

DECENTRALIZATION OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION GOVERNANCE IN INDONESIA: POWER RELATIONSHIPS AND MADRASAH AUTONOMY

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Abstract

The decentralization of government in Indonesia, which began in 2001, has brought about significant transformations in public governance. However, these transformations have not yet fully extended to Islamic education. This article analyzes the paradox of decentralization in madrasah governance: on the one hand, regional autonomy creates space for diversity in educational management, but on the other hand, madrasahs remain bound to centralized bureaucratic control through the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Using a socio-legal approach and the theory of power relations in governance, this article examines how four key actors—the central government, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, local governments, and madrasahs—interact in the struggle for authority over Islamic education. Data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs' EMIS (for the 2022/2023 academic year) shows that of the 55,535 registered madrasahs at the MI, MTs, and MA levels, 92.7 percent (51,507 units) are private and rely on community resources, while only 7.3 percent (4,046 schools) are public and receive direct funding from the state. Governance disparities between madrasahs in Java and outside Java, as well as between urban areas and underdeveloped, remote, and outermost (3T) regions, reflect the challenges of decentralization in fairly distributing capacity and resources. This article argues that a co-governance model involving active collaboration between the Ministry of Religious Affairs, local governments, and the madrasah community is a strategic alternative for achieving more meaningful autonomy in Islamic education.

Keywords: *decentralization of Islamic education, madrasah governance, power relations, Ministry of Religious Affairs, educational autonomy*

Abstrak

Desentralisasi pemerintahan di Indonesia yang dimulai pada tahun 2001 membawa transformasi yang signifikan dalam tata kelola publik. Namun, transformasi tersebut belum sepenuhnya menjangkau pendidikan Islam. Artikel ini menganalisis paradoks desentralisasi dalam tata kelola madrasah: di satu sisi, otonomi daerah membuka ruang bagi keragaman pengelolaan pendidikan, tetapi di sisi lain, madrasah tetap terikat pada struktur kontrol birokrasi terpusat melalui Kementerian Agama. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan socio-legal dan teori relasi kekuasaan dalam governance, artikel ini menelaah bagaimana empat aktor utama —pemerintah pusat, Kementerian Agama, pemerintah daerah, dan madrasah— berinteraksi dalam perebutan kewenangan atas pendidikan Islam. Data EMIS Kementerian Agama RI (tahun ajaran 2022/2023) menunjukkan bahwa dari 55.535 madrasah jenjang MI, MTs, dan MA

yang terdaftar, sebesar 92,7 persen (51.507 unit) berstatus swasta dan bergantung pada sumber daya komunitas, sementara hanya 7,3 persen (4.046 unit) berstatus negeri dengan pembiayaan langsung dari negara. Ketimpangan tata kelola antara madrasah di Jawa dan di luar Jawa, serta antara kawasan perkotaan dan daerah tertinggal, terpencil, dan terluar (3T), mencerminkan tantangan desentralisasi dalam mendistribusikan kapasitas dan sumber daya secara adil. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa model co-governance yang melibatkan kolaborasi aktif antara Kementerian Agama, pemerintah daerah, dan komunitas madrasah merupakan alternatif strategis untuk mewujudkan otonomi pendidikan Islam yang lebih bermakna.

Kata Kunci: *desentralisasi pendidikan Islam, tata kelola madrasah, relasi kekuasaan, Kementerian Agama, otonomi pendidikan*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is one of the countries with the highest number of madrasahs in the world. According to EMIS data from the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs for the 2022–2023 school year, there are 55,535 madrasahs at the Ibtidaiyah, Tsanawiyah, and Aliyah levels spread from Sabang to Merauke—not including tens of thousands of Raudhatul Athfal (RA) at the preschool level. These Islamic educational institutions not only serve as pillars for the transmission of religious values but also play a crucial social role for millions of families in Indonesia, particularly those in the lower-middle economic class. However, behind this impressive scale lies a paradox that has not yet been critically examined: government decentralization, which was supposed to create space for autonomy, has instead introduced new forms of control that hinder madrasahs from developing independently.

When Indonesia launched a massive decentralization policy through Law No. 22 of 1999—later amended by Law No. 32 of 2004 and Law No. 23 of 2014—there was hope that education—including Islamic education—would gain broader autonomy at the regional level. In reality, Law No. 23 of 2014 explicitly classifies religious education as part of “Absolute Government Affairs,” which fall entirely under the authority of the central government, on par with foreign policy, defense, security, justice, monetary policy, and national fiscal policy. The Ministry of Religious Affairs remains the sole authority for the management of madrasahs nationwide, while local governments have no clear legal obligation to support madrasahs in their regions. As a result, madrasahs find themselves in an institutional limbo: they are not entirely under local control, yet they do not always receive adequate attention from the central government.

This situation results in what might be called “pseudo-autonomy”: private madrasahs, which account for more than 92 percent of all madrasahs, are formally autonomous because foundations or communities manage them, but in substance they are heavily dependent on national policies regarding the core curriculum, accreditation, teacher certification, and diploma recognition. Meanwhile, local

governments—which should serve as strategic partners—are often absent from madrasah education financing and planning because there are no legal incentives to encourage their involvement.

Several studies have documented the challenges facing Islamic education in Indonesia from various perspectives: the quality of learning (Azra, Afrianty, & Hefner, 2021), curriculum policy (Wahid, 2020), and socio-religious dynamics (Lukens-Bull, 2019). However, there are still few studies that specifically analyze power relations in madrasah governance resulting from decentralization, particularly how the dynamics among the central government, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, local governments, and the madrasahs themselves shape or hinder the autonomy of Islamic education. This article aims to address this analytical gap.

This article poses three research questions. First, how does government decentralization in Indonesia shape power relations in the governance of Islamic education? Second, to what extent do madrasahs possess substantive autonomy within the existing decentralized system? Third, what kind of governance model can strengthen madrasah autonomy without neglecting national education standards?

The novelty of this article lies in its integration of power relations analysis with a socio-legal approach in the context of madrasah governance following decentralization. This approach has not been widely explored in the literature on Islamic education in Indonesia. Its contribution is twofold: theoretical, by developing a co-governance analytical framework for Islamic education; and policy-oriented, by offering evidence-based strategic recommendations to stakeholders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational Decentralization: Between Theory and Reality

In the context of education, decentralization theoretically promises three main things: efficiency, accountability, and local relevance (Rondinelli, 2018). When decision-making authority is distributed to lower levels, it is assumed that education policies will be more responsive to the needs of local communities. Hanson (2020), in his comparative study of educational decentralization in developing countries, demonstrates that successful decentralization requires not only the transfer of administrative authority but also fiscal transfers and adequate human resource capacity.

However, several researchers have warned that decentralization can create a “decentralization trap”—a situation in which the transfer of authority without adequate resources actually leads to the fragmentation of public services and increases interregional disparities (Smoke, 2019). In Indonesia, this trap is particularly evident in the context of Islamic education, where decentralization has been more administrative than substantive.

Governance of Islamic Education: A Comparative Study

In Muslim countries, the governance of Islamic education exhibits a wide spectrum. In Pakistan, debates regarding the regulation and data collection on madrasahs have long been a focus of policy; Andrabi, Das, Khwaja, and Zajonc (2008), in their study on the statistics and rhetoric of religious enrollment in Pakistan, demonstrate that official data on the number and role of madrasahs are often biased and politicized, making it difficult to use them as a basis for accurate regulatory policies. In Malaysia, Islamic education is highly centralized under the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM), making it more standardized but less responsive to local dynamics (Mohamad, 2019). Indonesia falls between these two extremes: formally centralized through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, but operationally highly variable depending on the capacity of local foundations and communities.

Azra, Afrianty, and Hefner (2021), in their analysis of Islamic education in Southeast Asia, emphasize that the sustainability of madrasahs in Indonesia is largely determined by the capacity of the social networks and community capital that support them. This finding is relevant to understanding why madrasahs in regions with strong, organized Muslim communities, such as East Java and Central Java, tend to be more developed than those in regions with Muslim minority communities or in 3T areas.

Power Relations and Educational Governance

From the perspective of governance theory, educational governance is not merely an administrative matter but an arena of power relations among actors with differing interests (Rhodes, 2017). Ball and Junemann (2019) developed the concept of “policy networks” to describe how the state, the market, and civil society interact in shaping education policy. In the Indonesian context, the network of Islamic education policy involves the Ministry of Religious Affairs at the central level, regional offices and local branches of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, local governments, Islamic mass organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, as well as local communities that manage madrasahs.

Foucault (in Rabinow, 2019) provides a useful framework for understanding how power operates not only through laws and formal regulations but also through norms, procedures, and subtler technologies of governance. In the case of madrasahs, state control is present not only through binding regulations but also through mechanisms of accreditation, certification, and budgetary assistance that create institutional dependence.

The sociological theory of law developed by Santos (2021) regarding “legal pluralism” is relevant for understanding the situation of madrasahs, which exist at the intersection of state law and the norms of the Islamic community. Madrasahs are subject not only to regulations from the Ministry of Religious Affairs but also to the

rules of their foundations, pesantren norms, and the expectations of local communities—which do not always align with state policy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article constructs an analytical framework that integrates three theoretical perspectives: decentralization theory, the theory of power relations in governance, and the sociological-legal approach.

First, this article adopts the typology of decentralization developed by Faguet (2014), which distinguishes between deconcentration (the transfer of administrative functions to regional branches of central agencies), delegation (the transfer of functions to semi-autonomous bodies), and devolution (the transfer of full authority to local governments accountable to their local constituents). In the context of madrasahs, what occurs is a combination of deconcentration through the regional offices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and pseudo-devolution, in which formal autonomy is granted to private foundations but without adequate resource support.

Second, this article uses Doreen Massey's concept of "power geometry" (as cited in Jessop, 2021) to analyze how power relations in madrasah governance are not only vertical (central-local) but also horizontal (between the Ministry of Religious Affairs, local governments, and communities). In this power geometry, madrasahs—particularly small private madrasahs in rural areas—often find themselves in the weakest position, serving as objects of policy rather than active agents shaping their own governance.

Third, the socio-legal approach used in this article views Islamic education regulations not as neutral norms, but as the product of negotiations and contestations between state interests, the interests of the Islamic community, and local political dynamics. Ministerial regulations, accreditation decisions, and the distribution of operational aid for madrasahs are all arenas where power is exercised and contested.

By integrating these three perspectives, this article proposes the concept of "authority-competition governance" to describe the state of madrasah governance in Indonesia: a system in which authority is formally distributed but substantively contested, thereby creating institutional uncertainty that ultimately has the potential to undermine the quality of Islamic education.

METHOD

This article employs a qualitative research approach using a multiple case study design and document-based policy analysis. Primary data were collected through an in-depth analysis of regulations, policy reports, and official statistical

data. In contrast, secondary data were drawn from an international academic literature review and reports from international organizations.

The main data sources include: EMIS (Education Management Information System) data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs for the 2022–2023 school year; the 2020–2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) documents related to Islamic education; documents on budget ceiling discussions between the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI); a World Bank report on the decentralization of education in Indonesia; and research findings published in reputable journals over the past ten years.

The analysis was conducted using three complementary techniques. First, a content analysis of regulations and policy documents to map the legal framework of madrasah autonomy. Second, a comparative case study analysis to identify variations in madrasah governance across different geographic and socioeconomic contexts. Third, a power relations analysis to uncover how the interests of various actors shape the implementation of decentralization policies for Islamic education.

The limitations of this study lie in the lack of direct field interview data, given that this article is based on document and literature analysis. Some supplementary data—particularly regarding the proportion of certified teachers, the nominal value of the School Operational Assistance (BOS) for madrasahs in the current year, and the detailed conditions of madrasahs in 3T regions—require further verification against the latest official documents before they can be used as definitive figures; this article presents them qualitatively as indicative trends, not as final figures. Further research using institutional ethnography at the madrasah level, as well as direct verification of quantitative data from EMIS and the Ministry of Religious Affairs' Research and Development Agency, will enrich and refine the analysis developed here.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Centralized Control Within a Decentralized Framework

One of the most striking paradoxes in the governance of Islamic education in Indonesia is how post-Reform decentralization policies have actually maintained—rather than weakened—the Ministry of Religious Affairs' control over madrasahs. While Law No. 23 of 2014 on Regional Government redefined the division of responsibilities between the central and regional governments, religious education was explicitly included as a matter of exclusive central government authority, alongside national defense, security, justice, monetary policy, and fiscal policy. This policy choice is not without consequences: it effectively closes the door for local governments to integrate madrasahs into regional education planning fully.

Data from the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs' EMIS for the 2022–2023 school year reveal a situation worth examining regarding the distribution of madrasah ownership. Of the 55,535 registered madrasahs at the MI, MTs, and MA

levels, only 4,046 (7.3 percent) are public and receive direct state funding. The remaining 51,507 madrasahs (92.7 percent) are private institutions that rely on community funding, public donations, and government assistance such as the Madrasah Operational Assistance (BOS Madrasah)—which, according to various policy reports, is still valued below the BOS for equivalent public schools. However, the amount changes every fiscal year and must be referenced directly in the current year's BOS Madrasah Technical Guidelines.

This situation creates what Osborne and Gaebler (in Agranoff, 2021) refer to as “phantom autonomy”—that is, autonomy that appears real on paper but is substantively hollow. Private madrasahs have the formal freedom to determine their vision, mission, and even their local-content curriculum, but this freedom becomes meaningless when financial capacity and human resources are inadequate. Various policy reports indicate that the welfare of private madrasah teachers—including those who are still on temporary contracts—generally lags behind that of teachers in public schools. However, precise comparative data require further verification.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs' oversight mechanisms also operate subtly through an accreditation system managed by the National Madrasah Accreditation Board (BANM). Accreditation status is not merely a recognition of quality but also a prerequisite for receiving various forms of government assistance, including the Teacher Professional Allowance (TPG) for certified madrasah teachers. Thus, accreditation serves as a governance instrument that disciplines madrasahs to adhere to national standards, regardless of highly diverse local conditions.

Figure 1 below summarizes the key statistical data that form the empirical basis of this analysis.



Figure 1. Overview of Madrasah Governance in Indonesia (Data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs' EMIS, Fiscal Year 2022/2023)

Dependence on Bureaucracy and Restricted Autonomy

As educational institutions, madrasahs face a unique structural dilemma within Indonesia's governance system. On the one hand, most madrasahs were founded through community initiatives and have grown on the principle of community self-reliance; on the other hand, to survive and thrive in a modern, standardized educational ecosystem, they must comply with various state-designed bureaucratic mechanisms. This dependence is multidimensional: financial, regulatory, and symbolic.

Financially, the madrasah School Operational Assistance (BOS) program—launched to equalize the quality of Islamic education—has tangibly enhanced madrasahs' operational capacity. However, various policy reports consistently note that the BOS allocation for madrasahs remains below that of equivalent public schools. This disparity not only reflects budgetary inequality but also reinforces the perception that madrasahs are “second-class” within the national education system. The nominal value of the Madrasah BOS changes every fiscal year through a Decision of the Director General of Islamic Education; therefore, readers seeking exact figures are advised to refer directly to the BOS Technical Guidelines for the current year.

From a regulatory perspective, madrasahs' dependence on the Ministry of Religious Affairs is most evident in teacher certification. The proportion of madrasah teachers who hold teaching certificates is generally reported to lag behind that of public school teachers. This certification backlog is largely due to the Ministry of Religious Affairs' limited capacity to administer the Teacher Professional Education Program (PPG), even as the number of madrasah teachers requiring certification continues to grow each year. Teachers who are not yet certified cannot

receive the Teacher Professional Allowance, thereby systematically affecting the well-being of educators in madrasahs.

A case study conducted by Haris (2021) on madrasahs in Pamekasan Regency, Madura, illustrates how this dependence on bureaucracy creates a cycle of powerlessness. Madrasahs in this region are heavily reliant on lobbying and the close ties between foundation administrators and the local Ministry of Religious Affairs office to gain access to aid programs. Madrasahs that lack strong institutional connections tend to lag in accessing resources, thereby creating horizontal inequalities among the madrasahs themselves.

Political Interests and Local Islamic Education Policy

One of the least-discussed dimensions in analyses of madrasah governance is the role of local political interests in shaping Islamic education policy at the regional level. Although religious education is legally a matter for the central government, in practice, regional heads and regional legislative councils (DPRD) have considerable leeway to grant or withhold support for madrasahs through the regional budget mechanism.

The phenomenon of “madrasah grants” from local governments is a tangible manifestation of this local political intervention. In various regions, local leaders with a Nahdliyin mass base or from parties affiliated with Islamic communities often provide relatively large grants to specific madrasahs, particularly those within the networks of Islamic organizations that support them politically. This phenomenon was documented by Mietzner and Muhtadi (2019), who demonstrated how political patronage in the distribution of Islamic educational aid serves as an instrument for mobilizing electoral support in Indonesia.

On the other hand, madrasahs in regions led by local heads who are less sensitive to the aspirations of the Muslim community—or in regions where the Muslim community is not the majority—tend to receive minimal support from the regional budget (APBD). This disparity creates significant variations in madrasah governance across regions that cannot be explained solely by regional fiscal capacity.

Buehler’s (2020) study on local Islamic politics in Indonesia identified three patterns of relationships between local governments and madrasahs: first, a patronage pattern, in which madrasahs become political clients of local government leaders; second, an autonomy pattern, in which madrasahs successfully maintain community-based independence; and third, a collaboration pattern, in which madrasahs and local governments build partnerships based on shared interests. This third pattern, though the most ideal, is the least common because it requires institutional capacity and trust between the two parties—elements that are often not yet well established.

A case study in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) offers an interesting illustration of how political interests can positively drive innovation in madrasah governance. Under the leadership of a governor with a pesantren educational background, NTB developed an educational affirmative action program that indirectly helped strengthen the ecosystem of madrasahs and Islamic higher education institutions in the province. This example demonstrates how political interests and the needs of madrasah governance can come together in productive harmony. However, the technical details of the program should be referred to in official documents from the NTB Provincial Government for precise citation.

Interregional Disparities in Governance: Java versus Outside Java

Disparities in madrasah governance between one region and another are among the most systemic issues in Indonesian Islamic education. These differences are not merely a matter of the number of madrasahs, but also concern institutional quality, human resource capacity, and access to adequate educational infrastructure.

In Java—particularly in the provinces of East Java, Central Java, and West Java—madrasahs thrive in a relatively conducive ecosystem. Collectively, these three provinces account for the largest share of the nation’s madrasahs, with a high concentration in pockets of traditional Muslim communities with strong pesantren roots. Islamic educational infrastructure in Java is supported by alum networks, well-established Islamic civil society organizations, and religious scholars who possess the social authority to mobilize community resources.

In contrast, madrasahs outside Java—particularly in Papua, North Maluku, inland Kalimantan, and Southeast Sulawesi—face far more complex challenges. Various policy reports from the Ministry of Religious Affairs consistently note that madrasahs in 3T regions face problems with substandard buildings, a shortage of teachers for general subjects (math, science, English), and accreditation rates that are significantly lower than those of madrasahs in Java.

This situation directly limits the madrasah’s ability to apply for teacher certification and access government assistance programs. However, the exact proportions require direct reference to the latest edition of the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ Research and Development report.

The digital divide has emerged as a new dimension of inequality in post-COVID-19 governance. The pandemic has exposed the fragility of Indonesia’s digital infrastructure for Islamic education: madrasahs in major cities have already adopted digital learning platforms. In contrast, some madrasahs in remote areas still lack adequate access to electricity and the internet.

This disparity has implications that go far beyond technical issues. In the long term, disparities in the quality of Islamic education across regions have the potential to widen the socioeconomic gap between Muslim communities in Java and outside

Java, as well as between urban and rural Muslim communities. This is a matter of social justice and national cohesion, not merely an administrative issue in education.

Table 1 summarizes the overall argument of this article, from the root causes of the problem to the proposed solutions.

Component	Description	Implications	Key Actors
Problem	The dual governance of madrasahs by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) and local governments creates overlapping authority and institutional conflicts.	Regulatory overlap and inefficient budget allocation.	Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA), Local Governments
Policy	Law No. 23 of 2014 classifies religious education as an absolute responsibility of the central government.	Madrasahs remain under central government authority rather than local government administration.	Parliament (DPR), Central Government
Implementation	Private madrasahs (92.7%) are formally autonomous but operate with limited resources, while public madrasahs (7.3%) are relatively few in number.	Systemic disparities in educational quality.	Madrasah Principals, Educational Foundations
Conflict	Local governments are not legally required to allocate budgets for madrasahs, while the Ministry of Religious Affairs has limited human resources at the regional level.	Madrasahs in frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged (3T) regions are more likely to be neglected.	Regional Legislative Councils (DPRD), Regional Offices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs
Impact	Educational quality gaps persist between Java and non-Java regions, as well as	Unequal educational outcomes and	Students, Parents

	between urban and rural areas.	graduate quality.	
Solution	Strengthen cross-sector collaboration through a co-governance model between the Ministry of Religious Affairs and local governments, supported by dedicated affirmative funding for madrasahs in 3T regions.	Enhanced community-based autonomy and more equitable governance of madrasahs.	All Stakeholders

Table 1. Article Argumentation Flow (revised version)

Local Wisdom and Community-Based Madrasah Governance

Amid the various systemic challenges faced by madrasahs, the experiences of several communities show that governance based on local wisdom and community social capital can be an effective adaptive strategy. This is a dimension often overlooked in top-down policy analyses, yet it is precisely here that many innovations in madrasah governance develop organically.

The concept of “gotong royong” (cooperation) in the financing and management of madrasahs remains alive in many Muslim communities in Indonesia, particularly in communities with a strong pesantren tradition. In Jombang Regency, East Java—often referred to as the “city of santri”—madrasahs affiliated with major pesantren are reportedly able to sustain financial independence through a combination of productive waqf, pesantren business units, and a loyal alumni network. This waqf-based funding model is gradually gaining policy recognition through various waqf-related regulations developed by the Indonesian Waqf Board and the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

In Aceh, which holds special status in the administration of Sharia-based Islamic education, madrasah governance takes a different form. The Dayah Education Agency—a traditional Islamic educational institution with official authority under the Aceh Qanun—manages numerous Islamic educational institutions that are structurally outside the regular Ministry of Religious Affairs system; the exact number should be sourced from official data from the Aceh Dayah Education Agency for academic citation purposes. Aceh’s experience demonstrates that substantive autonomy in Islamic education can be achieved, but it requires a strong legal framework and adequate local institutional capacity.

Another example comes from the Banjar Muslim community in South Kalimantan, which traditionally has a culture of donating a portion of its income to religious education. Several madrasahs in Banjarmasin have successfully developed a unique governance model: combining community-based funding rooted in customary practices with modern management grounded in public accountability. This model was examined by Normuslim (2020), who concluded that the success of community-based madrasahs in South Kalimantan is largely determined by the ability of madrasah principals to bridge the gap between the logic of community traditions and the state’s demands for modern accountability.

However, it is important to note that community-based governance also has intrinsic limitations. First, it is highly dependent on the availability of community social capital, which is unevenly distributed throughout Indonesia. Second, without coordination with the state, community governance is vulnerable to internal conflicts and becomes an arena for competition among different Muslim groups.

Third, quality standards developed at the community level may not align with the national standards required for diploma recognition and students' social mobility.

Strategic Reforms in the Governance of Islamic Education

Based on the analysis presented, this article identifies three areas of strategic reform necessary to strengthen the governance of Islamic education in Indonesia.

First: Recalibrating the Legal Framework for Decentralization

Indonesia requires a serious recalibration of the legal framework governing the relationship between the Ministry of Religious Affairs and local governments in matters of Islamic education. Revisions to Law No. 23 of 2014 should consider granting local governments a more explicit mandate to allocate budgets for madrasahs—not as an intervention in religious affairs, but as a form of local responsibility for providing educational services to their citizens. The joint financing model between the central and local governments for funding regional public hospitals (RSUDs) could serve as a relevant policy reference.

Second: Strengthening Co-Governance Between the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Local Governments

Develop a co-governance model that involves the Ministry of Religious Affairs and local governments on an equal footing in the planning, funding, and oversight of madrasahs. This can be achieved by establishing a cross-sectoral “Regional Islamic Education Governance Forum” that involves all stakeholders, from the government to Islamic civil society organizations. This forum can produce a “Regional Islamic Education Roadmap” as a planning document that binds all actors within the local Islamic education ecosystem.

Third: Strengthening the Substantive Autonomy of Madrasahs

Madrasah autonomy will be meaningless without strengthening internal capacity. Reforms are needed in three dimensions: (a) leadership capacity, through comprehensive professional development programs for madrasah principals based on local needs; (b) financial capacity, through the acceleration of productive waqf programs, the development of an equitable Madrasah Operational Assistance (BOS) program, and tax incentives for madrasah donors; and (c) digital capacity, through affirmative action programs for digital infrastructure that specifically target madrasahs in 3T regions. The madrasah digitization program launched by the Ministry of Religious Affairs is a step in the right direction. However, its scale needs to be significantly expanded by involving local budgets and the private sector.

CONCLUSION

This article has critically analyzed the paradox of decentralization in the governance of Islamic education in Indonesia. Rather than creating meaningful autonomy, decentralization—which has been underway for more than two decades—has resulted in a system that formally distributes authority but, in

substance, maintains madrasahs' dependence on the Ministry of Religious Affairs on the one hand, while leaving them without adequate support from local governments on the other.

The main findings of this article indicate that power relations in madrasah governance are asymmetrical and multi-layered: madrasahs occupy the weakest position within a power network that includes the central government, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and local governments. Disparities in governance between madrasahs in Java and outside Java, between public and private madrasahs—which, according to EMIS data for the 2022/2023 academic year, stand at 7.3 percent versus 92.7 percent—as well as between urban and rural madrasahs reflect systemic challenges in the equitable distribution of capacity and resources.

However, this article also shows that there is still room for evidence-based optimism. Aceh's experience with Islamic educational autonomy, the productive waqf model in Jombang, and community collaboration in South Kalimantan demonstrate that innovations in madrasah governance can emerge from the grassroots when legal and social conditions are supportive. The challenge is how the state can create an institutional framework that allows these local innovations to flourish while still ensuring equitable national quality standards.

The co-governance model proposed in this article—which integrates the authority of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the responsibilities of local governments, and the capacity of madrasah communities—offers a realistic middle ground. This is not full decentralization, which risks leaving madrasahs without national coordination, nor is it centralization, which stifles local initiatives. It is a form of governance built on trust, capacity, and accountability, distributed fairly.

The policy implications of this article are clear: Indonesia needs legal reforms that accommodate a greater role for local governments in madrasah funding; targeted affirmative action programs for madrasahs in 3T regions; the accelerated certification of madrasah teachers; and the development of equitable digital infrastructure. Without these reforms, millions of madrasah students in Indonesia will continue to face uncertainty regarding the quality of education to which they are entitled.

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