

# **‘Religious Education under Siege’: Policy and Ideological Debates in Indonesia**

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## **Abstrak**

*Tulisan ini mengkaji perkembangan Pendidikan Agama di Indonesia dari sudut pandang kebijakan Negara dan beberapa kecenderungan ideologis yang muncul. Pergeseran historis dari pengaruh budaya pra-kolonialisme, politik kolonialisme, berdirinya Negara-Bangsa hingga Era Reformasi dewasa ini melahirkan diskusi menarik tentang apakah Pendidikan Agama harus menjadi bagian Negara, instrumen untuk melegitimasi pembangunan sosial-ekonomi atau kekuatan kritis yang mempromosikan etika untuk keadilan sosial. Lebih dari itu, perdebatan ideologis mengenai Pendidikan Agama di tengah masyarakat yang multi-agama dan kepercayaan juga mencuat meskipun pada akhirnya pemerintah melalui UU Pendidikan Tahun 2003 memiliki sikapnya sendiri. Di tengah keragaman cara pandang yang ada, tulisan ini mencoba menawarkan langkah alternatif yakni bahwa, secara subjektif-doktrinal, Pendidikan Agama mesti aman bagi masing-masing keyakinan dan, secara sosial, Pendidikan Agama mesti menjaga dan mengembangkan pola hubungan agama yang beragam secara lebih berkualitas. Pada konteks ini, dialog di antara ragam komunitas beragama perlu diarahkan pada sumbangan kritis atas berbagai tantangan sosial dan gerakan progresif untuk ikut mengatasi ketidakadilan sosial sebagai agenda bersama. Diharapkan bahwa konsep ini akan mengatasi kejenuhan dialog lintas-agama yang kerap hanya memperdebatkan doktrin-doktrin teologis yang abstrak.*

**Kata Kunci:** Pendidikan Agama; Ideologi; Pendekatan Kritis; Keadilan Sosial.

## **Introduction**

One of the most significant current discussions in educational policy is what and how an ideology operates in influencing any policy making. The term ‘ideology’ which is simply defined by Wallace (2008) as a system of beliefs and ideas underlying behaviours, would typify agents or decision makers’ orientations. As Giroux (1984) perceptively states,

either educationalists or government's behaviours are likely to be under complex beliefs or thought to produce any policy. Such a phenomenon also seems to be relevant to describe and examine religious education (RE) in the framework of political decisions. In this respect, RE would not be totally free from interest group biases since it is also a product of political debates. Quite clearly, it can be said that RE policy actually has a particular ideology and needs to be constructively criticized.

Having given the above brief notes, in recent years, there has been also an increasing interest to rethink RE in Indonesia's public debates. Although it is clear that the government pays attention to RE as part of the national education system, there has emerged various responses to a decision which states that RE will be provided to make students 'understand and practice religious values and/or acquire expertise in religious studies' (*The 2003 Education Act*, Article 30). It can be then queried, as RE becomes part of political decisions, what is the type of a dominant ideology that would lead that statutory statement? As a response, for instance, several scholars argue that Indonesia as a multi-cultural and religious society should offer RE which mirrors such various backgrounds rather than merely places learning from a single tradition, for instance Islam or Christianity (Zuhdi, 2005; Baidhawiy, 2006). On the contrary, there are some who argue, as issued by The 2003 Education Act (Article 12), that RE is uniquely related to a particular belief embraced by people so that RE taught in schools should be exactly the same as convicted by students instead of promoting and learning about multi-religious traditions. Based on such debatable standpoints, RE teaching in Indonesia would still be an ongoing discussion.

So far, however, there has been little discussion about the existing ideologies behind RE policy in Indonesia. The lack of such studies are not only linked to what kinds of materials necessarily taught, but also related to the extent of the government intervention in general. Therefore, this essay critically discusses some issues, i.e. to begin with, what are the roots of ideological debates regarding RE in Indonesia?; next, to what extent does the government influence RE sectors especially in the reform era?; and finally, how should RE paradigms be designed in the context of multi-religious standpoints? In order to be clear, this writing begins by tracing the brief theoretical framework of RE ideologies or paradigms and it will then go on to study the above questionable points.

**'Under ideological siege': theoretical points in a brief**

Aronowitz and Giroux (1986) was apparently the first to use the concept '*education under siege*'. The main point they proposed is that education

is a centre of power struggle amongst ideologies. By taking American schools into consideration as a debate arena, they believed that schools are objects of the struggle amongst the conservative, the liberal and the radical. More simply, the first argues that education should preserve 'old values' such as beliefs or traditions and reject new ideas which would presumably be able to threaten their convictions and values. To criticize such a view point, there has emerged the second ideology, liberalism (modernism), which states that schools should open large chances for students individually to express their potentials in order to exist within a competitive market. This ideology is likely to be supported, for instance, by 'human capital theory' which claims that schooling is seen as investment to gain high income in future (Mgobozi, 2004). Yet, this outlook is also critically examined by several educationists who argue that individual wealth is not absolutely dependent upon individual potentials but also a social system. They criticize that 'human capital theory' has no longer been accepted due to the fact of an unequal social system which, in many cases, benefits privileged people either economically or socially (Philips&Schweisfurth, 2008; Harber, 2009). Therefore, the emergence of the radical as the third group which believe that schools are arenas to set up critical standpoints seems to be strongly believed as an alternative to anticipate unjust social systems.

To complete what Aronowitz and Giroux (1986) stated, Moore's perspective could be used to deepen theological and social orientations of RE in particular. Moore (1989) then classified RE paradigms into two categories that is the traditional and the contemporary. The former tends to polarise whether RE would focus on 'matters of the heart' which merely produces individual piety or 'matters of the world' which only orients to construct a social order. As a continuation of the previous debate, the contemporary standpoint tries to perceive whether RE would promote 'liberation', 'lifestyle' or 'practical theology'. Briefly, 'liberation education' emphasises that RE should be critical of social domination or be radical as Aronowitz and Giroux (1986) proposed. In addition, 'lifestyle education' is likely to lead RE to form a way of life of students as promoted by conservatives and, consequently, they would contribute to construct a societal order. The last perspective is that RE necessarily develops 'practical theology' which meets theological or belief meanings and social justice in practice. Thus, such a perspective reveals that religious adherents should not be anxious because basically, in practical theology, their social actions are religiously legitimate.

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on RE's positioning in a multicultural society. Several studies conducted

by contemporary scholars show that RE begins to go beyond binary opposition such as tradition versus modernisation and theology versus social liberation in which each generally promotes a one-sided perspective in understanding the nature of reality. Such modern thinkers argue that facing global social problems such as conflicts and poverty would not be able to overcome by a single tradition but by a mutual understanding and cooperation amongst various social groups including multi-religious communities (Zuhdi, 2005; Baidhaw, 2006; de Velasco, 2007). The UK education system in practice, for instance, has promoted the concepts of both 'learning from' a belief (mono-faith) and 'learning about' religious traditions (multi-faith) within its classrooms (Wright, 2008; Hella&Wright, 2009). Even though there has not been yet research which evaluates the effectiveness of this model, a mutual understanding amongst diverse religious traditions seems to be necessarily applied, not only related to sole theological dialogues but also multi-religious social actions. Thus, to what extent of either mono- or multi-religious traditions in reconstructing a society is acceptable in the Indonesian context would be an important discussion.

### **The origins of ideological struggles**

Reference to Schubert (1986) reveals that policy study can examine 'assumptions', 'political context' and 'historical precedent' or, as Ninnis (2004) states, it also includes 'what purposes' and 'with what consequences' of any policy produced. Their works show that investigating the origins of ideological debates on RE in Indonesia is somewhat determining because the recent RE development is a historical continuum which could not be separated from prior circumstances. Briefly, RE in pre- and during the colonial era and then in the Old and New Order will be discussed in this part.

Throughout the Indonesian history, RE which can be defined as religious transformation had been culturally growing in many communities including human values within. For instance, local values such as simplicity and loyalty had been taught in *peguron*, a traditional education institution in Java. In the following time, for instance, Buddhism arriving in the fifth century taught such values as piety and patience. Both the local and Buddhist values then met and shared with one another. The interaction had taken place for a long time until the arrival of Islam approximately in the thirteenth century. Islam was initially embraced by some traders who were generally mobile, moving from one place to another, so that they have actually promoted religious values in practice relating to, as Moore (1989) said, 'the matter of the

world' or economic motives, not only referring to 'the matters of the heart' or individual piety.

Having said that, it is interesting to take Marijan's (2000) opinion which explains that religious transformation at the first time was generally conducted through cultural or 'peaceful ways', for instance education held in houses and worship places, and religious embracement due to a marriage system . However, political power in the following time led by some Buddhist and Hindus kingdoms on the one hand and Moslem kingdoms on the other hand, had in many cases created social tensions amongst them. It is likely that political clashes had conditioned a one-sided way for each religious community to either defend or propagate their own beliefs. Therefore, it can be said that political interests have possibly created circumstances where each religious community emphasizes its internal unity rather than diverse social cooperation.

The above facts reveal that the dissemination of religions in the country appeared to have in some cases involved political power. Another case is that Christianity also could not be separated from both Portuguese and Spanish colonialism which propagated Catholicism in the 1700s in Maluku (the part of Eastern Indonesia) and the Dutch colonialism which disseminated Protestantism in the seventeenth until the mid-twentieth century (Postlethwaite&Thomas, 1980). However, it does not mean that schools promoted by the Dutch in particular were mostly Christian-oriented, except for several private Christian schools. Rather, the Dutch schools generally tended to be 'secular' in terms of many subjects taught such as history, geography, mathematics, science and language. As such, the Dutch seemed only to have an intention to produce skilful individuals capable of working in their government and other technical sectors. This trend was considerably different from religious or local schools such as *peguron* and *pesantren* (Muslim boarding school) which emphasized such subjects as piety and morality. Thus, that is why outcome of these traditional religious schools might be economically disadvantaged rather than secular schools.

Since the 1945 independence, there has been a spirit of the 1945 Constitution (Article 31) which stated that the government shall provide the national education system for citizens. Yet, during almost thirty years later, the education system projected by the Constitution did not emerge since what sustained generally was both secular schools emphasizing on, as Moore (1989) defines, 'the matters of the world' and religious schools merely standing for 'the matters of the heart' as their circumstances during the colonial era. At the same time, the State recognition to the

existence of various religions and beliefs (The 1945 Constitution, Article 29) was unlikely to be similar to its recognition to that of religious schools. Here, secular schools had more chances to slightly grow than faith schools. This uncertain situation had taken place since Sukarno, the first president, changed his block from USA (Capitalism) to Soviet Union (Communism) due to his unsatisfied reaction to America's foreign policy. His effort to declare the idea of 'Nationalism, Religion and Communism' was empirically rejected by mostly religious communities since they argued that it was contradictory in terms with placing communism identical to atheism and religion as part of theism in the same place. They could not imagine that how their children would be able to handle such a spiritual issue as it is now taking place, for instance, in the British state schools where theism and atheism is officially within their RE national framework (Watson, 2008). Shortly, although Indonesia's government issued Law Number 4/1950 mentioning that RE should be an optional subject in public schools (Zuhdi, 2005), during the so-called Old Order (1945-1967), the State actually did not have an adequate concept about RE's development because of the ideological uncertainty.

Over the 1970s, when the New Order government began to control the state, there has been a change of the religious school position which could be seen from at least two trends. The first trend was related to the development orientation lead by Suharto, the second president, which asserted that schooling was part of educating new generations to be economically competitive and ideologically safe. The former reveals that RE with old fashions which only taught theological and worship aspects seemed to be perceived, as if, as an unnecessary subject since it was indicated to have been mismatched with the national economic development. This assumption was empirically clarified by taking evidence that the time allocated to RE in public schools was only two hours a week compared to Science and Maths which have more than four even six hours a week. The latter was in line with an ideological issue which showed that the existing government tended to overestimate RE as an ideological competitor to the state ideology, *Pancasila*, which principally disseminates the national harmony within a diverse society. It was likely to be similar to what was happening in Britain until the 1990s where RE has been suspected as a movement that 'does not contribute to social cohesion, tolerance and understanding' (Thiessen, 2001: 23). One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether the regime's suspicion has made RE educationists and policy makers change RE's orientation?

The second trend simultaneously addressed to respond the above question is that there has been the significant flourishing of religious communities especially Muslim intellectuals who argued that religious values and ideas were essentially compatible with both Indonesia's multicultural society (Woodward, 1998) and ideas of modernity for instance openness to science and technology. As a result, modernisation of Moslem educational institutions here tried to be either socially or religiously accepted. Furthermore, there was some evidence showing that several *pesantrens* accommodated a *madrasah* model, an Islamic school where general or 'secular' sciences were taught, into their system. In 1975, based on a common decree letter amongst three ministries that is the Religious Affair, the National Education and the Home Affair, *madrasahs* were supported to include the national curricula containing Maths, science and foreign language (non-Arabic) in order for their alumni to either continue their studies into higher education or compete into labour market (Postlethwaite&Thomas, 1980). It is likely that RE's orientation has in some cases changed from traditionalism (preserving old values) to modernism (leading to economic need fulfilment). However, in fact, *madrasahs* are still at 'the crossroad' to make traditional and modern trajectories balanced at the same time. Such a critical situation, moreover, has created a public image which assumes that *madrasah* alumni are generally less qualified than school ones so that this condition possibly affects to their workplace accessibility. Thus, this public image has longer contributed to reproduce social inequality in line with socio-economic accessibility of the religious educational institution output in general.

#### **The government intervention to RE in the reform era**

The fall of the despotic New Order regime since 1998 has generally become a turning point of this nation to be more democratic in many social aspects including education. One of the most important regulations the government issued was The 2003 Education Act which principally emphasizes decentralization of education. Such a devolved orientation seems to be really apparent within RE. The Act (Article 55) states that 'community shall the rights to provide community-based education at formal and non-formal education in accordance with the specific religion ...' The provision shows that the government tries to be more realistic to accommodate socio-religious diversity. Another situation is that recognition to community-based education could be seen as part of civil society successes in bargaining their power to the government. However, does it mean that the community themselves are purely free from the

government intervention? As long as it is concerned, the government officially hands over their mandate to the Ministry of the Religious Affairs (MoRA) to arrange and assess RE in both state and private religious education institutions. In addition, RE curriculum in public schools has nationally been controlled by the Ministry of the National Education (MoNA) through an official body called the National Standardisation Board. Therefore, it can be said that what is really happening is, as Sumintono (2006) calls, a 'centralised decentralization' of education because, in some cases, local creativity must be under the national framework and assessment.

There is a strong possibility that RE's modernization is still becoming the government concern. The government asserts that RE is basically more than educating students to be individually pious since it also promotes social piety in the framework of inter or multi-religious relations. In addition, RE also pays attention to create individuals who are critical, innovative and competent to develop science, technology and art (The Government Regulation, Article 2&5). Such a principle is basically based on The 1945 Constitution (Article 31) which states that science and technology will be developed 'with highest respect for religious values and national unity for advancement of civilisation and prosperity of humankind. The Minister of the National Education also considered that the national education should not ignore 'the foundation for future economic growth and development ...' (Fajar, 2003). There is no doubt that the government does not only has an interest to build the national education in the framework of integrated curricula between science and morality as a mirror of a religious society, but also directs RE as part of the national interest which should legitimize development orientations. In this respect, as if, the government needs to have a theology of development, a religious idea or ethic that legitimates development. It could, however, be harmful if development projects both generally emphasising economic development and somewhat ignoring socially-unfair economic distribution should be always justified by religious ideas. Here, critical notions as proposed by some educationalist such as Freire (1970), Giroux (1986) and Harber (2009) who argue that education should be critical to social inequality and injustice, need to be accommodated by educationalists and decision makers in this country so that RE as either state of mind or institutions would not become an ever-approving agent but a critical movement towards social, political and economic development.



**RE in Indonesia: between mono and multi-religious approaches**

With regard to social reality which shows that Indonesia is a multi-religious society, the State and a part of people have had idealism to build an educational sector which accommodates diverse communities (Postlethwaite&Thomas, 1980). The 1945 Constitution (Article 28E) which mandates that ‘every person shall be free to choose and to practice the religion of his/her choice, to choose one’s education ...’ can be seen as representation of a spirit of ‘unity of diversity’ as promoted by the national ideology, *Pancasila*. The question is that how does this political acknowledgment operate in the real Indonesian education? It seems that RE as a compulsory subject has not yet found an adequate form to keep at least two interests that is subjective needs of each religious community and objective needs of the country as a multicultural society. The subjective or confessional need is generally committed by almost all religions to maintain their students’ faith (Zuhdi, 2005; Leirvick, 2004; Wright, 2008) or as popularized by the British RE as ‘learning from religion’ that is commitment to understand and internalize religious ideas and values based on any religion embraced by students. Such a principle can be found in The 2003 Education Act (Article 12) stating that ‘every learner in an educational unit is entitled to receive religious education in accordance with his/her religion, imparted by an educator who has the same religion’. Moreover, almost all regions in the UK under SACREs (Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education) at the recent time also promote ‘learning about religions’ which stands for critically understanding other religions in order for them to be respectful to each other. This kind of objective or non-confessional standpoint seems to be supported by Western pluralists who argue that religions are completely the same as other social phenomena such as politics, economy and cultures which generally could be either accepted or rejected. However, the last viewpoint, non-confessional, is likely to be difficult to be recognized by many Indonesia’s religious adherents who generally convince that having a religion should be spiritually kept, not only academically understandable.

To build a bridge between religious conservatism promoting a confessional/mono-faith approach and religious pluralism proposing a non-confessional/multi-faith approach, I argue that in the context of the Indonesian atmosphere, besides consistently keeping theological mandates or subjective needs of each religion, RE also should be reformulated appropriately in line with the issue of multi/inter-religious understanding. However, a pure rational approach would be difficult to implement in this country as it is now taking place in Western countries

in general. As long as it is concerned, RE in European countries is recommended to go beyond theological truth claims as proposed by Wright (2003) who argues that RE should be fitted with the common truth which could be received by various religious adherents. If possible, they even could leave their religious doctrines or denominations by remaking a common spirituality. Nevertheless, subjective identities of each religion in fact could not be ignored as part of building social commitment. It may be argued that diverse theological standpoints would indeed enrich students' social understanding as long as they commit to have generous dialogues to each other.

To make RE compatible with the recent multi-religious society, I would argue that RE needs to broaden its subjective need or confessional to be more critical. Based on Freire's (1970) notion and Frankfurt's theory (Dryzek, 1995), the concept of 'learning about (different) religions' should be developed in the framework of making students aware of their real social challenges as also promoted by liberation theology (Moore, 1989). It can be said that this model is a multi-faith relationship programmed to resolve societal problems through sharing theological and sociological standpoints, not to judge theological doctrines of each religion or belief. In this respect, such values as justice, equality, togetherness and social care could be the main concepts to criticize the existing issues such as poverty, oppression, terrorism, illegal logging, and other social and natural disasters. In their classrooms, students from diverse religions could share their common values and actions to deal with those problems, for instance, in line with unfair social policy. It is obvious that although a faith dialogue in terms of theological debates such as God's existence and the Holy Books' authenticity might be challenging, multi-faith dialogues and cooperation to create social justice are much more important to conduct. As a result, religiously different students could have mutual respect to each other due to their common social thought and actions.

### **Conclusion**

Religious education (RE) in Indonesia has longer been under ideological and social uncertainty. In both the colonial and the Old Order which were socio-politically vulnerable, RE was likely to be a peripheral movement because the State in general did not have a sufficient concept of education development except the only secular education. The problem has slightly changed as the New Order regime placed RE as part of the national development. In this case, however, RE was not as popular and economically promising as secular education. RE at that time also faced

the possibility that the State made use of RE as a tool to legitimize the national development which generally oriented to 'economic growth', not to 'socio-economic justice'.

Furthermore, RE in the reform era has encountered the fact that whether it would only concentrate on domestic sectors of each religion, or would widely participate to reconstruct a diverse religious society. More clearly, the government has been generally concerned with strengthening a belief of each student but lacks for paying attention to build a multi-religious society based on diverse religious dialogues and cooperation. On this basis, it may be inferred that RE policy in this country seems beneficial for internal enforcement of each religion but artificial in regard to multi-religious society reconstruction. Therefore, the diverse religious communities should promote the critical approach towards their common social problems so that their existence would possibly be more meaningful to maintain the fact of religious and social diversity for humanity at large.

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