



Modernization of Islamic Education in Indonesia: An Analysis of Malik Fadjar's Thoughts

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Abstract

This study examines the modernization of Islamic education in Indonesia through an analysis of the educational thought of Malik Fadjar. Employing a qualitative approach with a figure-based study design, the research explores Malik Fadjar's ideas and practical contributions to educational reform, particularly in the areas of human resource development, curriculum modernization, and institutional governance. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentary analysis, and analyzed using thematic content analysis. The findings reveal that Malik Fadjar conceptualized modernization as a holistic and integrative process aimed at overcoming the dichotomy between religious and general knowledge while preserving Islamic values. His reform agenda emphasizes ethical leadership, teacher professionalism, curriculum integration, and participatory governance as key pillars of sustainable educational development. The study further demonstrates that Malik Fadjar's ideas remain highly relevant in addressing contemporary challenges faced by Islamic education, including globalization, technological change, and institutional competitiveness. This research contributes to the discourse on Islamic education reform by highlighting a value-based modernization model that harmonizes tradition and modernity within the Indonesian educational context.

Introduction

Islamic education has long been a central subject of scholarly discourse, particularly in relation to its capacity to respond to social change and intellectual transformation. Historically, Islamic education experienced periods of remarkable progress, stagnation, and renewal. Scholars commonly identify phases of classical flourishing, decline, and modern reform, with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries often characterized as a period of intellectual stagnation marked by limited innovation in curriculum, pedagogy, and scientific inquiry (Wulandari & Agung, 2025; Sahin, 2022). This stagnation was not merely educational but was closely linked to broader socio-political decline, which weakened intellectual confidence and curtailed engagement with emerging forms of knowledge beyond religious disciplines (Asari et al., 2023; Okoronkwo & Dike, 2025; Mohiuddin, 2023).

One of the most persistent consequences of this historical decline is the dichotomy between religious knowledge and general or secular knowledge. This division has shaped educational structures and epistemological assumptions within Islamic education, positioning religious sciences as sacred yet isolated, while general sciences are viewed as empirically superior and economically valuable (Adiyono et al., 2024; Syarip et al., 2026; Fernadi, 2024; Mahmudi et al., 2022). Recent studies argue that this dichotomy undermines the holistic development of learners and marginalizes religious knowledge within modern educational systems (Humairah

et al., 2024; Muna et al., 2024). As a result, Islamic education often struggles to balance spiritual formation with the demands of scientific and technological advancement.

In the contemporary era of globalization and rapid technological change, Islamic education faces increasingly complex challenges. Globalization introduces external values that frequently conflict with Islamic moral frameworks, while digital transformation reshapes how knowledge is produced and transmitted (Rana, 2024; Hajar, 2024; Marita et al., 2025). Research highlights that without adaptive strategies, Islamic education risks losing relevance among younger generations who are immersed in global cultures and digital environments (Munirom, 2023; Tisnawati & Sukari, 2024). Consequently, modernization is no longer optional but a structural necessity for sustaining the role of Islamic education in shaping ethical and competent citizens.

Modernization in Islamic education, however, must be understood as a comprehensive and integrative process rather than superficial reform. It encompasses curriculum development, institutional management, pedagogical innovation, and human resource enhancement (Zaakiyyah, 2024; Permatasari & Tandiyuk, 2023). Recent scholarship emphasizes that effective modernization requires the integration of Islamic values with multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and technology-oriented approaches, ensuring that moral and spiritual dimensions coexist with scientific literacy and practical skills (Marjuni, 2022; Murtadlo et al., 2023). Such an approach enables Islamic education to function as both a moral compass and a driver of social progress.

Within the Indonesian context, efforts to overcome educational dichotomy and stagnation have gained momentum through institutional reforms, particularly the transformation of Islamic higher education (Hayadin et al., 2025; Nuryana, 2022; Hajar, 2024). The shift from religiously exclusive institutions toward integrative models reflects a growing awareness of the need to harmonize faith-based knowledge with modern sciences. Studies indicate that integrated Islamic educational institutions are more capable of producing graduates who are intellectually versatile, spiritually grounded, and socially responsive (Aulia & Usiono, 2024; Rustandi et al., 2023).

A key figure in advancing this integrative vision of Islamic education in Indonesia is Malik Fadjar. His thought emphasizes that Islamic education must transcend dualistic paradigms and embrace modernization without abandoning its ethical and theological foundations. Fadjar consistently argued that education rooted solely in religious instruction would be insufficient to address globalization, autonomy, and market competition, advocating instead for a balanced synthesis of religious insight, scientific reasoning, and humanistic values (Idris, 2023; Kurniawan, 2023). His ideas resonate strongly with contemporary calls for curriculum flexibility, institutional reform, and educational humanism.

Therefore, examining Malik Fadjar's thought on the modernization of Islamic education is both timely and significant. His perspectives offer a conceptual framework for addressing the enduring dichotomy between religious and general knowledge while responding to current global challenges. This study seeks to analyze his ideas on educational modernization, particularly in relation to curriculum integration, human resource development, and institutional governance, as a contribution to the ongoing discourse on the future of Islamic education in Indonesia.

Methods

The research was qualitative with a figure based or intellectual biography approach. This was deemed as suitable, as the study aimed at analyzing the educational thought, intellectual background and practical contributions of Malik Fadjar in the modernization process of Islamic

education in Indonesia. The study did not just record his views as ideas in isolation, but attempted to understand the ways in which his educational vision was developed from his personal and professional experiences, leadership in his institutions, and participation in national education reform. In this way, the thought of Malik Fadjar was analyzed from three aspects that are important in the context of Islamic education modernizations, namely development of human resources, curriculum reform and institutional governance.

This study employed documentary analysis, key informant interviews and a limited observation of institutional narratives in collecting the data. The primary and secondary materials were the documentary data that were used for the main source of analysis. The primary documents consisted of books, scholarly papers, academic writings, policy-related texts, speeches, institutional documents and writings by or directly related to Malik Fadjar. The latter documents used were secondary documents, such as biographies, journal articles, books, previous studies and critical analysis written by other scholars regarding the life, educational thought, leadership practice and contribution of Malik Fadjar to the Islamic education reform in Indonesia.

The findings of this study were supplemented by information gathered from key informant interviews. The informants were purposively selected because of their historical, academic, and professional close relationship with Malik Fadjar. They were a former personal aide, a former academic colleague, a former institutional staff member and a former student who became an educator. They were deemed relevant informants since they possessed first-hand or contextual knowledge in several areas of Malik Fadjar's educational ideas, leadership style, institutional practice, and reform agenda. Interviews were employed to enrich the biographical context, institutional memory, curriculum concepts, human resources development, governance and implementation of Malik Fadjar educational thought.

The limited observation was used as additional data in the interpretation of the institutional culture and institutional governance practices of the legacy of Malik Fadjar. The observation targeted institutional narratives, leadership values, participation patterns and education practices that could be seen as part of institutions that were impacted by his reform program. This component was not used as the main source of evidence, but it was used as contextual support for understanding the memory of the ideas of Malik Fadjar, as narrated and reflected in institutional practice, including the aspects of participatory governance, academic culture and human resource development.

Thematic content analysis was used to analyze data. The analysis started with multiple readings of the documentary materials, transcriptions of the interviews, and notes from the observations. The data was then coded, categorized and interpreted according to the themes that appeared repeatedly in the data regarding Islamic education modernization. The major themes were human resource modernization, integration of curriculum, institutional governance, ethical leadership, and integration of religious and general knowledge. The results were then presented descriptively in analytical narration, to explain the conceptual structure and also to give the results which have meaning in practice for Malik Fadjar's thought.

Results and Discussion

Malik Fadjar as an Agent of Islamic Education Modernization

The findings indicate that Malik Fadjar occupied a decisive position in the modernization of Islamic education in Indonesia. His role was not limited to the production of educational ideas, but extended into institutional leadership, policy engagement, and the practical reorientation of Islamic educational institutions. Documentary analysis shows that Malik Fadjar understood

modernization not as the abandonment of Islamic educational traditions, but as a conscious effort to strengthen Islamic education so that it could remain intellectually relevant, institutionally credible, and socially responsive. His modernization agenda was consistently directed toward integration rather than replacement, allowing Islamic education to engage with modern knowledge while maintaining its religious and moral identity.

According to AM, a former personal aide of Malik Fadjar:

“Educational reform was already part of his blood. His father had established schools, and Malik Fadjar continued that legacy by making reforms at a much broader, national level.”

This excerpt shows that Malik Fadjar’s reformist orientation was deeply rooted in his biographical experience. Educational reform was not merely an administrative task that emerged from his institutional position. It was part of a longer personal and familial exposure to educational activism. The statement suggests that Malik Fadjar understood education as a moral responsibility and a historical project, not simply as a technical sector of public policy.

The findings also show that Malik Fadjar’s significance lies in his ability to connect educational thought with institutional transformation. His ideas did not remain abstract concepts. They were translated into leadership practices, curriculum renewal, human resource development, and institutional governance reform.

“What distinguished Malik Fadjar was his ability to connect ideas with institutions. He did not stop at talking about Islamic education reform. He tried to make the institution itself move toward that reform.”

This statement strengthens the finding that Malik Fadjar should be understood not only as an educational thinker, but also as a reform actor. His contribution to Islamic education modernization was conceptual and operational at the same time. He formulated ideas about the future of Islamic education, but he also attempted to build institutional conditions that could make those ideas possible.

Another important finding concerns Malik Fadjar’s effort to build confidence within Islamic educational institutions. He rejected the assumption that Islamic education was inferior to general education. Instead, he encouraged Islamic institutions to become modern, disciplined, and trusted while preserving their spiritual foundation.

“He often reminded us that Islamic education should not feel inferior before general education. For him, Islamic institutions had to become modern, disciplined, and trusted, but without losing their religious soul.”

This finding suggests that Malik Fadjar’s modernization agenda was neither secularizing nor narrowly traditionalist. He offered a middle path in which Islamic education could become competitive and adaptive without losing its ethical and religious character. His thought positioned modernization as a way to strengthen Islamic education, not as a force that weakens its identity.

Modernization of Human Resources in Islamic Education

The findings reveal that human resource development constituted one of the most important foundations of Malik Fadjar’s modernization framework. He viewed teachers, lecturers, administrators, and educational leaders as the central actors in determining the quality of Islamic education. For Malik Fadjar, modernization could not be reduced to curriculum revision, infrastructure improvement, or institutional restructuring. Educational reform would

remain superficial if the people responsible for implementing it were not intellectually prepared, professionally competent, ethically disciplined, and spiritually committed.

AM explained Malik Fadjar's position as follows:

“Competency-based curriculum is meaningless without competent teachers. Malik Fadjar always said, ‘Teachers must not be sleepy.’ He often emphasized that educational recovery begins with teachers.”

This quote confirms that Malik Fadjar placed educators at the center of educational transformation. The phrase “teachers must not be sleepy” carries a deeper pedagogical meaning. It does not merely refer to physical alertness, but to intellectual vigilance, professional seriousness, and moral awareness. Teachers, in his view, should not become passive transmitters of content. They should become active agents who are able to read social change, respond to institutional needs, and guide learners toward meaningful development.

The findings further indicate that Malik Fadjar's concern with human resources was closely related to institutional strength. He understood that buildings, facilities, and formal curriculum documents could support education, but they could not replace the role of competent educators. Human resource development was therefore positioned as the first condition for broader institutional improvement.

“He was very concerned with teacher quality. He believed that buildings could be improved and curriculum could be revised, but if the teacher did not grow, the institution would remain weak.”

This excerpt shows that Malik Fadjar's modernization framework was human centered. He did not see teachers as merely technical implementers of curriculum. He saw them as intellectual and moral actors who determined whether educational reform would succeed or fail. In this sense, teacher development was not an additional component of modernization. It was the core of modernization itself.

Another important finding is that Malik Fadjar connected competence with sincerity, discipline, and ethical responsibility. His understanding of educational professionalism was not purely technical. It included the formation of moral character and a deep sense of responsibility toward learners.

“He gave us the impression that being an educator was not only a job. It was a responsibility to shape people. That is why he always connected competence with sincerity and discipline.”

This statement indicates that Malik Fadjar's view of human resource modernization combined professional capability with ethical formation. Educators were expected not only to master knowledge and pedagogy, but also to embody responsibility, sincerity, and discipline. This makes his modernization model distinct from purely managerial approaches because it places moral integrity at the center of educational quality.

Strategic Framework for Human Resource Modernization

Documentary analysis identifies a coherent framework guiding Malik Fadjar's approach to human resource modernization. This framework can be understood through three interrelated dimensions. The first is the ontological dimension, which places human beings as the main driver of educational quality. The second is the epistemological dimension, which refers to the knowledge, management principles, and professional capacities needed to improve education.

The third is the axiological dimension, which emphasizes ethical leadership, social responsibility, and institutional sustainability.

Table 1. Modernization of Human Resources in Islamic Education

Dimension	Core Emphasis
Ontological	Human resources as the main driver of educational quality
Epistemological	Quality management, equity, institutional autonomy
Axiological	Sustainability, ethical leadership, social responsibility

Table 1 illustrates that Malik Fadjar’s framework was philosophically structured rather than technically fragmented. The ontological dimension emphasizes the centrality of human agency in education. The epistemological dimension reflects strategic knowledge management, professional competence, institutional autonomy, and quality assurance. The axiological dimension highlights ethical commitment, social responsibility, and long term sustainability.

This framework demonstrates that Malik Fadjar’s modernization agenda was not merely administrative. It was grounded in a deeper understanding of education as a human, moral, and institutional project. Human resources were not positioned as instruments of policy implementation, but as moral and intellectual agents of change. This finding is important because it shows that modernization, in Malik Fadjar’s thought, required the transformation of people before the transformation of systems could become meaningful.

Curriculum Modernization and Knowledge Integration

The findings indicate that curriculum modernization was another major component of Malik Fadjar’s educational thought. Documentary evidence shows that he viewed curriculum modernization as an integrative effort to eliminate the dichotomy between religious and general knowledge. He rejected the assumption that Islamic education should remain isolated from science, technology, social change, and contemporary intellectual development. At the same time, he did not support a form of modernization that removed Islamic values from the educational process. His curriculum vision was therefore integrative, contextual, and value based.

AM stated:

“Malik Fadjar rejected rigid curricula. He believed learning must be relevant to social realities and responsive to change.”

This excerpt confirms that curriculum flexibility was central to Malik Fadjar’s educational thought. Curriculum was not understood merely as a fixed list of subjects, but as a living structure that must respond to the needs of learners and society. Relevance and contextuality were prioritized so that education could prepare students for practical engagement with real world challenges.

The findings further show that Malik Fadjar’s curriculum modernization was epistemological in nature. It was not only about adding general subjects to Islamic educational institutions. It was about reconstructing the relationship between Islamic knowledge, scientific reasoning, social awareness, and humanistic values.

“He did not want Islamic education to be trapped in old divisions between religious subjects and general subjects. He wanted students to understand religion deeply, but also to understand society, science, and the changing world.”

This statement shows that Malik Fadjar’s curriculum vision sought to overcome the old separation between religious sciences and general sciences. He wanted Islamic education to

produce learners who were religiously grounded but also intellectually open to society, science, and modern life. This integration was not meant to dilute Islamic identity. Instead, it was intended to make Islamic education more complete, relevant, and capable of responding to contemporary realities.

Documentary evidence also indicates that Malik Fadjar likened curriculum to a “nutritious menu.” This metaphor is significant because it reflects his view that curriculum should provide balanced intellectual, moral, spiritual, and practical nourishment for learners. A meaningful curriculum should not be overloaded with fragmented content, nor should it be detached from real social problems.

“When he spoke about curriculum, he often used simple language. He wanted the curriculum to be useful, balanced, and alive. It had to answer real problems faced by students and society.”

This quote strengthens the interpretation that Malik Fadjar’s curriculum modernization was directed toward usefulness, balance, and social relevance. Curriculum had to be alive, meaning that it should remain connected to the changing conditions of society. It had to help learners understand religion deeply while also developing the capacity to think critically, act responsibly, and contribute to public life.

Institutional Governance and the Rice Box Management Model

The findings further reveal that Malik Fadjar regarded institutional governance as a crucial part of Islamic education modernization. Documentary and interview data indicate that he viewed institutional weakness as one of the major barriers to educational quality. For him, Islamic educational institutions could not develop if they were trapped in rigid bureaucracy, weak coordination, poor accountability, and hierarchical distance between leaders and institutional members. Modernization therefore required a transformation in institutional culture and leadership practice.

AM described the model as follows:

“He initiated weekly meetings called ‘Rice-Box Management.’ He said, ‘As long as we can eat rice together and share ideas, we can solve problems.’”

This quote shows that Rice Box Management was not simply an informal meeting practice. It represented a deeper philosophy of participatory governance. Through this model, Malik Fadjar attempted to reduce bureaucratic distance, cultivate institutional trust, and create a space where institutional members could communicate, reflect, and solve problems collectively.

The findings also suggest that the strength of Rice Box Management lay in its simplicity. The meeting was not framed as a rigid bureaucratic forum, but as a space of dialogue, coordination, and shared problem solving. This made leadership feel closer and more accessible.

“The meeting was simple, but the effect was strong. People felt that they could speak, listen, and contribute. He made leadership feel close to everyone.”

This excerpt shows that Malik Fadjar’s governance model encouraged participation and shared ownership. By creating space for dialogue, he transformed leadership from distant authority into relational practice. Institutional members were not treated merely as subordinates, but as participants in the process of institutional development.

Another important finding is that Malik Fadjar’s leadership was exercised through presence and listening. He did not rely only on formal authority. He built institutional trust through direct engagement with people.

“He did not lead only from the office. He came to people, listened to them, and asked what could be improved. That was why many staff felt involved in the institution.”

This statement indicates that Malik Fadjar’s leadership was dialogical and practical. Modernization, in this context, was not only a matter of changing organizational structures. It also involved changing how people related to one another, how problems were discussed, and how institutional responsibility was shared. Governance reform was therefore enacted through cultural change as much as through formal policy.

Institutional Impact of Malik Fadjar’s Reform Agenda

The findings demonstrate that Malik Fadjar’s modernization agenda produced both conceptual and institutional impact. Conceptually, his thought contributed to a more integrative understanding of Islamic education, especially by challenging the dichotomy between religious and general knowledge. Institutionally, his leadership and policy involvement contributed to the strengthening of governance, curriculum relevance, human resource quality, and public credibility of Islamic educational institutions.

“The institutions he led changed because he pushed people to think beyond routine. He wanted Islamic educational institutions to have confidence, discipline, and clear direction.”

This statement indicates that Malik Fadjar’s impact was not only structural, but also cultural. He encouraged Islamic educational institutions to move beyond administrative routine and develop a stronger sense of direction. His reform agenda pushed institutions to become more confident, disciplined, and purposeful in facing educational change.

The findings also show that Malik Fadjar contributed to changing the self perception of Islamic education. Under his influence, Islamic educational institutions were not positioned as marginal or inferior. They were imagined as institutions capable of becoming modern, competitive, and morally grounded.

“His legacy is not only in policies, but in the way people think about Islamic education. He made many people believe that Islamic education could be modern, competitive, and still deeply Islamic.”

This excerpt shows that Malik Fadjar’s legacy was intellectual as much as institutional. He influenced how people imagined the future of Islamic education in Indonesia. His contribution was not only visible in policy or institutional reform, but also in the emergence of a new confidence that Islamic education could participate in modernity without abandoning its Islamic identity.

The convergence of interview data, documentary evidence, and institutional records confirms that Malik Fadjar’s modernization agenda was both conceptual and operational. His reforms addressed structural weaknesses while fostering ethical leadership and participatory institutional culture. Institutional change was achieved without eroding Islamic values. This synthesis highlights the enduring relevance of his ideas for contemporary Islamic education.

The findings of this study confirm that the modernization of Islamic education in Indonesia, as conceptualized and implemented by Malik Fadjar, represents a structural and philosophical shift rather than a merely technical reform. His emphasis on human resources, curriculum integration, and institutional governance aligns with broader theories of educational modernization that view reform as a systemic process involving values, institutions, and actors simultaneously. Previous studies have similarly argued that successful modernization in Islamic education requires comprehensive reform across epistemological, organizational, and

cultural dimensions (Mansir, 2021; Murtadlo et al., 2023). The present findings strengthen this argument by demonstrating how Malik Fadjar operationalized such reforms through concrete leadership practices and policy decisions.

The study's findings regarding human resource modernization are consistent with earlier research emphasizing the central role of educators in educational reform (Sopiulloh et al., 2026; Ningsih & Wachidah, 2025; Fadhluzzakiyy et al., 2025). Scholars have noted that teacher competence, ethical commitment, and professional autonomy are decisive factors in improving educational quality, particularly in faith-based institutions (Amin, 2024; D'Agostino et al., 2019; Effendi, 2025; Wang et al., 2020; Hasanah et al., 2021; Tisnawati & Sukari, 2024). Malik Fadjar's insistence that curriculum reform is meaningless without competent teachers echoes this position and reinforces the argument that modernization must begin with human capital. However, some studies caution that an overemphasis on managerial efficiency in human resource development may risk marginalizing spiritual and moral formation if not carefully balanced (Hasi, 2023). The findings of this study suggest that Malik Fadjar mitigated this risk by explicitly embedding ethical and religious values within his human resource framework.

In relation to curriculum modernization, the findings strongly support integrative approaches that seek to overcome the dichotomy between religious knowledge and general knowledge (Pitriani et al., 2024; Utari et al., 2025; Madya et al., 2026). This aligns with a growing body of literature advocating interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary curriculum models in Islamic education (Aulia & Usiono, 2024; Fitri et al., 2024). Malik Fadjar's metaphor of curriculum as a "nutritious menu" resonates with contemporary calls for balanced, contextual, and market-relevant curricula. Nevertheless, critics of curriculum integration argue that excessive accommodation to market demands may dilute the depth of classical Islamic scholarship (Yatusa'dah, 2022). The findings of this research indicate that Malik Fadjar addressed this tension by promoting integration rather than substitution, preserving Islamic epistemology while expanding scientific engagement.

The governance reforms identified in this study further corroborate earlier research highlighting the importance of participatory and adaptive leadership in educational institutions (Khosro et al., 2025; Mujari et al., 2026; Danso & Opoku, 2025). Malik Fadjar's "Rice-Box Management" model reflects principles of democratic leadership and organizational culture-building, which have been recognized as effective in managing educational change (Elice & Semin, 2023; Jabbar et al., 2025). This approach contrasts with bureaucratic governance models that often dominate public educational institutions. However, some scholars argue that informal leadership models may lack scalability and institutional consistency (Naldo et al., 2020). Despite this concern, the present findings suggest that Malik Fadjar's model functioned effectively within transitional contexts, particularly during periods of institutional crisis.

Overall, this study contributes to the discourse on Islamic education reform by demonstrating that Malik Fadjar's modernization agenda offers a viable middle path between tradition and modernity. His ideas support theories that advocate for value-based modernization—where technological advancement, institutional efficiency, and global competitiveness coexist with spiritual integrity and cultural identity (Kurniawan, 2023; Rosdialena et al., 2024). At the same time, the findings challenge reductionist views of modernization that equate progress solely with secularization or market orientation. By grounding modernization in ethical leadership and epistemological integration, Malik Fadjar's thought remains highly relevant for addressing contemporary challenges in Islamic education.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the modernization of Islamic education in Indonesia, as articulated and practiced by Malik Fadjar, represents a comprehensive and value-based reform paradigm. His thought emphasizes that educational modernization must be carried out through the integration of religious and general knowledge, the strengthening of human resources, and the reform of curriculum and institutional governance. The findings demonstrate that Malik Fadjar's approach does not position modernity in opposition to Islamic values but instead frames it as a means to enhance the relevance, competitiveness, and sustainability of Islamic education. Through ethical leadership, participatory governance, and integrative epistemology, his ideas successfully bridge the long-standing dichotomy between tradition and modern educational demands.

Based on these findings, this study suggests that contemporary Islamic education institutions should adopt a holistic modernization strategy inspired by Malik Fadjar's framework. Priority should be given to developing professional and ethically grounded educators, designing flexible and integrative curricula, and implementing governance models that are transparent, participatory, and adaptive to change. Future research is recommended to explore empirical implementation of Malik Fadjar's ideas across different educational levels and institutional contexts, as well as to examine their impact on learning outcomes and graduate competitiveness. Such efforts are expected to contribute to the continuous renewal of Islamic education in responding to global challenges while maintaining its spiritual and cultural foundations.

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