

Pondok Pesantren: Changes and Its Future

GAMAL ABDUL NASIR ZAKARIA

ABSTRACT

The tradition of education at Pondok Pesantren in Indonesia and in the Malay world possesses a long history and represents a portion of the history of the growth and spread of Muslims in the region. Pondok Pesantren is not only associated with the meaning of Islam but also incorporates the symbol of authenticity of the Malay community. This educational institution functions as an organization for the study of religious knowledge, preserves Islamic traditions, and produces both Muslim scholars as well as leaders. Pondok Pesantren, during its long history, has successfully proven itself to be an Islamic educational institution which is prestigious, of quality and self-supporting. Although its existence has not been influenced by sociopolitical, economical or cultural changes, this does not mean that Pondok Pesantren does not face problems and challenges, be they internal or external ones. This paper will discuss some issues such as the survival of Pondok Pesantren today and in the future with the fast-paced challenges which are happening around us.

Key words: Pondok Pesantren, Islamic Educational Institution, Muslim Scholars, Challenges, Survival.

ABSTRAK

Tradisi pendidikan pondok pesantren di Indonesia dan di dunia Melayu memiliki sejarah yang sangat panjang dan merupakan sebahagian daripada sejarah pertumbuhan dan perkembangan umat Islam di rantau ini . Pondok Pesantren tidak hanya dikaitkan dengan makna keislaman sahaja tetapi juga mengandungi simbol keaslian masyarakat Melayu. Institusi pendidikan ini berperanan sebagai wadah untuk mendalami ilmu-ilmu agama, memelihara tradisi keislaman, melahirkan ulama dan pemimpin umat. Pondok Pesantren dalam perjalanan panjang sejarahnya telah berjaya membuktikan peranannya sebagai satu institusi pendidikan Islam yang mampan, bermutu dan mandiri. Kewujudannya tidak banyak terpengaruh dengan perubahan-perubahan sosio-politik, ekonomi dan budaya, namun bukan bererti pondok pesantren tidak menghadapi masalah dan cabaran, sama ada cabaran dalaman mahupun luaran. Makalah ini akan membincangkan isu-isu yang berkaitan dengan kemampuan pondok pesantren untuk bertahan hingga ke hari ini, dan menghadapi perubahan dan cabaran yang amat pantas di luar dunia pesantren.

Kata kunci: Pondok Pesantren, Institusi Pendidikan Islam, Sarjana Islam, Cabaran dan Survival.

THE EXISTENCE OF PONDOK PESANTREN

The term 'Pondok Pesantren' is not limited to use in traditional Islamic educational institutions in Java but is also applied throughout the Malay world and region. Nevertheless, besides 'Pondok Pesantren', there are many other names assigned to traditional Islamic education. In Aceh, for example, the term used is 'Dayah'; in Minangkabau 'Surau' is the equivalent term; and in some parts of the Malay world the term 'Sekolah Arab' is commonly employed (Zamakhsyari Dhofier, 1984). In addition, in Southern Thailand (Hasan Madmarn, 2001) and in Malaysia (Ismail Ab Rahman, 1992), these educational institutions may also be referred to as merely 'Pondok'.

Pondok Pesantren is one of many forms of educational Islamic institutions and centres which advocate the spread of Islam and can be found in the hearts of communities throughout the country. As the oldest-existing Islamic educational institution, it has been recognized ever since the introduction of Islam in Indonesia. It is due to this reason that the position of Pondok Pesantren in Indonesia cannot be separated from the lives of Muslims in the nation.

The tradition of education in Pondok Pesantren in Indonesia possesses a lengthy history in its efforts to advance and improve the citizens and residents of the country (Kafrawi, 1978; Marwan Sarijo, 1984). This board of education also functions as a venue for the intensive study of religious knowledge, the preservation of Islamic traditions as well as preparation for potential Islamic scholars.

This view is supported by Thomas Arnold (1980), who explains in his book, *The Preaching of Islam*, that Islamic education had already been in practice from the time when Islam arrived on the shores of Indonesia in the year 674, earlier than the practice of modern education which was brought over by Portuguese colonialists who spread Catholicism.

The history of Pondok Pesantren in Indonesia represents a part of the history of the growth and development of Indonesian society. This history began from the first century of Muslim government in Aceh, commencing from the first century of the Muslim calendar until the present day. In the history of Islamic rule in Indonesia, the position of Pondok Pesantren was always at the forefront. Pondok Pesantren also played a significant role in Indonesia's struggle for independence from colonial rule and the nation's eventual attainment of independence.

From a historical point of view, Pondok Pesantren is not only associated with the definition of Islam, but also holds the symbol of authenticity of Indonesia. This is due to the fact that this educational institution has been in existence ever since the era of Hindu-Buddhism being in power. Islam arrived soon after to continue these existing educational institutions as well as spread the influence of Islam within them. However, this does not imply that Islam played a small role in the struggle for education in Indonesia (Nurcholis Majid, 1997).

According to Hossein Nasr (1987), the world of Pesantren is a traditional Islamic world, that is a world which has passed on and preserved the continuity of Islamic traditions cultivated by scholars from one era to the next with no limitation to precise periods in Islamic history.

PONDOK PESANTREN TODAY

Pondok Pesantren nowadays conveys a sense of gratitude and has the right to be proud due to increasing attention from leaders and society towards the world of Islamic education and the Pondok Pesantren institution. It has evolved from an educational institution with an existence barely acknowledged even with the positive role it has played to the biggest authentic Indonesian education system with a strong hold in the hearts of communities. According to a report by the Ministry of Religious Affairs 2008, the number of Pondok Pesantren institutions in Indonesia has reached 21,000 with a total of 4 million students. The education system of Pondok Pesantren today has been nationally acknowledged through the National Education Laws No II, 1989, making Pondok Pesantren one of the nationally-recognised education systems. It is therefore hoped that Pondok Pesantren can play a supporting role in ongoing developments that is dynamic, spontaneous and constant.

Since the 80s, the image of Pondok Pesantren in society has changed. The stereotypical opinion of the institution as one that is traditional and dogmatic is no longer common, as it has managed to alter these misconceptions, as well as (Zamakhsyari Dhofier 1995; and Fuad Jabali, 2002):

1. The outdated view that Pondok Pesantren only educates about religious knowledge without offering instruction on general knowledge is starting to change. Nowadays, Pondok Pesantren institutions which are mainly situated in the town area realize the necessity of teaching both areas of knowledge. The modern Pondok Pesantren has started to consolidate the two. Besides religious knowledge, academic subjects such as Mathematics, the English language, economics and many others are also taught.
2. The view that Pondok Pesantren only develop on the outskirts of town and town areas and that the students originate from small villages has changed significantly. Pondok Pesantren nowadays do not only develop outside of towns but also are rapidly developed within town areas with the name Modern Pondok Pesantren, as students who attend Pondok Pesantren are not limited to those from outside but from within the town area as well. Parents from the towns have started to realize the benefits of this education system in shaping the personal characteristics as well as academic achievements of their child. They send their children to Pondok Pesantren in the hopes that they will become virtuous, knowledgeable besides acquiring individual skills as their preparation for future undertakings; all of which cannot be achieved at a national school. External factors such as juvenile delinquency, social ills and religious misconduct which are happening in the society today further encourage parents to send their children to study at Pondok Pesantren.
3. The view that a graduate of Pondok Pesantren will only become an '*ustaz*', religious teacher, or one who delivers prayers and thus does not possess life skills is incorrect. Graduates from Pondok Pesantren nowadays can pursue education at a higher level in various fields such as medicine, economics, engineering, agriculture and many others not limited to religious matters. This is because Pondok Pesantren graduates are equipped with general as well as religious knowledge and, along with their acquired life skills, they will develop into self-sufficient individuals who do not need to depend on others. Besides that it is also hoped that they will be able to create new job opportunities to assist with the communities around them.

Ever changing man's views on the existence and roles played by Pondok Pesantren are aligned with the transformation and changes within the Pondok Pesantren itself. Currently, Pondok Pesantren has formal schools in its system namely madrasah, productive economical institution, people's developmental institution and health clinics (Kuntowijoyo, 1991). Meanwhile, in the area of management, Pondok Pesantren has used modern management system compared to the traditional one whereby kiyai was the prominent figure. Due to this, Pondok Pesantren can still survive and adapt to the changes as well as the needs of the people. This shows that the tradition practiced by Pondok Pesantren enables them to survive and grow amongst the community. Transformation which is happening within does not actually change the characteristics of pondok Pesantren and its strength as the Islamic Education institution (Fuad Jabali, 2002).

THE FUTURE OF PONDOK PESANTREN

Pondok Pesantren has succeeded in proving its worth as an established Islamic educational institution. Sociopolitical, economical and cultural changes have not exerted much influence on the continuation of the existence of Pondok Pesantren since its founding, and has since proven itself as a stable fortress of culture and religion (Azyumardi Azra, 1999). How has Pondok Pesantren managed to endure to this day? If compared to other Muslim countries, traditional Islamic educational bodies and institutions such as *kuttab* in Egypt and *medresse* in Turkey did not manage to last. Most of them disappeared as a result of the development of secular education or having gone through changes becoming a public educational institution and the increasing speed of the waves of change in secular education carried out by the government.

In comparison to *kuttab* in Egypt and *medresse* in Turkey, Pondok Pesantren has proven to be quick and responsive to change and innovation in the education world. This response comes from the Muslim reformers since the early 20th century. The reformer group is of the opinion that a reformation of the Islamic education system is needed in order to respond to the challenges of colonization as well as Christianity. As a result, the new Islamic educational institution emerged, which combined the traditional along with the modern.

The traditional Islamic education institution in the beginning differed in responding to changes in the education system. Karel Steenbrink, a Dutch traditional education expert, uses the phrase 'rejecting while following', which was the response given by Pondok Pesantren towards the arrival of modern Islamic education. Pondok Pesantren rejected certain aspects of the reformer group's understanding of religion, and at the same time they followed in the footsteps of the reformers so that they will be able to survive. However, although Pondok Pesantren has taken appropriate steps of adjustment for its viability, it is still beneficial to students, as can be seen in the existence of the classical system as a clearer curriculum. This led to the founding of the Pondok Pesantren Mambaul Ulum (1906), Tebu Ireng (1916) and Gontor (1926), which included general subjects such as Mathematics, Physics, Social Studies and the English Language in the curriculum (Maksum, 1999).

The response of Pondok Pesantren towards the modernization of Islamic education and ongoing socioeconomical changes includes:

1. Renewal of educational materials and content of Pondok Pesantren by including general subjects and skills.
2. Renewal of the education system and methodology.

3. A change in functions, whereby the function of religious education also includes that of socioeconomics (Azyumardi Azra, 1999).

Mohammad Natsir (2008) in his book entitled *Capita Selecta* has stated that Pondok Pesantren in Indonesia functions as “*the mental fortress of defence from century to century*”. Pondok Pesantren is also one of many quality development centres for *ummah* and plays the role of producing leaders of quality, as well as offering educational activities and *dakwah* (sermons) for the community. This traditional Islamic education institution has in addition resulted in individuals who have a better understanding of religion (*Tafaqquh Fi al-din*) who can offer advice to others.

Mohammad Natsir has placed high hopes on the graduates of Pondok Pesantren in their becoming Muslim scholars as well as graduates that are able to face current challenges, and thus should not be referred to as scholars if they are awkward and unsure when thrust into their community after having been educated and are consequently unable to actually face society. This is caused by the Pondok Pesantren graduates not being supplied with sufficient preparation to face the different ideologies that exist in urban areas and modern society. Mohammad Natsir wishes for the students in Pondok Pesantren to be equipped with knowledge and (vocational) skills which can be their weapons in facing increasingly-complex interactions (Mohammad Natsir, 1969).

In the interest of ensuring that Pondok Pesantren is able to endure, Mohammad Natsir points out that this educational institution must be capable of facing challenges and changes in the outside world in line with current times; Pondok Pesantren does not only exist and think in its own world. In line with current developments, issues which must be faced and overcome by Pondok Pesantren are becoming increasingly more complex. These issues include those which are brought to and arise in modern living, such as the advancement of information and globalization. The ability of Pondok Pesantren to overcome such issues will be the indication of the institution’s capabilities in facing such challenges, and only then will Pondok Pesantren qualify to be referred to as a modern Islamic educational institution. However, on the other hand, if Pondok Pesantren fails in facing modern living challenges, then it will be known as an educational institution which is behind the times (Mohammad Natsir, 2008).

Among the Islamic community, there is still misunderstanding with the meaning of the term ‘modern’, which is always associated with the Western world. We cannot fully blame the existence of this view as there are still many who are of the opinion that ‘modern’ is dominated by Western values. (Fazlurrahman, 1992).

However, the truth is that these modern values have universal characteristics that differ from Western values. In reality, the basis for modern culture refers to universal areas, namely, religion, knowledge and technology.

Hence, the main challenges in the modern age are those pertaining to knowledge and technology. The challenges raised by the West are secondary effects, as it is a matter of fact that Westerners still do control leadership of the world as well as technology.

The effects of such modernization in the beginning were positive; specifically, developments attained from knowledge and technology. However, after observing the effects of such progress, it seems most tend to veer towards negative values, such as the deterioration of spiritual lifestyles, the uprooting of local culture and the collapse of character, particularly amongst youths (Nurcholis

Majid, 1997). Changes and the negative effects caused by the Western modernity are greatly felt by the Muslim community which slowly resulted the loss of identity and erode their confidence.

In fact, modernity is a necessity which cannot be rejected. Until today, the relationship between Islam and modernity still goes on amongst the scholars and Muslim thinkers. They agreed that initially there were no contradictions between Islam and modernity but the question now is to what extent modernity can be tolerated what more, in the last few decades more criticisms are made on the failure of western modernity in fulfilling the promises of mankind's welfare both material and spiritually through the advancement of knowledge and technologies (Azyumardi Azra, 1999).

CONCLUSION

Pondok Pesantren nowadays has been holding the same position as educational institutions overseen by the government and possesses the right to implement its own forms and models of education. As a result, attention towards Pondok Pesantren has been increasing be it from the government or society. This institution, whose existence was hardly acknowledged in the past, has since become the largest and most stable institution in the centre of society and has rapidly expanded not only in villages but also in established cities, where it is known as Modern Pondok Pesantren. The educational curriculum at Pondok Pesantren has incorporated both religious and academic knowledge in addition to the teaching of life skills for students to become self-sufficient; both areas of knowledge receive the same emphasis and attention.

The future of Pondok Pesantren depends greatly on how this educational institution can weather the rapidly-occurring challenges and changes of the age. Pondok Pesantren should be open and not only think in terms of its inner circle. The institution must be prepared to face and accept changes and positive developments as well as the resulting effects - such as developments in technology and info-telecommunication and globalization - by preparing pupils with the ideal upbringing based on the revelations of God, equipping them with minds which are strong, characters which are honourable and accomplishments which are in line with their talents and interests.

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Biodata

Dr. Gamal Abdul Nasir Zakaria, Language and Literacy Education Academic Group, Sultan Hassanah Bolkhiah Institute of Education, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, e-mail: gamalzakaria@hotmail.com

