

The Roles of Persis in Education Development in Indonesia 1923-2024

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Abstract:

Persis (Persatuan Islam –Islamic Union) is one of the Islamic organizations in Indonesia that has made a significant contribution to the development of education since it was founded in 1923. This article aims to analyze the role of Persis in building an education system based on Islamic values, starting from the colonial era and the independence to the current modern era. Using a historical and qualitative-descriptive approach, this research examines the educational strategies, challenges and innovations carried out by Persis through madrasahs, Islamic boarding schools and formal educational institutions. The findings show that Persis is consistent in fighting for education based on pure Islamic beliefs, both through curriculum formation, teacher training and the development of educational institutions. In the reform and digital era, Persis continues to adapt to technology and global needs to ensure the relevance of Islamic education in producing a generation with noble character and high competence. This research confirms that the role of Persis education does not only cover the Islamic realm but also contributes to Indonesia's national development.

Contribution: By promoting character education through various community initiatives, including social media outreach, Persis demonstrates its commitment to fostering a generation that embodies noble values while being equipped for modern societal roles.

Keywords: *Islamic union; Islamic education; madrasah; renewal Islam; modern education.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of information technology necessitates a reevaluation of Islamic education methods. Research highlights the importance of integrating data literacy, human literacy, and technological literacy into educational practices to prepare students for future challenges. This modernization effort aims to cultivate morally advanced individuals who can navigate the complexities of contemporary society while adhering to Islamic values (Syafaruddin, 2024). The modernization process has introduced innovative teaching techniques that prioritize student engagement

and active learning. Methods such as participatory teaching, contextualized pedagogy, and blended learning—which combines traditional classroom instruction with digital resources—are becoming more prevalent (Azra, 2015; Zuhdi, n.d., 2018). These methods cater to diverse learning styles and encourage students to take an active role in their education.

Islamic Association (Persis) was born on 12 September 1923 in Bandung, in an atmosphere of Dutch colonialism that still gripped Indonesian territory. At that time, the Muslim community in the Dutch East Indies faced major challenges, both politically, economically and socio-culturally. One of the main challenges is the decline of Muslims due to religious practices mixed with superstition, *bid'ah* and *khurafat*, as well as the lack of understanding of Islamic teachings that are purely based on the Qur'an and hadith. This condition encouraged the birth of Islamic reform movements, including those spearheaded by Persis. The Persis Movement emerged as a response to colonialism, which not only exploited natural resources but also ignored Islamic education for native people. The education system implemented by the Netherlands, through government schools (Hollandsch Inlandsche School and Europeesche Lagere School), emphasized more on providing administrative labor to support colonial interests and did not provide significant space for Islamic education. This sparked unrest among Muslim ulama and leaders, who realized the need for alternative Islamic-based educational institutions to preserve religious values and build the collective consciousness of the people (Abdullah, 1991).

On the other hand, at the beginning of the 20th century, the global Islamic renewal movement, such as that initiated by Muhammad Abduh and Jamaluddin Al-Afghani in Egypt, also influenced the thinking of Islamic figures in Indonesia. Reform ideas that called for a return to the Qur'an and hadith as the main guidance attracted the attention of figures such as Ahmad Hassan, Mohammad Natsir, and other figures who later became part of Persis. Persis not only adopted this reform idea but also integrated it into their educational movement strategy (Nasution, 1982). In Bandung, the center of trade and intellectuals at that time, Ahmad Hassan and his friends took advantage of the strategic situation to establish an organization oriented towards Islamic reform. They focused on Islamic education through teaching in madrasas, religious discussions, and publishing Islamic literature. Persis also used print media such as the Islamic Defenders magazine to spread reform ideas, which later became a characteristic of this movement in building awareness among the people at large (Pratama & Zulhijra, 2019). Therefore, the birth of Persis in 1923 was part of the Muslim community's efforts to build intellectual and spiritual resistance to colonialism, as well as responding to the urgent need for Islamic reform in a society trapped in stagnation in religious thought and practice (Federspiel, 2001).

Education has been the main pillar of the Islamic Unity (Persis) movement since its inception. Persis is aware that one of the main causes of the decline of Muslims is the low level of education, especially understanding of religion which is mixed with practices that deviate from pure Islamic teachings, such as superstition, heresy and *khurafat* (Suharto, 2011). Therefore, education is Persis' main strategy to instill pure Islamic values based on the Qur'an and hadith. Persis views education as a means of social transformation and moral improvement of the people. Ahmad Hassan, one of Persis' central figures, emphasized the importance of understanding Islamic teachings correctly with a rational and textual approach. Education in this context does not only include religious teaching, but also efforts to build people's critical awareness of the challenges of the times. Through established madrasas and educational institutions, Persis is trying to produce a generation of Muslims who are not only devoutly religious but also able to compete in various fields of life (Abdullah, 1991).

One of the concrete forms of education promoted by Persis is the establishment of madrasas that use a curriculum based on the Qur'an and hadith. This madrasah prioritizes systematic teaching methods, such as learning tafsir, fiqh, and hadith, as well as Arabic language training to understand religious texts directly. This effort is different from traditional educational approaches, which often only emphasize memorization without in-depth understanding (Madjid, 2019). Apart from that, education is also a tool to fight colonialism and Western cultural domination. Persis seeks to integrate modern science with Islamic values so that Muslims are not trapped in the dichotomy between religion and worldly knowledge. Thus, Persis education does not only focus on theological renewal but also on forming a critical, independent and competitive generation. Through the publication of books, pamphlets and magazines such as Islamic Defenders, Persis expands the reach of Islamic education to the wider community. This media is used to spread pure Islamic understanding and raise people's awareness of the importance of returning to the teachings of the Qur'an and hadith. This strategy shows that for Persis, education is not only limited to the classroom but is also an intellectual movement that reaches all levels of society. With this approach, Persis succeeded in instilling pure Islamic values and gave birth to a generation of Muslims who contributed in various fields, including education, da'wah and government. Education in the Persis movement is clear evidence of how Islamic reform efforts can have a significant impact on the formation of the character and identity of Muslims in Indonesia.

METHOD

The method used in this paper is library research with a qualitative approach (Moleong, 2007). Using a historical and qualitative-descriptive approach, this research delves into the educational strategies, challenges, and innovations implemented by Persatuan Islam (Persis) across various educational institutions, including madrasas, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), and formal schools. This methodology allows for a comprehensive exploration of how Persis has navigated the complexities of educational development in Indonesia since its founding (Icenogle et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2023; Schnitker et al., 2017). The data source comes from a systematic and rational text-based teaching method. Madrasah Persis also emphasizes intensive Arabic language learning to enable students to understand the Qur'an and the hadith without intermediary translations. During this period, Islamic boarding schools began to become an integral part of the Persis education system. Islamic boarding schools such as the Persis Bangil Islamic Boarding School in East Java and Persis Pajagalan in Bandung play an important role in forming a cadre of Muslim ulama and intellectuals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Early Days (1923–1945): Consolidation and Identity Formation

In its early days (1923–1945), the Islamic Association (Persis) focused on consolidating the organization and establishing its identity as an Islamic renewal movement in Indonesia. This period was marked by efforts to emphasize Persis' mission to instill pure Islamic values, fight superstition, *bid'ah* and *khurafat*, and improve the quality of Muslims through systematic education (Federspiel, 2001). Persis was founded in 1923 in Bandung by Haji Zamzam and Haji Muhammad Yunus. However, significant momentum was gained when Ahmad Hassan joined in 1924. Ahmad Hassan brought a more intellectual and strategic approach, including strengthening through Islamic discussions, publishing print media, and establishing a cadre network (Madani, 2023). During this period, Persis faced major challenges, including resistance from people who were still bound by old traditions and pressure from the Dutch colonial government, which was suspicious of Islamic organizations. However, Persis continues to grow and is starting to build a network outside Bandung, including in Surabaya and Jakarta. Education is at the core of Persis' struggle in forming her identity. The two main approaches taken were the establishment of madrasas and the organization of Islamic courses.

The first Persis madrasah was founded in 1936 in Bandung. This madrasah emphasizes education based on the Qur'an and Hadith with a curriculum designed to provide an in-depth understanding of Islam. The main focus is to equip students with religious knowledge and the ability to read Islamic texts directly through learning Arabic. Madrasah Persis also integrates modern knowledge into its curriculum. This approach reflects Persis' commitment to responding to the challenges of the times, combining religious understanding with worldly skills so that graduates can contribute in various areas of life. Islamic courses are intended for the general public who cannot access formal education at madrasas. This course is usually held in mosques, the Persis administrator's house, or other gathering places. The course material includes *aqidah*, *fiqh*, and correct methods for reading the Qur'an, as well as an explanation of the dangers of superstitious practices and heresy. Through this course, Persis succeeded in reaching various levels of society, from workers and traders to students. Islamic courses are also a medium for introducing critical preaching methods based on logic and religious texts (Elder & Paul, 2007; Husen, n.d.; Paul & Elder, 2019).

In this early period, Persis used print media as a means of supporting education. The Islamic Defenders magazine, published since 1929, has become one of the main means for spreading the ideas of Islamic reform. The articles in this magazine contain explanations of Islamic teachings, criticism of deviant traditional practices, as well as Islamic guidance for the general public. The education provided by Persis aims to form a modern Muslim identity but still adheres to the Qur'an and hadith. This effort also reflected the spirit of intellectualism and independence from the influence of traditionalism or the dominant *tarekat* at that time. Through a comprehensive educational approach, Persis not only functions as a religious organization but also as an agent of social transformation. This early period became an important foundation for the Persis movement to continue to develop in the following period (Titin, 2020).

As a reformist Islamic organization, Persis not only faced internal challenges from a Muslim society that was still bound by tradition but also external challenges from the colonial government and the political dynamics that developed at that time. The Dutch colonial government was generally suspicious of Islamic organizations, including Persis, because it was feared that they could raise the spirit of resistance against colonialism. Although Persis primarily focused on religious reform and education, the government continued to monitor the organization's activities, especially through control of print media and associations.

Persis faced challenges in publishing the Islamic Defenders magazine and its preaching books, which were often subject to strict censorship. Articles deemed to "threaten public order" by the colonial government could be banned.

This hampers the spread of the idea of Islamic reform to the wider community. Persis often has to face burdensome administrative regulations, such as having to obtain permission to hold public meetings or establish educational institutions. This policy was created to reduce the potential for the consolidation of Muslims in opposing colonialism (Noorachman, n.d.).

Apart from pressure from the colonial government, Persis also faced resistance from traditionalist Muslim groups who felt disturbed by the sharp criticism leveled by Ahmad Hassan and other Persis figures regarding religious practices that were deemed inconsistent with the Qur'an and hadith. Persis often had disagreements with traditionalist ulama, especially regarding issues of jurisprudence and tarekat. For example, Persis criticized the traditions of grave pilgrimages, tahlil and the Prophet's birthday which were considered heresy. This view sparked sharp debate among Muslims and created polarization between Persis and traditionalist groups. Indonesia's political situation during the colonial period also influenced the development of Persis. This organization operates amidst the dynamics of national movements involving various groups with different ideologies, such as secular nationalism, socialism and Islamism.

In contrast to organizations such as Sarekat Islam (SI) which are more active in political movements, Persis chooses not to be directly involved in practical political struggles. The focus remained on religious and educational reform. This decision made Persis appear less popular in the eyes of some people who hoped that Islamic organizations would join in the fight for independence through political channels. During the Japanese occupation, Persis experienced new challenges. Japan supports certain Islamic organizations as a propaganda tool, but Persis does not receive major support because its focus remains on religious reform (Sugiarto & Rofik, 2020).

The Old Order and New Order Period (1945–1998): Modernization of Islamic Education

During the Old Order and New Order periods, the Islamic Association (Persis) increasingly strengthened its role in pioneering Islamic-based formal education. This role reflects Persis' commitment to improving the quality of Muslims through a modern and organized approach to the education system, both through madrasas, Islamic boarding schools and Islamic-based public schools. During the Old Order, Indonesia faced complex political dynamics, including the nationalization of educational institutions and pressure from various ideologies such as communism and secular nationalism. Persis is taking advantage of this opportunity to strengthen Islamic-based education, while remaining focused on spreading the teachings of the Qur'an and hadith as a solution to the challenges of the times (Wildan et al., 2015). After Indonesia's independence, Persis expanded its madrasa network in various regions. This madrasah has a curriculum that integrates religious and general knowledge, such as mathematics, Indonesian and natural sciences. The aim is to equip students with strong religious knowledge as well as intellectual abilities that are relevant to modern needs (Baru, 2012).

Persis began to adopt a modern approach using systematic and rational text-based teaching methods. Madrasah Persis also emphasizes intensive Arabic language learning to enable students to understand the Qur'an and hadith without intermediary translations. During this period, Islamic boarding schools began to become an integral part of the Persis education system. Islamic boarding schools such as the Persis Bangil Islamic Boarding School in East Java and Persis Pajagalan in Bandung play an important role in forming a cadre of Muslim ulama and intellectuals. Pesantren Persis has unique characteristics, namely its emphasis on pure religious disciplines without ignoring general knowledge. During the New Order era, the government supported formal Islamic education with relatively stable policies. This opens up space for Persis to expand its role in formal education and align its education system with government policies, without reducing its focus on pure Islamic values. Persis founded more Islamic-based schools, including public schools that integrate religious values in their curriculum. This is done to reach a wider community and provide an alternative Islamic-based education amidst the dominance of secular schools. Persis began collaborating with the government on an educational certification program. Persis madrasah and Islamic boarding school graduates are starting to be recognized by the state, so they can continue their education to a higher level in public schools or universities (Rahman & Saebani, 2018).

The Persis educational curriculum has undergone significant modernization, by including relevant social sciences and technology. Education in madrasas and Islamic boarding schools is directed at producing graduates who are able to contribute to national development, without abandoning their Islamic identity. Persis pays special attention to education in the interpretation of the Al-Qur'an and fiqh, with a logic-based and critical approach. This aims to give birth to a generation of Muslims who are able to solve the problems of the people by referring directly to the Qur'an and hadith. Persis continues to instill the values of pure Islamic faith and noble morals in students. This value became the main basis for dealing with the influence of secularization that developed during the New Order era. Persis Islamic boarding schools such as the Persis Bangil, Pajagalan and Tarogong Islamic boarding schools have developed into educational centers for cadres who not only study religious knowledge but are also active in Islamic da'wah and reform. These Islamic boarding school alumni played a role in strengthening the reformist Islamic movement in Indonesia (Suharto, 2011).

Reform Era to Present (1998–2024): Global Relevance and Technological Challenges

From the Reformation era until now, the Islamic Union (Persis) has faced new challenges and opportunities that have arisen as a result of globalization and technological developments. In this context, Persis continues to adapt to ensure Islamic values remain relevant in an increasingly globally connected society. One important step is adaptation to educational technology, which is the main element in maintaining the relevance of Da'wah and the Persis education system. The Reform Era opened up space for greater freedom in Indonesia, including for Islamic organizations such as Persis. However, advances in information and communication technology bring new challenges, such as technological disruption in education and the flow of information that is not always in line with Islamic values. Persis understands that to remain relevant, these organizations must integrate technology into preaching and education (Rahman, 2016).

Persis is gradually integrating technology into the education system, both in madrasas, Islamic boarding schools and Islamic-based public schools. Following are some of the steps that madrasas have taken. Persis madrasas and Islamic boarding schools are starting to utilize digital technology in the learning process. The use of online learning platforms, such as Zoom, Google Classroom, and applications specifically for Islamic education, has become increasingly common, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Islamic boarding schools such as the Persis Bangil and Pajagalan Islamic Boarding Schools have even developed digital-based learning modules that can be accessed by students anywhere. As an organization that, from the start, focused on spreading da'wah through print media, Persis has now switched to digital media. Persis magazine of Risalah and other publications are now available in digital format, allowing a wider audience to access Persis' preaching and educational materials online. Persis is also developing online-based Islamic courses, which enable anyone, anywhere, to study the Qur'an, hadith, fiqh and creed according to the Persis learning method. These courses often involve leading scholars and educators from the Persis environment.

Persis has established a technology-based education center that integrates computer laboratories, internet access and other digital resources. This is done to prepare students to face global challenges without forgetting Islamic values. Web-based academic information systems are starting to be used by Persis madrasas and Islamic boarding schools to manage student data, curriculum and assessments. This innovation helps increase the efficiency of education administration in the Persis environment. Higher education institutions such as STAIPI and UNIPI play a strategic role in producing a modern Islamic generation that is based on the Al-Qur'an and hadith and is able to face the challenges of the times. STAIPI, as an institution born from the womb of Islamic Association (Persis), integrates classical Islamic scientific traditions with modern approaches to form quality Muslim scholars.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Persis has played a very important role in the development of education in Indonesia. Since its inception, Persis has attempted to create an education system that not only pays attention to religious aspects but also opens up horizons to science and technology. In every period of Indonesian history, Persis was able to adapt to the challenges of the times, whether facing colonialism, political change, to the flow of globalization and technological developments. The educational role carried out by Persis has given birth to many generations of Muslim intellectuals who are able to contribute to nation-building. The education provided at Persis educational institutions not only teaches religious knowledge but also practical skills that are relevant to the needs of the times. Through higher education institutions such as STAIPI (Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Persatuan Islam -- Islamic College of the Islamic Union) and various madrasas and Islamic boarding schools, Persis continues to be committed to producing a generation of Muslims who are modern, have character and are able to face global challenges. Thus, Persis's contribution to the world of Islamic education in Indonesia is very large and sustainable, providing a significant positive impact in shaping the face of education and a better Indonesian society, based on pure Islamic values and in line with current developments. The study confirms that the educational efforts of Persis extend beyond religious instruction; they also contribute significantly to Indonesia's national development. By producing educated individuals who are both knowledgeable in Islam and competent in various fields, Persis plays a crucial role in shaping the future of Indonesian society

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