

# Political Change and Community Development at Traditional Islamic Boarding School

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Abstract: It was common to see, during new order regime (Soeharto era), that traditional Islamic Boarding School (*pesantren*) stayed away from political involvement. In this sense, the Islamic boarding school does not receive assistance from Indonesian government and strives to be as independent as possible in various ways. The paper explores how the role of traditional *pesantren* has been developing during reform era. Ethnographic approach is employed to explore the conception and practices of *Pesantren Sidogiri* concerning political change and community development. Using community development approach, it argued that Islamic boarding school applied human right approach with its emphasis on equality, dignity, and justice.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Important social and political changes occurred in the country during the Reformation era. In this sense, the role of Indonesian *pesantren* seems to be significant in the political context, particularly in East Java. In the 2004 general election, for instance, the members of DPD (*Dewan Perwakilan Daerah* or the upper house of the national parliament) from East Java dominated by whose backgrounds are *pesantren*. *Pesantren* can be divided into traditional, modern, and independent. Traditionally the teaching of traditional *pesantren* based on classical texts (*Kitab Kuning*), which is mainly refer to Syafi'i school of thought (Tan, 2014).

The result of general election is also proof that *pesantren* have been able to respond to social and political changes. Indonesian *pesantren* for a long time had reputation as cultural symbol of Indonesian social institution which very much based on grass-roots. When *Pesantrens* are associated with Nahdlatul Ulama or NU (the awakening of Muslim religious scholars), they have the opportunity to show that their philosophy of education is based on religious tolerance (*Islam Rahmah li al-'Alamin*). In this sense, NU also promote tolerance Islam, which is called as Islam Nusantara, it is religious ideology based on the doctrines of Aswaja (*Ahl al-Sunnah wa al Jama'ah*). It is also common to say that *Pesantren*

is identical with NU and the vice versa. Points out that the NU is the most loyal and perfect representation of a Muslim group who declare to the Sunni doctrine in Southeast Asia. Concerning the religious ideology, it is wrong to assume that *Pesantren* is the breeding ground of radicalism. Moreover, Islam spread in Indonesia through *pesantrens* was "Sufi Islam" which was easy to melt with local culture (Alimi, 2017; Barton, 2017; Barton and Fealy, 1996; Nathan and Kamali, 2005).

Regarding Indonesia social-political life, it was common to see the Indonesian government paying little attention to *pesantren* development. As indicated by Bull, "during 1994-1995 government favoritism was perceived toward Muhammadiyah and led some *pesantren* people to feel some distance from Soeharto regime". In this sense, the *pesantren* community seemed to be marginalized by the Indonesian government (Lukens-Bull, 2005; Rahman Alamsyah and Hadiz, 2017).

The paper will focus on how *Pesantren Sidogiri* in East Java has responded to the political change. We examine the *pesantrens*' policy toward Indonesian government legal framework for *pesantren* educational system. While the term "community development" refers to *pesantrens*' people participation in social-development over surrounding society. For these purposes, this paper answered two primary research questions: how has the *Pesantren Sidogiri* responded to political change,

dan what role have pesantren developed regarding community development.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational system is not a neutral area, because it is always socially constructed, culturally mediated and politically intervened. It is like two sides of the same coin; it can become a site of cultural action for freedom and at the same time, operate as a means of cultural action for domestication (Lukens-Bull, 2001; Ouvrard-Servanton et al., 2018). In line with this perspective, Freire has pointed out: "Neutral education cannot exist. It is fundamental for us to know that, when we work on the content of educational curriculum, when we discuss methods and processes, when we plan, when we draw up educational policies, we are engaged in political acts which imply an ideological choice; whether it is obscure or clear is not important" (Freire, 1974).

Meanwhile, in the perspective of sociology of education, the role of government is viewed as "direct involvement". The government has involvement in education, whether through ideological beliefs, funding, or setting policy (Savage and Lingard, 2018).

What is the contribution of *pesantren* to community development approach? In this point of view, it is important to note that one of significant contributions to the development of educational system in *pesantren* is the attention from Indonesian government through Ministry of religious affair (MORA), particularly since post-Soeharto era. Since 2005 MORA has already provided scholarships for *pesantren* students to pursue degree in various State Universities in Indonesia. It is argued this phenomenon add to *pesantren* educational tradition, particularly which is called '*santri kelana*' (wandering *santri*). According to Dhofier, one of the important aspects of the *pesantren* educational system is the emphasis on the journeying of its students. A typical wandering *santri* was a *santri* who was travelling from one *pesantren* to another *pesantren*. The aim was to seek knowledge for the best authorities on the various specialist Islamic branch of knowledge. Such tradition was the wandering *santri* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It seems appropriate to say that wandering *santri* was attributed to *santri* who traveled from *pesantren* to another *pesantren* (Barton, 2017; Dhofier, 2014; Schlehe, 2017). Today, in the era of reformation, the wandering *santri* is traveling from *pesantren* to various universities. We also argue, this

tradition has positive values for the wondering *santri*'s future roles as well as to answer the negative image of *pesantren*. This is because; it was common in the past to see that the *pesantren* curricula were emphasizing pacification and memorization rather than a curriculum for empowerment and critical thinking.

Furthermore, *pesantren* environment was isolated from the developments of sciences and modern society. Those who were in the circle of the *pondok pesantren* were not able to solve the problems which arose due to modern development (Jainuri, n.d.). The role of doctor, lawyer, engineers, educators, economist, needed by community, could not be trained by a traditional Islamic educational institution, but by a modern one. Thus the *pondok pesantren* seemed not to serve the national plans for modernization adequately. All these assumptions might be true in the past; however, this assumption seems not to be true anymore, since many aspects today have changed in *pesantren*.

In regards to the community development approach, Geertz argued that the *pesantren* community and kiai could not contribute to Indonesian development. In this sense, he also predicted that *pesantren* community were unable to deal with the social change that has already happened in the society (Geertz, 1960). This paper claims the *pesantren* community has responded in dealing with the challenges of social life or community development issues.

## 3 METHOD

The main purpose of this article is to explore how traditional *pesantren* deal with the political change and the approach to community development. The research data obtained from literature review, document analysis and fieldwork in Sidogiri *pesantren* that is located in Pasuruan East Java, Indonesia. We employed ethnographic method to explore the conception and practices of *Pesantren* Sidogiri concerning political change and community development. The fieldwork conducted for about 50 days.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Legal Framework for the Pesantren Educational System

Reform era Government policy towards the *pesantren* is reflected in Law No. 20/2003 on National Educational System (*Undang-Undang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional*), article 4 (30). The Law effectively identifies *pondok pesantren* as a subsystem of the national educational system. The Law states: "religious educational models can be formed as *diniyah, pesantren, pasraman, pabhaja samanera* and the like (Agama, 55).

In 2006, the Minister of Religious Affairs (*SK Mentri Agama*) recognized the qualifications granted by some traditional *pesantren (salaf pesantren)*. This policy makes them equivalent to those received by students who graduated from Indonesian state-owned schools. This policy enables *santri* to continue their studies in Indonesian universities. As a result, the *pesantren* graduates, particularly at the senior level, were able to undertake tertiary studies, not only in state Islamic colleges such as IAIN, UIN or STAIN, but in other private and state universities as well (Basyuni, 2008).

The effort to integrate the *pesantren* into the national educational system also continued and accelerated in 2007 with the Government Regulation. The Government issued Regulation No.55 of 2007 for the *pesantren* educational system. With this Regulation, the *pesantren* have been integrated into the Indonesian national educational system. As a consequence, the Indonesian government must pay attention to the *pesantren's* educational development, particularly by providing a small subsidy to some *pesantren*. One of notable Indonesian Government subsidies is through BOS (*bantuan operasional sekolah*) or the operational subsidy for schools. The Indonesian government provided Rp. 235.000 per year per student at the primary level. While for a student at the senior level, the Government provided Rp. 324.500 per year. From this point of view, according to the deputy of *Pesantren Sidogiri*, the *Pesantren* decided to accept the Indonesian government subsidies:

"Related with BOS *bantuan operasional sekolah* (operational subsidy for schools) which is provided by the Indonesian government, *Pesantren Sidogiri* does not have the right to refuse the Government's financial support. Since the purpose of these funds is to support the *santri*, the *Pesantren* decided to

accept the donation; since the BOS is not allocated for the *Pesantren* as an institution".

The *pesantren* deputy's attitude suggests a new big concern towards external supports, including from the Indonesian government. This is considered as a new approach since in the past the *Pesantren Sidogiri* refused any financial support from the Indonesian government. Some of the old ambivalence remains. The government's assistance will be refused when it is given to the *pesantren* as an institution but accepted when the recipients are the *santri* (student).

Regarding accreditation, the Indonesian government also recognised the *pesantren's* qualifications, including some of the traditional *pesantren's* certificates. Ministry of Religious Affairs data indicates that today there are 32 *pondok pesantren salaf* throughout Indonesia who qualifications have been accepted the government (report of Subdit V 2007; unpublished). While, During the Soeharto Regime, the Indonesian government did not recognize all *pesantren salaf* certificates. Their certificates are also considered as equal to those of *Madrasah Aliyah* (Islamic senior high school). With this 2007 government regulation, the traditional *pesantren* have become more integrated into the Indonesian educational system. For instance, the State Islamic University of Malang has accepted *Pesantren Sidogiri's* certificates. Another private Indonesian university is also offering scholarship for *Pesantren Sidogiris'* student, such as STIE Tazkia (Institute for Islamic Economics) Bogor, UNAS (Bandung National University), Malang Islamic University (UNISMA) to pursue degree at various program.

Furthermore, based on the Regulation above, the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Religious Affairs has also provided the opportunity for the traditional *pesantren* to run a 9-year compulsory education in the primary level. In Indonesia, or elementary educational level is called nine-year compulsory education. It is hoped that children under 18 years old will be able to pursue at least nine years of schooling. This policy makes the *pesantren* equal to that of the national system run by public schools, with the requirement to add some 'secular' subjects such as mathematics, *Bahasa Indonesia* and natural sciences. It is easy for some *pesantren* to accept the State policy since the Regulation does not interfere with the *pesantrens'* traditional study of the *Kitab Kuning* and the development of the *pesantren's* educational values. The Indonesian government policies have significant implications for the *pesantren* as their graduates can continue their studies in public schools and higher education institutions. At the same time, the traditional *pesantren* have retained their original

identity as they have designed their secular curricula, rather than simply adopted that of the government.

The government Regulation will also contribute to the program of compulsory education launched by the Indonesian government in 1994 in becoming a reality. In Indonesia, according to the law, children should attend primary school for nine years, but in reality poverty was mostly to blame for this not occurring. In the 1945 Constitution of Indonesia, article 31, section 1, states: "every citizen shall have the fundamental right to education." Traditional *pesantren* also share the responsibility to ensure that compulsory education becomes a reality. In short, the *pesantren* become the alternative schools that are affordable for the village children and adolescents.

With regards to the support of *Pesantren Sidogiri*'s development and financial autonomy, the *Pesantren* had a reputation for refusing any donations support or subsidies from outside organizations, including the Indonesian government and international development agencies. In 2006, for instance, an AusAID' LAPIS program (Learning assistance projects for Islamic schools) tried to offer assistance. However, *Pesantren Sidogiri* refused to accept this donation. There is a general perception in Indonesia that an approach like that at *Pesantren Sidogiri* is considered conservative. Majid argues that the policy of some *pesantren* trying to distance themselves from the Indonesian government are regarded as the manifesting a non-cooperative attitude. This has been obvious since the colonial era and remains with some *pesantren* policies even now (Majid, 2009). However, for the *Pesantren Sidogiri* community, this approach is regarded as no more than a manifestation of an attempt to keep good traditions to develop self-reliance not as an opposition towards the Indonesian government policy. The deputy of *Pesantren Sidogiri* explained: One of the important teaching values in *Pesantren Sidogiri* is self-reliance (*kemandirian*); it is based on prophet teachings: 'self-reliance is the foundation to be successful'. Based on this principle, we work hard in order not to depend on others, society, and even the Indonesian government. We have a slogan 'we should contribute to this country.' Therefore we think about what we should give to this country not what we should get from this country.

This is to say, once again, for *Pesantren Sidogiri* that self-reliance is not opposed to the state, but reflects a determination to be independent. Regarding financial support and educational programs, the *Pesantren* is independent of outside support. The objectives of social and educational programs from *Pesantren Sidogiri* are more directed to the needs of the surrounding *pesantren* community, rather than to the State programs.

Therefore, this article indicates that in the post-Soeharto era, the *Pesantren* were increasingly more open to intervention from Indonesian government. This is might be because some *pesantren* leaders felt more involved in the political process and they also had parliamentary representatives.

#### 4.2 *Pesantren*'s Social Role: Community Development Issues

In addition to religious training, *pesantren* also play a social role. Clifford Geertz, when identifying the role of Javanese *pesantren*, argued that *pesantren* and *kiai* were only influential in their community and not among the other two socio-religious communities: *the priyayi and abangan*. This research argues that in social life or community development issues the contributions of *pesantren* did influence not only the *pesantren* community or *santri* but also the broader society. In this sense, *pesantren* are also concerned with economic development and social transformation and they do not only focus on their role as traditional educational institutions, but the *pesantren* also contribute in reducing poverty (Geertz, 1960).

*Pesantren Sidogiri* is well known for its achievements in economic development. Initially, the growing interest of *Pesantren Sidogiri* was to develop social programs based on the *pesantren*'s initiative. This is noted in a statement from one of the leaders of *pesantren Sidogiri*:

It was initially because of the concern held by *Sidogiri*'s teachers about the fact that many people, particularly surrounding the *pesantren*, practice *riba* (interest) when they get loans from money lenders. The *Pesantren* teachers at that time realized that the *Pesantren* should be able to address this social problem. He also refers to Islamic values which is called as *al-ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood), and social *ibadah* (worship). In this context, he quoted the prophet tradition (*al-hadith*), "anyone who does not take care of Muslim Community affairs is not my followers (*ummah*)."

To address this social problem, in 1997 *Pesantren Sidogiri* decided to establish its microfinance institution, a *Shariah* finance model called *Baitul Mal wa Tamwil* (BMT) or Islamic micro saving and lending cooperative and *Kopontren* (the *Pesantren* cooperative). Although BMT institutions are not under *Pesantren Sidogiri*'s management, BMT managers are consists of elites and alumni of the *Sidogiri* Islamic Boarding School. Initially, the BMT capital was Rp. 13.5 million (\$ USD 1800) collected from the *pesantren*'s teachers. After seven years in operation, the BMT has 12,470

customers. Financial transactions reached Rp.35 billion with assets of Rp.8.1 billion. *Kopontren Sidogiri* offers financial service programs for people such as *mudharabah* or a partnership where the *Pesantren* provides the capital. *Syirkah wujud* or the partnership is based on goodwill, credit-worthiness and a contract, *Ijarah* or leasing finance (Bakhri, 2004).

The practice of BMT and *Kopontren* provides interest-free loans for people to develop small and micro enterprises. The most important purpose of giving interest-free loans is to help people escape from “*lintah darat*” (moneylenders). Even though the amount of loans is considered inadequate to develop a new form of ‘micro-business’, this program has attracted many people since it generates opportunities to increase their capital to enhance their income. In addition, the program raises productivity. Those who have already run a small business can increase the volume of “*dagangan*” (goods or commodity). While those who are beginners have the opportunity to develop alternative income sources other than farming.

Indirectly, the *Pesantren* deals with unemployment issues and urbanization problems. According to the deputy of *Pesantren Sidogiri*, Masykuri Abdurrahman, through credit, they create productive activity in which they can employ many people. The difficult situation in the agricultural sector has led many young people to leave their villages and go to cities or abroad for work. By giving an opportunity for young people to run micro-businesses in the village, it is hoped that the move to the cities can be minimized.

Furthermore, he argues that by distributing and allocating micro credit to poor people, it empowers them to be self-reliant and prosper. Many successful strategies for helping the poor escape from poverty begin with supporting a family or community’s assets and then find ways to create alternative incomes. In this way, *the pesantren* also contributes in reducing poverty. The *pesantren’s* perspective poverty is fundamental problem that must be solved as explained by a staff of *Pesantren Sidogiri* cooperative.

The task of the Muslim community is not physical war, but to combat poverty and other social problems such as malnutrition, providing housing, clothes and medical assistance for the needy people. The purpose of this task should not only be for Muslims, but also for all people who live in the same community. In this matter, I would like to make a comparison. Although wine or beer is forbidden in religious teachings, it still has some benefits for human beings, while poverty has no

benefits at all for human society. This is our task; we should put our knowledge into practice.

Year by year, the economic development at *Pesantren Sidogiri* has demonstrated significant progress. The *Pesantren* has started to produce and sell drinking water in collaboration with an outside company (*Air Mineral Santri*). The revenue from these business activities provides income to support the operation of the *Pesantren*. Besides contributing to the independence of the *pesantren*, the *Koperasi Pondok Pesantren* (the *Pesantren* cooperative) also offers learning experience opportunities for the students, particularly those who are studying *mua’amalah* (economics). These business activities run by *pesantren* are managed by the *santri*, thus giving them an opportunity to experience practical training and business management. In short, the Sidogiri cooperative opened a new opportunity to get a job for the community. The case of *Pesantren Sidogiri* is also proof that even though the *pesantren* makes an effort to maintain the traditional form, the *pesantren* is also able to deal with some aspect of community development. The increasing number of employee can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: The number of employee in *Pesantren Sidogiri* Cooperative.

Year	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The number of employee	4	4	6	7	7	9	1
	1	7	6	4	5	4	0
	3	4	5	7	3	8	0

The creation of *pesantren* cooperative and BMT (Islamic micro saving and lending) is advocated by community development in *Pesantren Sidogiri*, benefit both for student, local people and the *pesantren*. The *pesantren* enjoy great advantages from the community development activities. There is a range of advantages behind the establishment of such institution. First, as an educational institution, *Pesantren Sidogiri* should be able to provide considerable sums to finance its own operational costs, including construction of educational facilities. Secondly, the establishment of profitable institutions was also intended to strengthen the independence of independent *pesantren* regarding education funding.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The fall of Indonesian president Soeharto in 1998 opened a political opportunity for civil society groups, including the traditional *pesantren* community, to express their political, social, and educational ideal more openly. The Indonesian government also made an effort to develop the quality of traditional *pesantren* educational system. In this sense, the relationship between the *pesantren* communities and the State has shown a cooperative approach. The *pesantren* also deal with needs of society. Therefore, we argue that *Pesantren* Sidogiri has its own strategies to deal with and respond to social challenges. In this sense, the effectiveness of *Pesantren* Sidogiri to attract people participation in community development cannot be separated from *pesantrens'* values such as self-sufficiency, social worship and Islamic brother-hood (*al-ukhuwah al-Islamiyah*). In short, being traditional does not mean the *pesantren* ignored to economic development and social transformation.

It is undeniable that in social life or community development issues, the contribution of *pesantren* is important. *Pesantren* not only focus on the role of an Islamic educational institution, but it is also concerned about economic development and social transformation of the community, such as reducing unemployment and eliminating poverty. The creation of BMT or microfinance institution, *Kopontren* (the *Pesantren* cooperative) shows that the *Pesantren* indirectly deals with social life and unemployment issues. In this sense, *pesantren* provides interest-free loans for people who would like to develop 'small and micro-enterprises' and create opportunity to get job. Using the two principal foundations in community work as identified by Ife and Tesoriero (Ife and Tesoriero, 2006). The first principle is a social justice, or human right perspective refers to equity, dignity, and justice. The second principle is ecological perspective with its emphasis on air pollution, global warming, and water sanitation. It is argued that the community approach at *Pesantren* Sidogiri reflect the human right perspective.

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