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**FORMALISING TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC EDUCATION:
PESANTREN INSTITUTION IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA**

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Abstract

This article examines the current state of the traditional Islamic education based in the Indonesian Islamic boarding schools, called *pesantren*, after the Indonesian People's Representative Council passed the *pesantren* bill into legislation in September 2019. Our focus is on aspects mentioned in the *pesantren* legislation document that in many ways regulate the way the *pesantren* system should be managed as a new type of formal education. The *pesantren* people will certainly take much advantages from the enactment of this legislation. Nevertheless, they cannot avoid possible changes in the established values that have been long socially reproduced in that environment following the formalisation process. This study is also based on the authors' visits to the *pesantrens* located in two Indonesian cities, i.e. Jakarta and Ciamis, in March 2020 as well as the first author's ethnographic research during the years 2015-2017 in some West Javanese *pesantrens*. In this article, the authors argue that in the first two decades of the 21st century the traditionalist Muslims celebrated an important period in the development of the *pesantren* tradition-based education after this type of education currently received a recognition in the national education system.

Keywords: Formal Religious Education, *kitab kuning*, *pesantren*, politics of Indonesian Islamic education, traditional Islamic education

I. Introduction

On September 24th 2019, The People's Representative Council of the Republic of Indonesia (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia*, or DPR RI) passed the *pesantren* bill into legislation, i.e. *Undang-Undang Number 18 Year 2019 on Pesantren* (henceforth, the *pesantren* legislation). The Minister of Religious Affairs, Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, who was present at the People's Representative Council's plenary session, states that the enactment of this legislation will give a recognition and strong legal standing position for the *pesantren* institution—as the home to traditional Islamic education—to play their role in the national education (Maharani, *DetikNews* September 24th 2019). Some of the Indonesian Muslim

organisations, especially those who do not advocate traditional education, however requested the postponing of the enactment process by giving the reasons that some points in the bill were not properly elaborated. In their opinion, the bill does not accommodate the aspiration of others Islamic institutions that also offer the *pesantren*-based education. In this connection, they argue against the identification of *pesantren* to be associated with the classical Islamic textual education, called *kitab kuning* (approximately meaning, yellow book), and with the existence of the respected teacher (*kiai*) in the institution. In fact, they state that not all the *pesantrens* are built to advocate the *kitab kuning*-based learning, or to have a *kiai* based in their institutions (Permana, *DetikNews* September 24th 2019).

It has been accepted that scholars have placed the nature of the traditional Islamic education as a binary opposition to the modern education (Halstead 2004; Hussain 2007). Eickelman (1985: 65) and Boyle (2004: 16), for example, note that modern education treats education as separate, independent activities. Such a style however does not agree with the ways in which traditional Islamic education has been developed (for example, see Nilan 2009). Boyle (2004: 22-23) states that there is an obvious contradictory worldview on the structures and values in both different educational environments. In modern education, people pay attention to the grades that indicate someone can pass on or fail. Aside from that, the system was made with a strict level of bureaucratisation. Grades are created based on students' ages, and that they expect to grow in group and acquire skills and knowledge in a uniformity or based on the offered units. In the traditional environment, students leaving or staying in the *pesantren* are mostly a personal choice. Conversely, the modern education requires an entry examination, or a kind of test, or to do administration for those who register. Then, they are scheduled to take an end examination for graduation.

In Indonesia, Geertz (1960: 184-185) and Ricklefs (2007: 173-174) note that the adoption of Western styles in Islamic education seemed to be the most resentful idea among traditionalist Muslims (the *kolot*). During the 19th century to the first part of the 20th century the colonial government built the Dutch-sponsored education that were contradictory to the styles in traditional Islamic education, especially on the ways its education was managed and goals of learning were oriented. The Dutch-sponsored education is developed to create skillfull workers or officials and to support the development of economy. Meanwhile, traditional Islamic education is oriented to deep understanding of Islam as the learners' religion and increase both

social and individual piety (Steenbrink 1986: 24). Eickelman's, Boyle's, Geertz's, Ricklefs' and Steenbrink's statements are right in considering the ways in which both traditional Islamic education under the *pesantren* system and modern education are placed in a binary opposition. Up to the end of the 20th-century Indonesia, we witnessed that traditional Islamic education found their own ways to develop out of the existing government educational system.

This article examines the current state of *pesantren* tradition-based education in Indonesia that has in the last two decades found its way to be equal in the Indonesian educational system. Our focus is on the issued regulation, i.e. the 2019 *pesantren* legislation, that in many ways control the way the *pesantren* system should be managed as a new type of formal education. In this regard, the *pesantren* people certainly take much advantages from the enactment of this legislation. But, they at the same time cannot avoid possible changes in the established values that have been long socially reproduced in the *pesantren* environment. Based on our visits to the *pesantrens* located in Jakarta and Ciamis in March 2020 as well as the first author's ethnographic research during the years 2015-2017 in some West Javanese *pesantrens*, this study therefore sheds light on significant changes in the positioning of the *pesantren* system in contemporary Indonesia compared to those during the late 19th to 20th centuries.

Based on the analysis to follow, we argue that in the first two decades of the 21st century the *pesantren* tradition-based education is celebrating an important period of its development after this system becomes a part in the national education system. The peak political process of this transformation is the enactment of the *pesantren* legislation in September 2019, showing that the Indonesian government is now recognizing three mainstreams of national education: general, *madrasah* and *pesantren* systems. We identify this recognition as the second convergence episode after the enactment of the 1950 legislation that included the modernised Islamic school system, i.e. *madrasah*, to be part of the educational system under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Departemen Agama*) in addition to the general education under the Ministry of Education and Culture (*Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan*).

II. The politics of Islamic education in Indonesia

We define traditional *pesantren* here as the institution that offer *kitab kuning*-based learning only, not formal education. Nevertheless, students are allowed to take formal education outside the *pesantren*. Traditional *pesantren* is also called *pesantren salafiyah* or *salafi* (Dhofier

1982: 41). It is worth noting here that in the Muslim world the word *salafiyah* or *salafi* is a contested term that can be interchangeably used to identify different Muslim groups (Lukens-Bull 2005: 135).

In the first author's fieldwork in a traditional West Javanese pesantren in the early 2016, he had chit-chat with a senior student, telling how the villagers were now getting more aware of academic titles attached in someone who serves such traditional religious ceremonies as *slametan* or *kenduren*. For them, an *ajengan* (a traditional religious teacher in a Sundanese region) should be granted a degree, for which they would give more admiration. For example, when a villager invites an *ajengan* with a granted university degree in his name to serve a religious ceremony, he usually brings home both *nasi berkat* (a container with cooked rice and side dishes) and the envelope containing some amount of money inserted in the plastic bag where the food container is in. Those without a granted degree might face a different experience, and that they would just receive the food container only for doing the same service.¹

Since the late 19th century, the *pesantren* tradition-based education has been considered periphery in the mainstream Indonesian education. Even after the 1945 Indonesian independence, the system was taken as a non-formal education unless they received modernisation under the *madrasah* system. For the majority of students that the first author observed there, they understood formal education and staying² in the pesantren to be two different things. The former deals with the way they look at the future. Meanwhile, the latter, especially for those not taking formal education, deals with the way they seek blessings through their co-presence with the *kiai*. Another senior student whom the first author talked to told that, in the first year of his coming to the *pesantren*, the majority of students had fully stayed at the *pesantren* without taking formal education outside the environment, and that they were proud of studying Islam in that way. In the following years nevertheless, he saw a very different situation, witnessing most of those coming to the *pesantren* also took formal education. They went to their schools outside the *pesantren* every morning and usually came back in early afternoon for attending *kitab* learnings.

In the global Muslim world, Rahman (1982: 43) identifies a secularistic paradigm coming up in the pre-modern Muslim period owing to the failure of Islamic institutions to meet the needs

¹ This story is previously mentioned in Nurtawab (2018: 49).

² We use the term "staying" rather than "studying" here to affirm the intention of some senior students not taking formal education to live with the *kiai* family and serve them daily.

of changing societies. This paradigm adversely affected all aspects of Muslim life in the modern period, especially in the field of education. In this regard, Rahman recognises some aspects by which we can understand the remarkable differences of modern development throughout Muslim regions. The first aspect deals with how a Muslim society in certain regions was able to develop independently while they were under the control of European colonialism. The second deals with the way the Muslim leaders maintained their leaderships and relationship with the ruling power prior to the colonial invasion. The third connects to the ways in which Islamic education had been previously developed; and the last deals with the colonial governments like British, French, and Dutch that ruled their colonies.

Having considered the above factors, Rahman (1982: 43) identifies education in the Muslim world, including in the pre-colonial Indonesia which had been greatly intervened by the Dutch colonial government. Rahman states that in Indonesia the *ulama* institutions and their roles were not concentrated although they were able to become a strong element in the government. In the early 19th-century pre-colonial Indonesia, Steenbrink (1995: 119-120) notes that there was an attempt from the colonial government at developing the educational institution for Indonesian people based on the established system, i.e. *pesantren*. They finally rejected the proposal on the grounds that the *pesantren* system was regarded to run a bad pedagogical practice, that is memorisation of long Arabic texts without a proper comprehension. The late 19th-century colonial government then decided to build an educational system that was very much different from that of *pesantren*-based traditional Islamic education. In fact, as Steenbrink (1984: 158-159) notes, the *pesantren* was at that time the only educational institution that was established and ubiquitous throughout the country (see also Yunus 1979; Dhofier 1982; Latif 2008).

In the early 20th century, Islamic modernism from the Azhar university in Egypt began to come and influence more Indonesian Muslim leaders, and that this movement was considered dangerous by the Dutch (Hing 1977: 157). In the 1930s the colonial government started to subsidise Islamic schools that received the modernisation through the cooperation of the Dutch (Noer 2010: 37). Steenbrink (1986: 87-88) and Dhofier (1982: 41) note that the majority of the *pesantren* however rejected changes in their system. After the Indonesian independence, those who modernised their systems by adding general subjects aside from Islamic subjects in their curriculum showed their significant development. Meanwhile, many traditional institutions

stopped operating because they only had a small number of students or no member of the *kiai*'s family was able to inherit a charismatic leadership after the *kiai* passed away (see also Wagiman 1997).

The above description corresponds to what was happening in the global Muslim world. Boyle (2004: 23), for example, notes that there was an increasing trend that Islamic education in the whole Islamic world followed the way public schools were managed. The example of this is in the way learners are grouped. Previously, Islamic schools—or more specifically Qur'anic schools—were grouped based on their acquired skills and knowledge. But, more Islamic schools are now using classroom where students are grouped based on their ages, bringing chairs and tables and including more general subjects in the curricula. Islamic schools have been then transformed into modern institutions in which characteristics look very similar to public schools.

The new-born Indonesian government accepted the formation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Departemen Agama*) in 1946. This ministry is also home to the development of religious education where in 1950 The People Representative's Council passed the bill on the principles of education and teaching at schools into legislation (henceforth, the 1950 education legislation) where in the article 10 of the legislation document it is stated that those who took religious education recognised by the Ministry of Religious Affairs fulfilled compulsory education. Since then, Indonesia has recognised two mainstreams in the national education: general education under the Ministry of Education and Culture and religious education under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Nevertheless, the *pesantren* tradition-based education was left behind, for the government merely recognised this type of education as non-formal. As Steenbrink notes, the *madrasah* system as the recognisable religious education under the 1950 education legislation has been headed to imitating public schools while maintaining their characteristics as offering more Islamic subjects (Steenbrink 1986: 88; cf. Pohl 2007: 135-141).

As has been stated, the *pesantren* tradition-based education was clearly left behind because it has developed out of the national system. Physically speaking, they received modernisation in the sense that many *kiai* accept the use of microphone or other modern devices to ensure that their teaching performances can go smoothly and reach more listeners. Aside from that, more students accept the use of modern writing tools like pen rather than a sharpened bamboo stick with traditional ink called *mangsi* or *dawat*. The administration of *kitab* learning however did not change a lot where the system—with the selection of all *kitab*s used for

pedagogical practices—remained domain of kin group and, therefore, were difficult to standardise. The forward effect of taking this system non-formal led to objections for accepting the graduates of the *pesantren*-based education when they wanted to pursue their study at any formal education or to look for a formal job.

It is worthy to mention how the Ministry of Religious Affairs maintained partnership with the *pesantren* institutions after the recognition of the *madrasah* system as part of the national education since 1950. As Steenbrink (1986: 88-97) notes, the Ministry did not intervene the *pesantren* institution and also Qur'anic traditional education in one hand. They in the other hand suggested the *pesantren* people receive modernisation by which they can contribute to the national development. Moreover, the adoption of the *madrasah* system in the *pesantren* environment would enable the Ministry subsidise the institution (see also Dhofier 1982: 41).

Levels of education in the *madrasah* system are set up to be equal with those in general education under The Ministry of Education and Culture, i.e. *ibtida'iyah*, *thanawiyah* and *aliyah* (**Table 2**). The *madrasah* curriculum was divided to one-third for Islamic subjects, and the rest for general subjects. Steenbrink (1986: 97) and Dhofier (1982: 33-43) note that in the attempt of the Ministry of Religious Affairs at gaining a public recognition, they brought the *madrasah* system to the paradigm that not only did the institution teach Islamic subject, but it also offered general subjects. This nevertheless made many *madrasah* institutions were reluctant to request the government's subsidy due to their objections to reduce the proportion of Islamic subjects in their curricula. As Lukens-Bull (2005) dan Subhan (2009) note, the Ministry also built the conception that the *madrasah* system would not achieve the same level as public schools without a will to include the same proportion of general subjects. In this regard, Steenbrink (1986: 7) states that in the second part of the 20th-century Indonesian general education has emerged and developed without reference to the adaption of the traditional Islamic education. Conversely, the formal Islamic education grew up with attempts at corresponding to general education.

One of the main development in making the *madrasah* system equal to general education is the signing of agreement between the Minister of Religious Affairs, the Minister of Education and Culture and the Minister of Home Affairs known as The Decree Letter of Three Indonesian Ministers Number 9 Year 1975 (*Surat Keputusan Bersama Tiga Menteri*, or *SKB Tiga Menteri 6/1975*). The main point of this agreement is the recognition of the *madrasah* system to be equal with general education, on a condition that this institution needs to allocate more general subjects

aside from it also offered Islamic subjects (Zuhdi 2005; Subhan 2009: 216). In this connection, Zuhdi (2005) and Subhan (2009: 217) affirm that the *SKB Tiga Menteri* becomes the turning point of transforming Indonesian *madrasahs* into more modern and secular. The mainstreaming of general subjects in the *madrasah* curriculum led to—what Steenbrink said above—the ways in which the *madrasah* system was getting more integrated with public schools.

Lukens-Bull (2005: 63-64) notes that the peak process of mainstreaming general subjects in the *madrasah* curriculum is in 1994 when the proportion of religious education was reduced to 11%. Many *madrasah* institutions however decided to increase the proportion of Islamic subjects while including the same amount of general subjects as general education. In this regard, the first author's experience of taking the *tsanawiyah* program—Islamic junior high school—in a *madrasah* based in Jakarta in 1993-1996 is useful to understand the way the *madrasah* institution adopted both general and Islamic curricula as a whole. The teaching process looked more a full-day school because the *madrasah* has adopted 100% of Islamic subjects as well as 100% of general subjects (cf. Saridjo 1996; Subhan 2009: 218). The adoption of both curricula as a whole in this *madrasah* continues up to the present time.

The second part of the 20th-century development of Islamic education certainly did not advocate the *pesantren* tradition-based education. More *kitab kuning* or classical Islamic texts were excluded from the *madrasah* curriculum. Lukens-Bull (2005: 64) notes that many respected teachers affiliated in the Nahdlatul Ulama, the biggest representative organisation for traditionalist Muslims in Indonesia, felt that the *madrasah* system cannot meet the need of the students to learn their religion properly. In order to solve the gaps, they attempted at adding more hours for Islamic subjects in each day while shortening the duration of teaching for each subject. The result was certainly below target. When monitoring the implementation of the *SKB Tiga Menteri* in his visit to one *Madrasah Aliyah*, The Minister of Religious Affairs, Munawir Sjadzali (1983-1993), found that the students do not have a proper capability both in Arabic language and literature. This encouraged him to develop an alternative program that allocate more Islamic subjects by using references in Arabic texts. The program started in 1988, known as *Madrasah Aliyah Program Khusus* (MAPK). Many Indonesian Muslim scholars state that the program gained a great success in producing Muslim intellectuals. Despite the fact, the program had to end in the middle of the 1990s (Subhan 2009: 228). The emergence of this program

however, as Subhan (2009: 229) notes, is the evidence of how strong the mainstreaming of general subjects in the *madrasah* system is.

In the 1970s, Steenbrink (1986: 7) once stated that since the early 20th century Islamic education began to develop styles of Islamic pedagogy that gradually adapt to the conception of public schools. This is relevant to Islamic education that received modernisation under the *madrasah* system. Nevertheless, this is not the case with the *pesantren* tradition-based education that in many ways remained the same as those established a century ago. As for the latter, as will be elaborated, we state that the 21st-century Indonesia witnessed a distinctive development compared to that of traditional Islamic education during the 20th century. Following the 1998 reform period, Muslim traditionalists have gained a momentum for them to consolidate their political basis in their attempts at making the *pesantren* tradition-based education recognisable and equal in the Indonesian educational system.

III. *Pesantren* as a new type of formal education

We have presented a general picture on the politics of Indonesian Islamic education from the 19th century to the late 20th century. One point that we would like to re-affirm here is in the way the *pesantren* system has been positioned in the periphery of the Indonesian educational mainstream although the establishment of this institution can be traced back to early 19th century, or even older. The existence of the *pesantren* tradition-based education got less dominant even after the Indonesian independence day. The recognition of religious education under the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 1950 did not help the *pesantren* institution increase their role in education. The main reason is that the *madrasah* system is more oriented to accept more general subjects and to reduce Islamic subjects to a minimum proportion. Meanwhile, the *pesantren* tradition-based education remained domain of kin group, and that the system is not economically oriented to contribute to the national development.

In this section, we argue that following the 1998 reform period the Indonesian public witnessed a significant development of democracy where traditionalist Muslims were able to consolidate their resources to gain a certain level of political power and to strengthen their diplomacy, especially in the advocacy of the *pesantren* tradition-based education to be part of the national education system. It began with the enactment of the 2003 legislation on the national education system. The legislation, article 30 (3-5), states that religious education can be

conducted either in formal, non-formal and informal forms of education, and that this type of education can have its base in the *pesantren* institution or other established religious institutions.

In 2007, The President of the Republic of Indonesia issued a government regulation on the conduct of religious education, recognising that this type of education has greatly contributed to the national development. This regulation contains more elaboration on the way religious education—like those based in the *pesantren* institution—can be managed in a formal way. Following this government regulation, The Minister of Religious Affairs then issued two Ministerial Regulations in 2014 in their attempts at making the *pesantren* tradition-based education recognisable. The first regulation deals with the equivalence policy (*mu'adalah*). As Nurtawab (2018: 45) notes, this policy is meant to give a formal recognition on the conducted pedagogical practices based in the *pesantren* system by using the curricula outside the national curriculum. In its implementation, the equivalence policy falls into two main categories based on the common categories of the Indonesian *pesantrens*, i.e. modern (*mu'allimin*) and traditional (*salafiyah*). The second regulation deals with the launch of Formal Religious Education (*Pendidikan Diniyah Formal*, or PDF). The latter is the *kitab kuning*-based education that offers 70% or more of the curriculum to study Islam and Arabic, and the rest to study general subjects.

In this connection, it is worth knowing how many Indonesian young learners studying at the *pesantren*. The Ministry of Religious Affairs once published a directory in 1982, informing the profiles of the *pesantren* institutions throughout Indonesia. Dhofier in his forward for this publication states that the total number of the registered *pesantrens* were 4,890 with 735,417 students. In the following four decades, we can see the significant increase based on the free accessible online statistic on the current state of the *pesantren* institution provided by the Directorate for Religious Education and Pesantren, The Ministry of Religious Affairs as follow:

Table 1: Numbers of *pesantren* and its students in 2020

Students at dormitories & at home		Types of Pesantren	
At dormitories	At home	<i>Kitab kuning</i> -based learning plus formal education	<i>Kitab kuning</i> -based learning only
1,172,075	2,903,057	14,306	12,661
Total: 4,075,132 students		Total : 26,967 pesantrens	

Adapted from: ditpdpontren.kemenag.go.id/pdpp/grafik. Retrieved on May 19th 2020.

Based on **Table 1**, there is a changing perspective in a way the Ministry of Religious Affairs categorises the *pesantren* institutions compared to the statistic in years 2012/2013,

dividing the *pesantrens* into three categories, i.e. *salafiyah*, *khalafiyah* and combination. Dhofier (1982: 41) defines the *pesantren khalafiyah* as the *pesantren* that offers more general subjects or offers general education in the *pesantren* environment. **Table 1** therefore only shows the *pesantrens* institutions that offer *kitab kuning*-based education. In other words, the above statistic excludes the *pesantren khalafiyah* that in the 2012/2013 statistic contributed 5,483 institutions out of 29,535 *pesantrens* in total. **Table 1** on the current state of *pesantrens* and students shows that the number of students who are currently taking *kitab kuning*-based education has reached more than 4 million students. They are studying at more than 27,000 *pesantrens* where about 40% (i.e. 12,661) out of the *pesantrens* in total offer traditional Islamic education only, that is the *kitab kuning*-based learning using traditional methods (*bandongan* and *sorogan*).

It is worth quoting Steenbrink's statement in the 1970s on the ability of the *pesantren* institution to survive—or even to develop in quantity—in the midst of marginalisation for about two centuries, preserving their learning tradition and identity. The fact that the traditional Islamic education has increased in numbers shows that the *pesantren* people are used to living with modernity although they refuse to adopt it (see Steenbrink 1986: 102). As Nurtawab (2019) notes, the 21st-century Indonesia witnessed the way the *pesantren* tradition-based education—with all their established traditional learning methods—found their way to be part in the mainstream of the Indonesian education system.

The process of formalising traditional Islamic education reached a peak with the enactment of the *pesantren* legislation on September 24th 2019. If we refer to the first convergence project in 1950, the *pesantren* system had to receive modernisation and run pedagogical classroom under the *madrasah* system. Another convergence project that currently took place in 2019 demonstrated a different fact where the *pesantren* legislation recognises many aspects of the traditional *pesantren* tradition that advocate the conduct of *kitab kuning* learning. The government is now responsible for supporting the administration of the *pesantren* tradition-based education just as they support both general schools and *madrasah*. Levels of education offered in the the *pesantren* tradition-based education are now equal to those in the general and *madrasah* systems (**Table 2**).

Table 2: Three mainstreams in the current Indonesian educational system

Levels of education	General system UU 20/2003 on National education system	Madrasah system UU 20/2003 on National education system	Pesantren education UU 18/2019 on <i>Pesantren</i>
Primary	Sekolah Dasar (SD)	Madrasah Ibtida'iyah (MI)	PDF Ula / Mu'adalah Ula
Secondary	Sekolah Menengah Pertama (SMP)	Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs)	PDF Wustha / Mu'adalah Wustha
	Sekolah Menengah Atas (SMA) or equals	Madrasah Aliyah (MA) or equals	PDF 'Ulya / Mu'adalah 'Ulya
Higher education	University (Undergraduate, Magister and Doctor)		Ma'had 'Aly (Undergraduate, Magister and Doctor)

At the outset, it is stated that there was an attempt from representatives of some Islamic organisations to make a request for the postponing of enacting the *pesantren* bill because, to them, some aspects in the draft are not properly presented, one them being the definition of the *pesantren* that is very much attributed to the *kitab kuning* learning practices. However, some members of the People's Representative Council claim that all contents in the draft already accommodated all the Muslims' aspirations. For example, the *pesantren* legislation states that *pesantren* is categorised as an Islamic institution that offer *kitab kuning* learning, or offer the form of Islamic studies in the modern form, known as *mu'allimin*, or offer Islamic education in other forms that are integrated with general education.³

A new development concerning the current traditional Islamic education based in *pesantren* is that the *pesantren* is eligible to open the *pesantren* tradition-based education at the university level, known as *Ma'had 'Aly*. This is of course a new mainstream at the higher education level that in the future will certainly attract the graduates of the *pesantren* to take *kitab kuning*-based Islamic studies at the undergraduate—or even doctoral—programs.⁴

IV. From kin group to government: values contested

In this section, we examine some important points dealing with the way the *pesantren* tradition-based education is administered. The government now legally recognises that the

³ Articles 1(2) and 5(1).

⁴ Article 22(1-7).

pesantren institutions have greatly contributed to gaining the Indonesian independence as well as to the national development. In order to assure the continuation of the *pesantren*'s role in education and social engagement, the government then issued a regulation to legitimise the conduct of the *pesantren* tradition-based education.

For the purpose of study, we selected some articles in the *pesantren* legislation, in the ways in which the formalising process of the *pesantren* institution reflects the contestation between the established values of the *pesantren* tradition and those brought from the implementation of the new regulation. Here, our focus is on the way the *pesantren* institution socially reproduces the structured values in a new type of formal education and how they transform into the adoption of a new administration. In this regard, we need to keep in our mind that the main difference between the *pesantren* legislation and previous regulations that had been enacted during the 20th century is in the way that this legislation significantly brings the whole *pesantren* system and their traditional styles of *kitab kuning*-based learning to become a legal part in the Indonesian education system. Dhofier (1980: 47-58) notes that the existence of the *pesantren* is inherently related to the *kiai* and his kin group or, more generally, their networks. There are certainly embodied values that have structured all members of the society in that environment to behave in a way that is socially acceptable, and that those values have been for years socially reproduced to strengthen the structure in a given environment.

Figure 1: Students wearing t-shirt of “Guruku kyai, Bukan Mbah Google (My teacher is a kyai, Not Grandfather Google), showing a student’s pride of being linked with the respected teacher.”



Photo: First author. Taken on May 1st, 2017 in Ciamis

The embodied values that are likely to be contested following the formalising process of the *pesantren* institution deal with the orientation of *kitab kuning*-pedagogy that focuses on completion (*khataman*) as a learning goal. Nurtawab (2018: 85-93) notes that it is very common in the traditional environment that a student completed one *kitab* learning more than one time, or even many times, with the same respected teacher or others. Aside from that, traditional students commonly seek their co-presence with the respected teacher as the main reason of staying at the *pesantren* through which they would be given blessings (*tabaruk*). For students, the blessings include the referential aspect of the *kitab* they completed with the teacher. Both values of

completion and co-presence with teacher are closely linked to the students' pride on their obtained knowledge link (*sanad keilmuan*) to their teachers. As Maftuhin (2018: xvii) notes, one of the important links for *kitab kuning*-based Islamic knowledge in Indonesia is through the link of Syekh Mahfudz al-Tarmasi (d. 1920), a well-known Islamic scholar in the early 20th-century Indonesia (cf. Rachman 1997: 77-96). In this connection, traditional students believe that co-presence with respected teachers in seeking blessings through the conduct of *kitab kuning*-readings is a prerequisite for studying Islam, and that studying Islam on the *internet* with *mbah google* (Grandfather Google, a popular call among Indonesians for a search engine used for browsing anything on the internet) is socially taken as unacceptable (**Figure 1**).

The *pesantren* legislation, article 5(2), mentions basic elements that have to be found in the *pesantren* institution: dormitory, mosque, *kitab kuning*-based learning, students (*santri*) and respected teacher (*kiai*). In this regard, there is a strong tendency that these elements refer to what have been commonly found in the traditional environment—and therefore uncommon in other educational environments—and that public take these elements for granted as the basic identities for the whole types of the *pesantren* institution.

It has been accepted that the *kiai* title is granted based on his charismatic leadership, and therefore this is not a granted degree. The current development of traditional Islamic education nevertheless shows the objectification process where the granted title *kiai* is now subject to a formal regulation. Regarding the *kiai*'s position in the *pesantren* institution, the legislation mentions some criteria as the minimum requirements for someone eligible to be granted a *kiai* title. The *pesantren* legislation, article 9(1), states that someone granted a *kiai* title has to be, first, a graduate of the *pesantren* institution; second, of a higher education in Islamic studies; and/or, third, to have a competency in Islamic studies. The last two criteria show a flexible assessment. Based on the second and third points, it can be understood that those who graduated from the Islamic studies program at the university and/or those who—after studying Islam by himself or with someone—has acquired a high level of Islamic knowledge and skills can be granted a *kiai* title. One thing, there is an ambiguity in the way that those criteria should be understood as to whether someone should meet the whole three criteria or one of them only. The use of the words “and/or” has opened these multiple possibilities.

Figure 2: *Santri* conducting *sorogan*



Photo: First author, taken on December 14th, 2015 in Sukabumi

Figure 3: *Bandongan-kitab* as the unique traditional learning method in *Pesantrens*



Photo: First author, taken on January 2016 in Sukabumi

Another point to consider is that the *pesantren* legislation recognises the traditional learning methods (i.e. *sorogan* and *bandongan*) as legal methods for conducting formal religious education (**Figures 2 and 3**).⁵ It has created a different nuance in the politics of Islamic education in the 21st-century Indonesia compared to those taking place during the 19th and 20th centuries where the *pesantren* institutions were required to receive modernisation for a recognition from the government. Furthermore, as has been presented above, traditional methods also received strong criticism for it develops the activity of memorising long texts, usually in Arabic, without a proper comprehension.

The *pesantren* legislation advises that the *pesantren* tradition-based education should be conducted in a systematic, integrated and comprehensive way.⁶ Despite some modification as shown in **Table 2**, the above levels of education generally reflect the picture of a traditional student who since a young age started learning Qur'anic recitation and basic Islamic knowledge. Then, he gradually went up to higher levels to study more *kitab*s from various disciplines in Islamic studies and Arabic. At this stage, he might move to one *pesantren* to another and finally stay a little bit longer in a big *pesantren*. At the end, the *kiai* might see that he has achieved a satisfactory level in the mastery of classical Islamic texts and might allow him to go back home to build his own *pesantren*. Many of them then travelled to the centres of Islamic studies at Mecca, Medina or Cairo (Yunus 1979: 54-61; Dhofier 1982: 24-28). Following the enactment of this legislation, the government is responsible for facilitating the whole duration of the *kitab kuning*-based education above. In so doing, the government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs' Directorate for Religious Education and Pesantren, has to make criteria by which the *pesantren* system can be standardised and receive a legal recognition in the national education system. Levels of the *pesantren* tradition-based education are therefore formalised, standardised and set up as equal to those in general education and *madrasah* (**Table 2**).

Aside from the fact that the *pesantren* system remains the domain of kin group, another obstacle in the standardisation of the *pesantren* tradition-based education lays in the fact that the *kitab*-learning tradition greatly varies in one region to another depending on the individual *kiai*'s orientation and expertise (cf. Wagiman 1997: 78). In the first author's conversation with a senior

⁵ For more elaboration on *sorogan* and *bandongan* methods, see Dhofier (1982: 28-33).

⁶ UU 18/2019, article 13(1).

teacher at one *pesantren* in Ciamis, he explained that basically there is a different level of *kitab*s used as pedagogical tools in the West Javanese *pesantrens* compared to those in the East Javanese province. In this connection, there is a tendency that the designed curriculum, provided by the Ministry of Religious Affairs' Directorate for Religious Education and Pesantren for the conduct of Formal Religious Education, refers to the tradition established in the East Javanese *pesantrens*. As a result, the *pesantren* institutions based in other provinces are facing difficulty in meeting the standardised curriculum.

Another point to consider regarding the formalising of the *pesantren* system is that the system has to ensure a mechanism for a quality control, one of them being the conduct of examination in measuring students' performances. It is very likely that some modern values, for example from the examination practices, will be assimilated into the established structure of the traditional environment. In this connection, there might be a pressure on traditional students to pay more attention to the referential aspect of the *kitab*. Meanwhile, his efforts to always have a co-presence with the teacher is to seek blessings, and that the blessings can mean anything including the referential meanings of the *kitab*.

Students of traditional *pesantren* might not take this as a big problem for, based on **Table 1**, they also take formal education. Even there is no formal education offered in a *pesantren* environment (contributing about 40% out of the *pesantrens* in total), the first author observed that they were predominantly taking formal education outside the *pesantren*. With the long experience of having contact with formal education, traditional students might possess a proper level of understanding that their acquired knowledge of Islamic studies from their participation in *kitab kuning* learning need an assessment through an examination. In this regard, the *pesantren* legislation advises that the final stage of students' graduation is in the hand of the Minister of Religious Affairs through the conduct of The National-Standardised End Examination of Formal Religious Education (*Ujian Akhir Pendidikan Diniyah Formal Berstandar Nasional*, or UAPDFBN), also known as *Imtihan Watani* (Arabic, literally meaning 'National Examination').⁷

The Ministry of Religious Affairs' Directorate for Religious Education and *Pesantren* conducted the first national examination on March 10th-12th, 2018. 836 students from 14 Formal Religious Education institutions in 6 provinces (i.e. Aceh, West Jawa, Central Jawa, East Jawa,

⁷ Article 21(1). The implementation of the current national examination refers to the Decree of the General Directorate for Islamic Education issued in 2019.

South Sulawesi dan North Kalimantan) reportedly took the examination (MoeslimChoice March 12th 2018). In the current national examination conducted in March 12th-14th 2020, there is a significant increase in the number of participants in the examination, accounting for 3,500 participants from 49 Formal Religious Education institutions where 32 out of the 49 institutions are in the senior secondary level (*PDF 'Ulya*) and the rest from the institutions in the junior secondary level (*PDF Wustha*) (The official website of the Ministry of Religious Affairs branch at the West Java province March 14th 2020).

We were fortunate to have a visit to two *pesantrens* that offer Formal Religious Education in Jakarta and Ciamis in March 2020, one day before the governors of both Jakarta and West Java provinces approved the semi-lockdown policy (*Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar*, or PSBB) due to the spread of the covid-19 pandemic. The spread of this pandemic finally made the Ministry of Religious Affairs' General Directorate for Islamic Education decide not to use the conducted national examination as the main consideration for students' graduation or for entry examination to the next grade in Formal Religious Education program. Instead, the examination results-based measurement can be replaced by any assessments based on academic report or other academic achievements (The official website of the General Directorate for Islamic Education, March 28th 2020).

While the number of Formal Religious Education has increased, we suggest that the non-formal *kitab* learning can still be a common practice in the traditional environment in the future. Students are used to coming to their senior colleagues within the *pesantren* environment or to attending some intensive *kitab* courses conducted by a *kiai* in other *pesantren* (locally known as *pasar* or *kilatan*, a type of *kitab* learning conducted in specific months like Ramadan where a teacher get through the *kitab* with a quick reading and the participants fully listen to it during the reading performance). The first author once had a chit-chat with two senior students who tell the story of their attempts at completing *kitab*s with their senior colleagues. The first student told me that he completed *Alfiyah* and *Ta'lim muta'allim* as a whole four times during his stay at the *pesantren*. He also completed both *kitab*s twice in *pasar* events. Meanwhile, the second student told that he even completed *Rahbiyah* seven times with his senior colleagues in the *pesantren* conducted at their convenient times. Regarding the above common practice in *kitab* learning, this new legislation gives a chance for the *pesantren* institutions that offers non-formal *kitab* learning only to take the equivalence program (*mu'adalah*), or otherwise allows the

students to participate in the national examination. After taking these programs, they can be eligible to gain a recognisable certificate of graduation and reserve equal rights for pursuing their study or looking for a job.⁸

We would like to re-affirm here one of the most difficult parts in formalising the *pesantren* tradition-based education. In the whole article, we are not saying that the attempt at formalising the *pesantren* system is a new phenomenon in the 21st-century Indonesia. Many attempts have been made by previous governments. But they were not successful due the *pesantren* people rejected any attempts at adopting Western elements in traditional Islamic education. As Dhofier (1980 & 1982) notes, the *pesantren* institutions are fully controlled by the *kiai* family, and that the *kiai* as the founder of the institution reserves full rights to bring his institution based on any orientations he chose. Such a big influence from his charismatic leadership and the difficulty in obtaining the successor have greatly contributed to the decline of many traditional Islamic institutions after the death of the founder.

The *pesantren* legislation regulates the role of the *kiai* as the one who determine the development of their *pesantren* institutions. In so doing, the *kiai* is advised to form and lead the teachers assembly (*Majelis Masyayikh*) and council (*Dewan Masyayikh*). In article 20(1), coordinated by the *kiai*, this assembly has a duty to design the curriculum of the *pesantren* where—based on the instruction from the Ministry of Religious Affairs' General Directorate for Islamic Education—the curriculum should contains 70% or more for *kitab kuning* learning, and the rest for general subjects such as Indonesian language, civic education, and others. Another task of this assembly is to ensure the quality control by which the assembly are advised to preserve the learning tradition. In the broader context, the task for making the curriculum design and ensuring the quality control however has to follow the Ministerial regulations. Following the enactment of the *pesantren* legislation, both *kiai* and public officers are now sharing their powers in the administration of the *pesantren* tradition-based education.

V. Concluding remarks

In this article, we have highlighted current attempts at formalising the traditional Islamic education under the Indonesian education system. Muslim traditionalists, as the biggest part of the Indonesian Muslims, took advantages from the 1998 reform period that created an open and

⁸ Article 23(1).

liberal democracy in Indonesia. Since then they were able to maximise their consolidation of power, especially in the way they bring progressive ideas on Indonesian Islam and traditional Islamic education to the Indonesian public sphere.

Since the enactment of the *pesantren* legislation, the Indonesian government is now recognising three mainstreams in the national education system, the first two being the result of the convergence project in 1950 and the last based on this new legislation. Those who graduated from the *pesantren* system are now reserving equal rights for pursuing their study or looking for a formal job. During the 20th-century, the Indonesian publics witnessed the objections of Muslim traditionalist to modernise their traditional learning methods. Now, the methods are successfully brought to be part in the national education system, and that the *pesantren* tradition-based education is now required to have formal indicators in their contribution to the national development. Both traditional and modern values that seemed to have been placed as a binary opposition during the 19th and 20th centuries are now trying to co-exist in a formal *pesantren* tradition-based education. In this connection, the established values of the traditional environment are likely to face a contestation with a new bureaucratisation of the *pesantren* system.

To conclude, the Indonesian public witnessed a different situation pertaining to the relationships of the 21st-century *pesantren* people with the existing political power compared to those during the 20th-century modern Indonesia. During the 20th-century, both colonial and Indonesian governments encouraged the *pesantren* institutions to modernise their curriculum and learning methods as well as receive classroom system. By accepting this, the *pesantren* were then eligible to receive subsidies from the governments. Nevertheless, the *pesantren* people took the coming of modernisation as a threat that, in their opinion, potentially weaken the established values of traditional Islam. The 21st-century Indonesia then witnessed the mainstreaming of the *pesantren* system in the Indonesian public sphere after the People's Representative Council passed the *pesantren* bill into legislation in September 2019. One point that certainly attract us to question in future research is that in fact the legislation talks more about traditional Islamic education. In response to the implementation of the legislation, we are questioning where non-traditionalist Muslims groups are heading in the way they develop their *pesantren* institutions and how they negotiate with the new regulation.

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