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Organizational Pluralism and Democratic Pedagogy: A Qualitative Study of Modern Islamic Boarding Schools

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ABSTRACT

Prior scholarship has explored the intersection of leadership and democratic values within Islamic boarding schools, touching on contemporary leadership approaches and day-to-day practices that embody democratic ideals. Nevertheless, the role of organizational development as an underpinning for democratic education in modern pesantren has received insufficient scholarly attention. The present study seeks to illustrate how democracy education is actualized through the evolution of organizational structures, employing qualitative descriptive methods as its research approach. Findings reveal that leadership structures within these organizations must embrace a democratic and collective model in order to prevent any single individual or faction from monopolizing authority. The principle of deliberation underpins both the formation and execution of organizational systems in modern boarding schools. These findings offer a meaningful contribution to the body of knowledge in Islamic education by proposing a structural model for democratic modern Islamic boarding schools, one that effectively embeds democratic values into institutional practices and pedagogical processes as a form of innovation in character and citizenship education.

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INTRODUCTION

The bombing attack at Makassar Cathedral Church on Sunday, March 28, 2021, perpetrated by a husband-and-wife duo, continues to haunt the collective memory of Indonesian society (Titahelu, 2024). Merely two days after the incident, another shocking act of violence unfolded when a female attacker stormed the National Police Headquarters armed with an airsoft gun. While this second perpetrator belonged to the millennial generation, her underlying motivation mirrored that of the first: religiously driven jihad. These back-to-back incidents inevitably evoke memories of earlier terrorist activities that similarly featured individuals with Islamic boarding school backgrounds (Fanindy & Mupida, 2021).

For a long time, Islamic boarding schools were widely perceived as breeding grounds for radicalism and intolerance, though this view has since lost much of its traction. Nevertheless, a formal announcement by BNPT suggesting that certain pesantren were allegedly propagating extremist teachings has rekindled public anxiety (Sukabdi, 2021). That said, such a sweeping generalization does not hold up under scrutiny. Multiple scholarly inquiries have demonstrated that pesantren tend to interpret jihad in a broad, context-sensitive manner that is relevant to contemporary life, far distanced from violence, and even actively supportive of social cohesion. This tension between widespread assumption and documented reality gives rise to a pressing question: "Who bears true responsibility for the escalating wave of terror and intolerance?"

Islamic boarding schools carry significant weight in countering intolerance through the cultivation of democratic values (Apriliana et al., 2023; Azra, 2015). Yet the fact that some of their graduates have been implicated in terrorism underscores the urgency of reassessing their role. As Indonesia's most longstanding Islamic educational institution, pesantren must embrace a comprehensive approach to democratic education that encompasses cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions (Polsgrove & Lockyer, 2019). Instructional tools such as short stories have proven particularly effective in nurturing values of tolerance (Sufanti et al., 2021). According to Zamroni, for democratic education to reach its full potential, boarding schools must build organizational frameworks, institutional cultures, and learning processes that are genuinely grounded in democratic ideals (Grau et al., 2017).

Existing scholarship on Islamic boarding schools in the contemporary context has largely centered on leadership transformation, exploring styles ranging from visionary and democratic to paternalistic and spiritual (Salim et al., 2025). Democratic education has also been observed in practice through everyday institutional routines, such as classroom instruction, peer interaction, dormitory living, disciplinary protocols, and national commemorations like flag-raising ceremonies (Halomoan, 2023). Further research indicates that Islamic boarding schools are inherently aligned with democratic values and have, from their very beginnings, displayed an open and inclusive orientation toward social diversity (Apriliana et al., 2023; Ma'arif, 2019). Consequently, the democratic culture embedded within these institutions must be deliberately and efficiently cultivated to build mutual respect and understanding within a pluralistic social environment.

While the three aforementioned bodies of research address leadership approaches and democratic principles within Islamic boarding schools, including progressive leadership models and day-to-day practices that embody democratic values, there remains a notable gap concerning organizational development as the structural foundation for democratic education in modern pesantren. This study seeks to address that gap by emphasizing the critical role of adaptive, participatory, and value-driven institutional governance. When paired with systematic management, transparent accountability, and the meaningful involvement of all stakeholders within Islamic boarding schools, democratic education can be firmly embedded in everyday social practices and long-term institutional frameworks suited to the modern era (Sudir, 2025).

Historically, Islamic boarding schools were privately established and governed by a Kiai, whose authority was absolute and whose decisions were binding for all other parties (Hanafi et al., 2021; Wekke, 2015). This top-down, authoritarian mode of leadership, which is still prevalent in traditionally structured pesantren, presents considerable obstacles to the internalization of democratic education. Over time, however, a new wave of modern Islamic boarding schools has emerged, characterized by more participatory and democratic leadership practices, thereby

opening meaningful avenues for the holistic actualization of democratic education. This article explores how democratic education is realized through the development of organizational structures within modern Islamic boarding schools in Surakarta, Indonesia, with a particular focus on elucidating the formation, operational systems, leadership approaches, and institutional history of these structures as indispensable components in bringing democratic education to life.

METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach with the purpose of thoroughly examining and depicting real-world phenomena through critical evaluation and assessment (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). The focus of investigation is a contemporary Islamic boarding school located in Surakarta, Indonesia — an institution that integrates democratic education principles into its educational framework. The information gathered encompasses aspects related to democratic values as reflected in organizational formation, institutional systems, leadership approaches, and the historical development of organizational structures within modern boarding schools in Surakarta, Indonesia.

Data were sourced from a range of participants, including institutional leaders, teaching personnel, administrative staff, students, and other stakeholders directly involved in democratic education practices at the school. Data collection was carried out through interviews, direct observation, and documentation review. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, triangulation was applied across sources, methods, and time periods. The analytical process involved a series of steps: reviewing all collected data, performing data reduction, organizing information into units, categorizing and validating the data, and ultimately interpreting the findings (Mezmir, 2020).

Once data collection was complete, conclusions were derived by applying an inductive reasoning approach, which begins with specific observations before moving toward broader generalizations. The findings indicate that the organizational structure of these modern boarding schools reflects and aligns with the fundamental characteristics of democratic principles.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section covers four foundational aspects: the formation of organizational frameworks, the system governing such frameworks, approaches to leadership, and a historical assessment of how organizational structures in modern boarding schools have evolved. Together, these four elements serve as the building blocks through which democratic education is actualized within the organizational structure of contemporary boarding schools, ultimately embedding democratic values directly into each student. Through this lens, the critical determinants of success for Islamic boarding schools can be pinpointed in their capacity to function as an ideological stronghold against radical and intolerant ideologies.

Establishment of Organizational Structure

The organizational framework of modern boarding schools reflects a democratic character when examined through a democratic lens. As noted by Zamroni, this democratic nature is evident in the absence of any single party's dominance over others within the hierarchy (Fast & Overbeck, 2022). Modern boarding schools, also known as Khalafiyah institutions, operate under a collectively democratic leadership model. This leadership approach carries two major implications for nurturing democratic values within contemporary boarding school settings. Democratic leadership directly influences how the organizational system functions, ensuring it operates along democratic principles, and more specifically, it shapes each student's internalization of democratic values in their day-to-day social interactions (Jibril Qaralleh, 2021).

This form of leadership inherently calls for ongoing negotiation and compromise. One notable aspect is the structural shift in leadership roles: while traditional boarding schools are typically headed by a Kiyai, modern institutions place a director in that equivalent role. The director's primary purpose is to maximize the use of all available resources within the organization. García Torres (2019) and Joo (2020) argue that such leadership fosters satisfaction among all organizational members while simultaneously cultivating democratic values through

the dynamic relationships and collaborative engagement between the director and the broader organizational body.

Whether serving as the director of a modern boarding school or functioning as a Kiyai, the leader is fundamentally responsible for fulfilling three core roles: mu'alim (teacher), murobi (educator), and mursyid (mentor), directed toward both organizational members and the entire student community. A boarding school leader must not be confined to just one or two of these roles, as all three are considered deeply interconnected and inseparable within the Kiyai's function, with their collective execution directly influencing the quality of learning and development (Brown & Flood, 2020).

A democratically structured organization in modern boarding schools serves as a foundational prerequisite for members to embody and practice democratic behavior. This becomes a central priority for all students enrolled in such institutions, as the organizational model serves as a bridge that translates theoretical democratic concepts into lived educational experiences (Badjanova & Ilisko, 2015; Chaharbashloo et al., 2020).

However, a significant challenge in building a truly democratic boarding school structure is the prevalence of nepotism within organizational leadership. In such cases, leadership positions are reserved exclusively for members of the founding or Kiyai's family, regardless of whether they possess the competencies required for effective leadership. This practice leads to an organizational structure shaped by familial interests rather than individual merit, effectively suppressing the emergence and growth of democratic values. At its core, an organizational framework that contradicts democratic principles will inherently obstruct the development and spread of those values throughout the school community (Vanblaere & Devos, 2016).

Organizational Structure System

An examination of how modern boarding schools are structured reveals a notably democratic orientation, particularly evident in the deliberative processes used when formulating institutional policies. Every stakeholder within the organizational framework is afforded an equal opportunity to voice their perspectives and contribute ideas. The practice of bringing multiple parties into decision-making processes serves as a foundational mechanism for nurturing democratic principles within educational settings (Mitchell, 2017).

To prevent any single religious leader from exercising unchecked authority, modern boarding schools have established advisory councils or governing boards. These boards comprise individuals selected for their relevant expertise and are tasked with offering informed perspectives and recommendations to institutional leadership. This arrangement reflects a commitment to inclusive governance and reinforces the cultivation of democratic ideals within the school environment (Alshurman, 2015).

Acknowledging and honoring the diversity present within a community is essential to building a genuinely democratic institutional structure. Modern boarding schools bring together individuals from varying age groups, ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic circumstances. Embracing this diversity is a necessary step if such institutions are to actively resist values that run counter to democratic principles (Vervaet et al., 2018). Notably, many organizations that claim to pursue democratic structures often overlook multicultural representation, a gap that becomes particularly apparent when individuals with physical disabilities are effectively excluded from participation.

Beyond structural diversity, a multicultural educational framework also seeks to cultivate a breadth of intellectual perspectives. This is supported by providing members of the organization the freedom to explore and express their own thinking (Hornáčková et al., 2015). Such intellectual freedom is exercised through two primary channels: written communication and direct verbal dialogue, both of which are increasingly facilitated through contemporary digital tools. The integration of modern communication technology serves as a vehicle for advancing democratic engagement (Marzbali et al., 2016).

Democratic characteristics in modern boarding schools are further reflected in how these institutions manage the recruitment of their personnel, guided by the twin principles of professionalism and proportionality. The hiring process begins with a careful assessment of

staffing needs, followed by the establishment of clear educational criteria that candidates must satisfy. Proportionality, meanwhile, ensures that new staff are brought on in numbers that correspond to the institution's actual requirements. This approach to human resource management reinforces and advances democratic values within the organization (Yang & Taylor, 2013).

Beyond structural reforms, modern boarding schools also actively work to address the internal challenges that hinder open participation. One recurring difficulty is that members often feel constrained by an implicit sense of hierarchy, perceiving a significant distance between themselves and those in senior positions. A second concern involves the fear that offering critical feedback or suggestions may result in favoritism or negative attitudes from leadership.

To address the first challenge, institutions have adopted section-level coordination meetings where staff members can freely share ideas with their immediate supervisors (Behfar et al., 2016). These meetings are intended to reduce the psychological distance between different levels of the organizational hierarchy. The insights gathered in these sessions are subsequently presented by section heads at broader weekly meetings with the school's director. Importantly, the ideas conveyed in these forums are framed as collective contributions rather than individual viewpoints, which helps to mitigate concerns about personal bias or favoritism.

A complementary solution involves granting each organizational unit a degree of autonomy in managing its own affairs. Section members are empowered to propose innovations, refine internal workflows, and recommend improvements to their department's resources and facilities. This freedom enables departments to operate and evolve in ways that are both creative and aligned with the institution's broader values, ultimately fostering a culture of innovation throughout the organization (Grau et al., 2017).

Leadership Style

According to Wahab et al. (2016), school leadership constitutes a fundamental dimension closely tied to the behavioral patterns within the organizational framework of educational institutions. Beyond this, leadership style has been found to exert a considerable influence on the advancement and overall progress of educational institutions (Tatlah & Iqbal, 2012). The democratic qualities evident in the leadership of modern Islamic boarding schools are reflected in how institutional resources are managed, guided by the fluid and evolving nature of interpersonal interactions within the organizational structure. This dynamic interaction fostered by boarding school directors rests upon two foundational pillars.

The first pillar concerns the design and cultivation of an inclusive organizational system. Rather than being shaped by the unilateral decisions of a single authority, inclusivity ensures that the system is collectively determined and implemented through shared consensus among all parties involved. This approach further signifies that the organizational framework is not rigid or permanent, but remains open and adaptable to reforms from previous structures (Yoldaş, 2015).

The second pillar involves the cultivation of multi-stakeholder reasoning. Dynamic interpersonal engagement within the organizational structure is sustained through the active development of reasoned thought. This process calls upon all members to sharpen their analytical thinking, problem-solving capabilities, and sense of care and willingness to contribute meaningfully toward shared goals. Consequently, this nurtures a deepening sense of collective responsibility among members of modern boarding schools in working toward common objectives (Ivanova, 2016).

School leaders bear the responsibility of mentoring and assessing members of their organizational structure with the aim of fostering professional excellence in performance (Lim & Bishen Singh, 2020). This mentoring takes multiple forms, including broad-based guidance, hands-on supervision, and capacity-building through seminars and workshops, all of which are intended to propel each member toward greater professional growth. The director's role in embedding professionalism is further reinforced through a system of rewards and consequences. High-performing members are recognized through promotions, while those who fall short are subject to disciplinary measures. In cases where ethical conduct remains unsatisfactory even after prior warnings, decisive action including dismissal may be taken. Additionally,

professionalism is upheld through the provision of comprehensive facilities and infrastructure that enable each member to perform at their highest capacity.

The advancement of democratic values is pursued by establishing a dual-directional working system that integrates top-down policy dissemination with a bottom-up approach designed to amplify member engagement and ownership (Yuan et al., 2021). A collaborative work culture is cultivated across departments and units within the Islamic boarding school's organizational structure. This is manifested in the deeply held perception among members that every department functions as an equal partner rather than a subordinate unit — each operating in synergy and solidarity with others in the collective pursuit of shared institutional aspirations.

Historical Evaluation

Tracing the origins of boarding school development reveals that their establishment has predominantly been driven by religious scholars (Kiai) or family-based foundations. The foundational decisions made during the early stages of a boarding school's development leave a lasting imprint on how the institution is organized and governed. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that members of the founding family frequently occupy key positions within the school's organizational hierarchy.

Contemporary boarding schools are intentionally structured around democratic principles within their organizational frameworks. This approach is designed to cultivate a shared sense of ownership among all community members while simultaneously encouraging a strong work ethic rooted in genuine dedication and an eagerness to learn. Over time, this systemic approach has been instrumental in nurturing and sustaining a democratic institutional culture within modern boarding schools (Sales et al., 2017).

Boarding schools that operate under a personal or proprietary ownership model are often criticized for shortcomings in their management practices. Such institutions tend to function through closed, centralized, and family-dominated governance structures, where authority over decisions and assets is concentrated in the hands of the owner. In contrast, sound institutional management ought to be grounded in the principles of transparency, accountability, and collective participation (Adji et al., 2023). At a minimum, effective boarding school management encompasses program planning, program execution, and the administration of financial resources.

The quality of institutional management in a modern boarding school is most visibly reflected in how its programs are planned. Within the organizational hierarchy, program planning is conducted openly, with each unit performing its designated responsibilities through structured forums. This planning process flows from the top of the hierarchy — beginning with the boarding school's foundational body — down to the director, who is tasked with carrying out the programs that have been formulated.

All programs sanctioned by the foundation are subsequently executed by the director and the organizational units beneath them. Oversight of program implementation falls under the purview of the deputy director. Each unit within the structure is responsible for preparing reports and evaluations of completed programs, which are then escalated to the leadership. Both the president and the director bear the responsibility of reporting back to the foundation.

However, transparency in program and financial reporting within modern boarding schools remains imperfect. Evidence of this is seen in the limited scope of reporting — typically confined to communications between the director and the foundation — while financial disclosures are rarely extended to students or their guardians. Although family networks are deeply embedded in parts of the boarding school's organizational structure, this does not automatically translate into authoritarian governance. In fact, research indicates that modern boarding schools are capable of upholding and genuinely embedding democratic values — both within their organizational structures and among the broader student community.

A deeper examination of modern boarding school organizational structures suggests that the presence of family systems does not inherently lead to absolute or autocratic governance. Rather, these organizations operate on democratic foundations, expressed through deliberative processes, tolerance, and respect for diverse perspectives (Radkiewicz, 2021). This dynamic is

not entirely unprecedented; parallels can be drawn with the Yogyakarta Sultanate in Indonesia, which, despite being a monarchical system of governance, has historically demonstrated a disposition toward inclusive rather than authoritarian rule (Wiszowaty & Wahyuni, 2023). Much like modern boarding schools, the Sultanate's governance is non-absolute in nature, allowing democratic values to take root and flourish within it.

This pattern, observable in today's modern boarding schools, illustrates a broader principle: democratic values are not exclusive to explicitly democratic systems. They can emerge and thrive even within monarchical or family-based organizational structures, provided those systems do not operate in an absolute manner. It can therefore be concluded that it is absolutism — not the structural form of governance itself — that serves as the true measure of whether a system undermines democratic principles.

CONCLUSION

Drawing from the discussion above, the way modern boarding schools are structured organizationally plays a pivotal role in bringing democratic education to life. Four essential conditions define an organizational structure that reflects democratic principles. To begin with, leadership within the structure must follow a collectively democratic model, one that prevents any single individual or group at the top from exercising unchecked authority. Next, deliberation must serve as the cornerstone upon which the organizational structure is both built and operated. This deliberative approach honors the diversity within the community by allowing each party a degree of autonomy, and in doing so, it reduces the risk of favoritism or personal bias taking root among members. The third condition concerns the disposition of organizational leaders, who must embody inclusiveness and professionalism while remaining open to reasoning from multiple perspectives. Alongside this, a leadership style that balances top-down directives with bottom-up input is considered the hallmark of effective boarding school governance. Finally, the organizational structure of modern boarding schools must actively work to eliminate absolute nepotism. While nepotism is not inherently at odds with democratic values, it becomes problematic when it disproportionately influences leadership appointments or displaces merit-based criteria in the organizational structure of modern boarding schools. Together, these four foundational conditions within the organizational structure of contemporary boarding schools serve to cultivate democratic values among all members. This cultivation carries significant weight for every student in a modern boarding school, as it serves as a bridge connecting theoretical understanding with the practical application of democratic education.

A truly holistic approach to democracy education cannot be understood apart from three core elements present in any educational institution: the organizational structure, the school culture, and a democratically oriented educational process. The scope of this research, however, remains focused on the organizational structure as one pathway toward achieving that broader holistic democratic education. Within the domain of organizational structure, the historical background of a boarding school's founding stands out as a particularly significant dimension. History shapes the direction of institutional development and the systems that emerge within it, making it a compelling subject for deeper inquiry through ethnographic research methods. Beyond this, the remaining two elements are equally vital areas that warrant further research and development in pursuit of the overarching goals of holistic democracy education.

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