation, where authority, tradition, and freedom of thought intersect (Marzuki et al., 2020; Zuhdi, 2018). It seeks to reconcile Islamic educational discourse with modern social theory to deepen understanding of the role of pesantren in shaping critical awareness among Muslim communities (Hefner, 2016; Nafi'a et al., 2022).

Theoretically, the study expands the discourse on Islamic authority by positioning pesantren as sites where the dialectic between power, knowledge, and intellectual freedom occurs (Foucault, 2020; Zaman, 2012). Empirically, it offers insights into how pesantren can navigate the balance between maintaining moral and scholarly traditions and adopting reform-oriented, participatory pedagogical practices. Practically, the research proposes a conceptual model that can guide Islamic educational institutions, policymakers, and religious communities in fostering a culture of critical thinking, reflective learning, and participatory engagement (Subchi et al., 2022; Marzuki et al., 2020). In doing so, this study contributes to understanding the relationship between religious authority and intellectual freedom, while supporting the development of pesantren as spaces for sustainable spiritual, social, and educational transformation.

Research Method

This research employs a qualitative critical literature study design with a hermeneutic-critical approach and discourse analysis. This approach was chosen to examine how the constructions of fanaticism and religious authority are formed and transformed in the context of Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Through interpretive and reflective analysis, this study aims to uncover the epistemic dynamics between power, knowledge, and intellectual freedom in the Islamic boarding school education system. The researcher goes beyond simply presenting textual data and seeks to unearth the hidden meanings behind power relations and Islamic boarding school scholarly traditions. Thus, this design allows the researcher to reinterpret the structure of religious authority not merely as a social entity but as an ideological construct that shapes thought patterns and intellectual freedom in Islamic education spaces.

This research procedure consists of four stages that proceed in a spiral and reflective manner. In the identification stage, the researcher collects primary scientific sources in the

form of books, articles, and research reports that discuss religious authority, fanaticism, and freedom of thought in Islamic education. Next, the classification stage involves grouping the literature by key themes such as the transformation of authority, the relationship between kiai (Islamic scholars) and santri (Islamic students), and the dynamics of intellectual discourse in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). The interpretation stage is the core of this research, where the researcher conducts a double hermeneutic reading to interpret the explicit and implicit meanings of the texts within their social, historical, and ideological contexts. The final stage, synthesis, integrates the analysis results into a new theoretical framework on the relationship between religious authority and intellectual freedom, relevant to the reform of Islamic boarding school education in the modern era.

The data in this study are sourced from scientific literature that meets academic criteria and is conceptually relevant. Primary sources include internationally reputable scholarly articles published by publishers such as Taylor & Francis, Springer, Brill, and Routledge; classic and contemporary books on Islamic education and critical social theory (e.g., Foucault, Arkoun, Al-Attas, Zaman, and Hefner); and official documents related to Islamic boarding school reform and policies in Indonesia. Data collection was conducted through a systematic review with inclusion criteria including topic relevance, academic validity, and contribution to the study of authority transformation. The literature search was conducted using keywords such as Islamic authority, Islamic boarding school education, intellectual freedom, religious fanaticism, and educational transformation. This systematic approach ensures that each piece of data reviewed has conceptual significance in building the research's critical argument.

Data analysis was conducted using critical discourse analysis (CDA) based on a Foucaultian framework that emphasizes the relationship between knowledge and power in the production of religious discourse. The analysis was conducted at three levels: first, the textual level, which examines narratives about authority and fanaticism in academic and religious texts; second, the discursive practice level, which explores how the discourse of authority is reproduced through the Islamic boarding school education system, both in teaching practices and social relations; and third, the social practice level, which interprets the social implications of changes in authority on intellectual freedom and the modernization of Islamic boarding schools. The validity of the analysis is maintained through triangulation of sources and reflexive interpretation, in which the researcher consciously places himself

in a critical epistemic position towards the object of study. With this approach, the research seeks to reveal that the transformation of religious authority is not merely a structural change, but also a reflective process towards intellectual liberation in the Islamic boarding school environment.

Research Finding

Authority Structure of Islamic Boarding School and Patterns of Student Obedience

Historically, Islamic boarding schools functioned as centers for the transmission of Islamic knowledge, positioning the kiai (Islamic scholars) as authoritative figures possessing spiritual, moral, and epistemological legitimacy. The hierarchical structure formed within them was not only pedagogical but also reflected a social system that maintained the relationship between power and knowledge (power/knowledge), as described by Foucault (in Aini, 2022). In the traditional Islamic boarding school tradition, the kiai's leadership was built through a continuous chain of knowledge and personal charisma recognized by the student community (Dhofier, 1999; Zaman, 2002). Student obedience was not solely the result of external pressure, but rather the internalization of the values of ta'dzim, a form of religious respect institutionalized as epistemic ethics (Syarif, 2013).

This pattern of obedience is often based on an adage that is very popular among Islamic boarding schools, namely the saying attributed to Sayyidina Ali bin Abi Talib:

"أنا عبد من علمني حرفاً واحداً، إن شاء باع وإن شاء أعتق"

"I am a slave to the one who taught me a single letter; if he wishes, he may sell me, and if he wishes, he may set me free."

This saying serves as a normative basis for students (santri), instilling deep respect for their teachers or kiai (Islamic scholars). Culturally, this adage forms the spiritual basis for the practice of extreme ta'dzim (reverence), in which the teacher is considered to have complete authority over the student, even in symbolic and moral dimensions. However, from a scholarly perspective, it is important to note that this statement is not found in authentic hadith books such as Sahih al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, or the other four Sunans as a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Some classical literature refers to it as an atsar (saying) attributed to Ali ibn Abi Talib, not a marfu' hadith (Masyhuri, 2017). Nevertheless, the moral message of this saying remains widely adopted in Islamic boarding

schools (pesantren) because it embodies the ethical values of scholarship and respect for the transmission of knowledge (ta'dzim al-'ilm).

Thus, the ethical and epistemic obedience observed in these institutions can be interpreted as a mechanism for reproducing religious knowledge and authority. While the affection-based loyalty fosters moral discipline and spiritual devotion, it simultaneously risks constraining critical thinking and intellectual independence. Symbolic representations of kiai in modern media further reinforce these hierarchies, yet the emergence of subtle student resistance indicates a potential for dialogue between tradition and intellectual freedom. "The patterns of obedience observed in Islamic boarding schools highlight complex power relations between kiai and students. These patterns not only reflect traditional hierarchies but also raise questions about students' intellectual autonomy and moral development.

Thus, this adage serves as an ethical foundation for the formation of power relations in Islamic boarding schools. The students' obedience becomes a form of epistemic obedience, obedience born of moral and spiritual awareness toward the teacher as the source of truth (Nauval, 2024). Research by Achmadin et al. (2024) shows that, in the socio-cultural context of Islamic boarding schools, this relationship represents a patron-client relationship in which the kiai serves as both a spiritual figure and a director of students' social behavior. This pattern creates a system in which truth is produced and recognized through the kiai's authority, while the students position themselves as passive recipients of knowledge.

Furthermore, research by Maghfiroh and Fadhilah (2024) on students living in the inner sanctum (ndalem) at the Mamba'ul Hikam Islamic Boarding School in Blitar demonstrates how this obedience is rooted in complex affective relationships. The students' obedience stems not solely from the power structure but also from a sense of love and spiritual devotion instilled from the beginning of their education. This pattern demonstrates a form of obedience by affection, where a personal relationship with the kiai fosters strong epistemic loyalty. However, within the framework of modernizing Islamic education, this pattern of obedience creates ambivalence: it can foster morality and discipline, but it can also restrict students' intellectual autonomy.

On the other hand, research by Mundiri (2022) and Nisa'u et al. (2025) shows that the kiai's authority also undergoes symbolic transformation through new media and public spaces. The representation of the kiai as a charismatic figure in popular culture reinforces

the construction of symbolic power that affirms the students' obedience while simultaneously reproducing the discourse of traditional spiritual leadership in a modern context. However, this research also found the emergence of subtle resistance (symbolic resistance) from some students who are beginning to reinterpret obedience as a form of dialogue between tradition and intellectual freedom.

Discussion

Power Relations: An Ethical Crisis in the Authority Structure of Islamic Boarding Schools

The phenomenon of sexual violence in Islamic boarding schools cannot be reduced to individual deviant behavior but must be understood as a structural product of the unequal power relations between the kiai (Islamic scholars) and the students (santri). The kiai's position as a sacred figure creates an aura of absolute obedience that silences criticism and normalizes submission (Pebriaisyah & Wilodati, 2022). In some cases, religious authority is manipulated into an instrument of legitimizing violence, with perpetrators using religious symbols and language to justify their unethical actions (Abdul Basir bin Mohamad et al., 2024). This phenomenon is referred to as spiritual manipulation, a form of symbolic violence that transforms religious relations into arenas of moral and sexual domination. Thus, sexual violence in Islamic boarding schools not only physically injures the victims but also undermines the moral epistemology of Islam, which should be based on compassion and justice.

The deeply rooted patron-client relationship in Islamic boarding schools exacerbates this inequality. Within the social structure of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), students are often positioned as subordinate subjects who must submit completely to their patron (kiai), with no room for negotiation (Setiawan, 2012). Ilahi (2014) explains that this relationship pattern culturally shapes habitual obedience, making criticism of the kiai a moral violation. This condition, as noted by Azizah (2021), fosters religious feudalism, hindering transparency and accountability in the management of Islamic educational institutions. When spiritual authority is exercised without principles of justice and social control, Islamic boarding schools are vulnerable to becoming spaces for the reproduction of oppressive patriarchal power under a religious guise.

Lesthari's (2023) research reinforces these findings by demonstrating how digital media representations highlight power relations in cases of sexual violence in Islamic boarding schools as systemic, not incidental, phenomena. The media depicts how female students lose autonomy over their bodies due to the "doctrine of piety" that demands complete obedience. In this context, sexual violence becomes epistemic violence, as victims lose the ability to interpret their own moral reality under the pressure of the ideology of ta'dzim (unlimited respect). Winarno, Islah, and Giyoto (2025) describe this condition as an ethical crisis in Islamic education, indicating a systemic failure to establish mechanisms for protecting and ensuring justice for students.

This ethical crisis demands deeper epistemological reform within the Islamic boarding school authority system. Wulandari and Yunita (2025) propose applying a psychology of da'wah and a critical education approach to foster equal ethical awareness among teachers and students. Similarly, Jagat (2025) emphasizes the importance of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy in dismantling oppressive power structures and fostering ethical literacy among students. Islamic education must move from merely transmitting dogma to a liberating practice that positions humans as autonomous moral subjects. Thus, the transformation of religious authority is not merely a matter of institutional reform but also a restoration of Islamic prophetic values, in which power is used not to dominate but to protect and humanize.

Fanaticism as a Product of a Closed Hierarchy of Knowledge

Religious fanaticism in Islamic boarding schools can be understood as an epistemological consequence of a closed system of authority. From the perspective of Foucault's (1977) power/knowledge theory, knowledge is never neutral but always operates within a network of power that determines who has the right to speak and what is considered true. Religious authority in Islamic boarding schools often functions as a hegemonic mechanism that structures Islamic discourse through the kiai (Islamic cleric), who serves as the central figure determining the legitimacy of truth. This structure gives rise to what Arkoun (2003) calls "epistemic closure," the closure of critical thinking space due to the sacralization of authoritative sources. As a result, students tend to experience epistemic obedience (Madjid, 1997), an intellectual obedience that subordinates individual rationality to a hierarchically constructed truth.

This phenomenon becomes even more complex when fanaticism is no longer simply a religious expression but becomes a symbolic instrument that maintains the stability of power within the Islamic boarding school structure. Hannan's (2017) study found that social relations within Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) communities are often accompanied by social stigma against outside groups, particularly when religious identity is perceived as threatened by differing views. Within the same framework, Nasution (2022) explained that sectarian fanaticism at the Musthafawiyah Purba Baru Islamic boarding school (pesantren) demonstrates an exclusive tendency to acknowledge the truth of a particular sect, thereby narrowing students' scientific horizons. This hierarchical relationship pattern emphasizes that the authority of the kiai (Islamic cleric) is not solely spiritual but also creates a feudal structure of knowledge that governs the legitimacy of thought and action (Sari, Madani, Afradini, & Uyun, 2025).

Other studies show that religious fanaticism is also rooted in the way Islamic boarding schools reproduce symbolic power through monotheism-based education. Mesalina et al. (2024) show that authority at the Daarul Attauhid Muaro Kumpeh Islamic Boarding School is established through an educational system that emphasizes absolute loyalty to the spiritual leader. In this context, monotheism is not merely a theological teaching, but also an ideological tool that reinforces authority structures and regulates social relations within Islamic boarding schools. When knowledge is reduced to a single doctrine without room for dialogical interpretation, fanaticism serves as a bulwark that maintains the system's integrity, while simultaneously hindering the growth of intellectual freedom. This phenomenon underscores that power and knowledge in Islamic boarding schools are intertwined in the logic of obedience rather than dialogue.

Besides stemming from authority structures, fanaticism is also rooted in the internalization of religious values that are not balanced with critical capacity. Nisa (2022) highlights Imam al-Syawkani's view that fanaticism arises from an impure intention to learn, namely when students seek justification rather than truth. In the context of Islamic boarding schools, such intentions are reinforced by the ethic of ta'dzim, which is often interpreted in an absolute manner, shifting respect for teachers into boundless obedience. This aligns with Hanafi's (2018) findings that religious fanaticism in Indonesia arises from the tension between religious authority and interpretive freedom. When religious education systems fail

to develop the capacity for reflective thinking, obedience turns into fanaticism, and spiritual devotion shifts to epistemic subordination.

In the context of the digital era, the dynamics of fanaticism in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) do not necessarily diminish but instead find new avenues for survival. Harnadi et al. (2023) argue that technological modernization has had a relatively small impact on the dynamics of traditional authority, as Islamic boarding schools have successfully maintained their basis of religious legitimacy through symbolic adaptation. This phenomenon demonstrates that digitalization does not automatically bring intellectual emancipation, as epistemic power structures persist in new formats. On the other hand, Novisari, Hairina, and Faridah (2021) show that fanaticism among religious study groups in Banjarmasin exhibits a similar pattern of obedience, where the figure of the religious teacher becomes the source of absolute truth that cannot be challenged. Thus, fanaticism in Islamic boarding schools is not an incidental phenomenon, but rather the result of the systemic reproduction of knowledge structures that restrict space for free thought and critical dialogue.

Intellectual Freedom as a Challenge to Islamic Boarding School Reform: Building Critical Ethical Thinking in Islamic Boarding Schools

The development of modern Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia and Southeast Asia reflects the dynamics of Islamic education reform oriented toward intellectual openness and the integration of knowledge. Hefner (2009) emphasized that these modernization efforts emerged in response to the need for students (*santri*) to adapt to social change and global demands. Azra (2019) added that the integration of religious and general knowledge in Islamic boarding schools is an epistemological strategy that connects classical traditions with the challenges of modernity. However, Nilan (2021) noted that this spirit of freedom of thought often clashes with the values of *ta'dzim* (religious guidance), which places the authority of the *kiai* (Islamic cleric) at the forefront, thereby limiting space for critical dialogue. In this context, a dilemma arises between maintaining the harmony of scholarly traditions and fostering students' (*santri*) intellectual autonomy.

This epistemological tension is not only cultural but also structural. The authority structure that positions the *kiai* as the center of scholarly legitimacy creates a patron-client relationship pattern that limits the space for freedom of thought (Ilahi, 2014). This relationship pattern is often interpreted as a form of respect, but in practice, it can create an intellectual feudal system that hinders critical inquiry. Istiami (2024) shows that in some

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), the indoctrination system remains strong, resulting in a culture of critical reasoning that does not develop optimally. Therefore, intellectual freedom in Islamic boarding schools requires not only curriculum reform but also a reconceptualization of the teacher-student relationship as more dialogical. The strong ethos of ta'dzim (reverence) inherent in the Islamic boarding school system shapes students' moral character, but it can also limit intellectual freedom if understood in an absolute sense (Hakim, 2025). Therefore, Islamic boarding school reform needs to prioritize epistemological transformation that allows students to respect authority without denying the right to critical and independent thought.

Developing critical reasoning in Islamic boarding school education is a strategic challenge amid the strong tradition of ta'dzim (reverence) and hierarchical authority structures. Research by M. Yasin et al. (2022) shows that ethical critical thinking in Islamic boarding schools can develop if accompanied by the habituation of reflective dialogue between teachers and students. However, the prominent patron-client pattern within the kiai leadership system often results in emotional and intellectual dependency, weakening students' critical thinking (Anisa, 2025). This pattern fosters "emotional obedience," which is morally positive, but can lead to intellectual fatalism if not balanced with a spirit of ijtihad and self-reflection.

Freedom of thought in Islamic boarding schools is also hampered by cultural resistance to the critical education paradigm. Samsudin (2019) identified that the student thinking paradigm tends to be reproductive, rather than reflective, shaped by a tradition of authority-centered knowledge transmission. In this context, critical education plays a crucial role in opening students' structural awareness to social realities and power inequalities in their environment (RS Jagat, 2025). Thus, a critical approach is not a threat to the value of ta'dzim (religious obedience), but rather an ethical means to deepen the meaning of Islamic boarding school scholarship, preventing it from remaining merely indoctrinated. The kiai, as the central figure in Islamic boarding schools, plays a strategic role in fostering critical-ethical reasoning. PPTYL Timur (2019) explains that students' reasoning results from a dialectic between tradition and learning experience, shaping their unique way of thinking. Muharrom (2024) asserts that the loss of the tradition of criticism in Islamic boarding schools leads to a decline in students' innovative abilities. Therefore, it is crucial for Islamic boarding schools to build an ecosystem of scientific dialogue that enables students to learn to critique politely

and argue constructively. This approach not only maintains traditional manners but also prepares a generation of students capable of becoming Muslim intellectuals with ethical awareness and reflective skills.

Table 1. Challenges and Solutions to Intellectual Freedom Reform in Islamic Boarding Schools

Challenges	Recommended Solutions
Tension between the tradition of <i>ta'dzim</i> and freedom of thought. Absolute reverence for the <i>kiai</i> limits critical dialogue.	- Emphasize <i>ta'dzim</i> as an ethical practice rather than feudalism, allowing students to maintain respect while expressing opinions freely. - Provide structured discussion spaces such as dialogical <i>halaqah</i> and reflective <i>bahtsul masa'il</i> .
Hierarchical authority structure creating patron–client relations. The <i>kiai</i> as the center of knowledge legitimacy often leads to emotional and intellectual dependency.	- Build a participatory leadership paradigm within the pesantren. - Provide training in dialogical pedagogy for <i>kiai</i> and teachers to encourage two-way interaction.
Indoctrination system that hinders a culture of critical reasoning. Indoctrination leads to intellectual fatalism.	- Reorient the curriculum toward integrating critical thinking through <i>usul fiqh</i> , <i>ijtihad</i> , and <i>mantiq</i> approaches. - Implement problem-based learning (PBL) and project-based learning.
Reproductive and non-reflective learning paradigm. Students memorize more than they process or analyze knowledge.	- Reinforce traditions of critical <i>muhadlarah</i> , academic debates, and reflective tasks. - Use assessment based on argumentation and analysis rather than memorization.
Cultural resistance to critical education. Critical thinking is perceived as a threat to pesantren authority and harmony.	- Provide internal education that critical thinking is part of the Islamic scholarly tradition (e.g., <i>ijtihad</i> , <i>munazharah</i>). - Conduct awareness programs on ethical–critical literacy for students and caretakers.

Decline of the tradition of criticism within pesantren scholarship, leading to innovation stagnation and weak student reflection.	- Revive traditions of <i>taqrir</i> , <i>munazharah</i> , and respectful text-based critique. - Establish regular inter-pesantren academic forums such as student colloquiums.
Lack of a healthy scientific dialogue ecosystem. Academic discourse tends to be one-way and centralized.	- Build a collaborative learning ecosystem such as study groups, literacy clubs, and student journals. - Facilitate students' participation in seminars, essay competitions, and external academic discussions.

New Paradigm: Participatory Authority and Emancipatory Education

The analysis demonstrates that Islamic boarding school education needs to shift from a hierarchical authority model toward a shared or participatory authority paradigm. From a Foucaultian perspective, participatory authority functions as a counter-discursive strategy that deconstructs the monopoly of religious truth traditionally concentrated in a single authoritative figure, thereby redistributing epistemic power within the pedagogical space of the pesantren. This transformation requires reconceptualizing teacher–student relations from a vertical model to a complementary, dialogical one. Freire (1970) conceptualized this approach as emancipatory learning, a process of liberating consciousness through critical dialogue that positions students as subjects of knowledge rather than passive recipients. Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, Al-Attas (1993) emphasized the unity of knowledge and adab, ensuring that intellectual freedom remains inseparable from ethical and spiritual foundations. Accordingly, participatory authority does not negate *ta'dzīm* but redefines it as an ethical framework that regulates the expression of questions, opinions, and arguments. In this sense, Islamic boarding schools hold significant potential to function as learning laboratories that cultivate intellectual autonomy while sustaining moral submission to divine values.

This emancipatory educational paradigm is particularly relevant in the context of Islamic boarding schools, where authority is no longer understood as domination but as a facilitative force in the development of critical consciousness. In line with Foucault's conception of power as productive rather than merely repressive, emancipatory education in

pesantren does not aim to dismantle authority, but to reorganize it as a relational and enabling structure. Muthohar (2022) emphasizes that emancipatory Islamic education does not eliminate the role of the kiai; instead, it repositions authority as an instrument of empowerment that guides santri toward ethical critical subjectivity. Empirical findings by Pertiwi, Cahyani, and Diana (2018) further demonstrate that symbolic interactions grounded in ethical leadership values produce a relational shift in pesantren pedagogy, where the kiai functions not only as a transmitter of knowledge but also as a spiritual guide who listens to students' aspirations. This relational model fosters epistemic equality by providing space for students to think, question, and argue, while preserving ta'dzīm as a moral framework that regulates critical engagement rather than suppressing it.

Participatory education also plays a crucial role in addressing social fragmentation and resistance to change within the pesantren environment by transforming authority into a medium of dialogue and collective meaning-making. Research by Khotimah (2025) demonstrates that participatory leadership in pesantren is effective in managing social conflict and strengthening intergroup cohesion through inclusive and dialogical practices. These findings align with Prasetyo (2022), who shows that participatory leadership fosters a shared vision and a sense of collective responsibility among members of the pesantren community. Within this framework, authority operates not as a coercive mechanism, but as a socially legitimized process that integrates managerial effectiveness with ethical and spiritual guidance. Consequently, the participatory authority paradigm not only enhances institutional governance but also reinforces the social and spiritual dimensions of Islamic education, enabling pesantren to navigate change without eroding communal harmony or religious values.

In practice, this emancipatory and participatory approach must be grounded in the cultivation of a reflective pesantren mindset that remains open to change while firmly rooted in tradition. Moesafa (2003) argues that an emancipatory pesantren mindset enables santri to engage critically with tradition without losing their scholarly and scientific foundations. At the same time, Usman (2020) emphasizes that the critique of pesantren educational practices should serve to refine tradition rather than negate it. From a Foucault perspective, this reflective orientation operates as a discursive mechanism that embeds critical inquiry within ethically bounded spaces, thereby dismantling asymmetric power relations without eroding moral authority. By integrating humanistic and democratic values into pedagogical

practice, pesantren can evolve into collaborative arenas for the shared pursuit of meaning and truth. Consequently, the transformation toward a participatory authority paradigm should be understood not as a threat to tradition, but as a process of ethical refinement that positions pesantren as centers of dialogical learning, intellectual freedom, and Islamic moderation in the contemporary era.

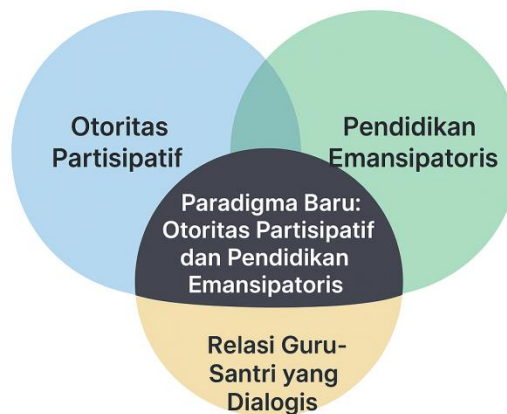


Figure 1. pillars of the new paradigm of Islamic boarding school education

The image above illustrates the integration of three main pillars that form the foundation of a new paradigm in Islamic boarding school education: participatory authority, emancipatory education, and a dialogic teacher-student relationship. Each circle represents a key concept that intersects and complements the others. “Participatory Authority” emphasizes a shift from a hierarchical leadership model to a more collaborative, authority-sharing pattern. “Emancipatory Education” refers to a learning process that liberates consciousness, as conceived by Freire, in which students are positioned as active subjects in the pursuit of knowledge. Meanwhile, “Dialogic Teacher-Student Relationship” depicts a horizontal relationship that provides students with space to ask questions, express opinions, and argue without losing etiquette or respect. These three concepts converge at the center of the diagram and form the core of the New Paradigm: Participatory Authority and Emancipatory Education, an approach that positions Islamic boarding schools as reflective, humanistic, and collaborative learning spaces. This paradigm not only strengthens the scholarly tradition of Islamic boarding schools but also paves the way for the growth of students' critical thinking and intellectual independence in the modern era.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the transformation of religious authority in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools reflects a complex negotiation process between traditional epistemic adherence and the need for intellectual emancipation. The hierarchical relationship between kiai (Islamic scholars) and santri (students), deeply rooted in the ethics of ta'dzim (religious tolerance), contributes to both moral formation and epistemological closure, giving rise to religious fanaticism. Through a Foucaultian analysis, this research reveals that power and knowledge in Islamic boarding schools are not only institutional but also discursive, creating legitimacy structures that determine what is considered true and who has the right to express it. This tension between respect and critique underscores the urgency of reconstructing religious authority into a participatory and dialogical model.

Theoretically, this research expands the discourse on the transformation of Islamic authority by integrating critical social theory and Islamic epistemology to formulate a shared authority framework, a model of authority that aligns tradition with critical rationality. In practice, this research provides educators and policymakers with insights to reform Islamic boarding school education toward an emancipatory and ethical pedagogy that fosters reflective thinking, mutual respect, and moral accountability. In this way, Islamic boarding schools can transcend their role as guardians of conservative orthodoxy and transform into spaces for ethical dialogue, critical thinking, and humanistic spirituality. Ultimately, the transformation of religious authority is not merely a structural change but an epistemological revolution that redefines Islamic education as a process of liberation rather than a constraint on human reason.

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