



Transformation, Dynamics, and Intellectual Conflicts in Indonesian Islamic Higher Education: Tradition Vs Modernity

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the presence of a transformation process, dynamics, and conflicting thoughts inside three Islamic Higher Education institutions in Indonesia. Subsequently, an analysis is conducted to examine the ramifications of this transformation and dynamics on the state life of Indonesian citizens. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method. The data were acquired through interviews conducted with actors from three PTKIs (K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta, and UIN Walisongo Semarang), as well as through observation and documentation studies. The collected data were further analysed through an inductive process using indicators that assess rational and traditional religious perspectives. The findings reveal that the three Islamic Higher Education institutions underwent a transformation from conventional religious beliefs to rational ones. Within this transformation process, dynamics and conflicts of thought inevitably emerged. The findings show that such dynamics not only influence the development of religious education within PTKIs but also shape the broader life of the Indonesian state. In this regard, PTKIs play a strategic role in shaping education policy and social life, particularly by promoting inclusive curricula, fostering tolerance, and strengthening community empowerment in Indonesia.

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Introduction

The Islamic Higher Education (hereinafter termed as PTKI) plays a critical role in delivering social transformation in Indonesia. On the one hand, as a tertiary institution, PTKI has a responsibility to act as a social change agent (Sara & Jones, 2018). Universities conduct a variety of academic research in order to make a real contribution to society. PTKI with an Islamic identity, on the other hand, show a high association with the character of Indonesian people who are known to be religious (Farish A, 2015).

Modernization is inevitable (Hatu, 2011; Rosana, 2015) and brings a school of rationality thought (Whimster & Lash, 2014), affecting the existence of religion, as an institution associated with tradition. As a tertiary institution, PTKI certainly embraces modernity, particularly in the aspect of scientific advancement. Various Western social theories were studied by academics at PTKI. Meanwhile, as a tertiary institution that has an Islamic (religious) identity, the various academic studies of the PTKI inevitably encounter religious aspects as their field of study. Here, the potential for transformation of the religious views of PTKI lecturers and students is more open than that of public tertiary institutions, which do not study religious knowledge. The transformation of PTKI's religious views has the potential to lead to the transformation of the religious views of society in general in Indonesia.



Naturally, the transformation process is often accompanied by dynamics, contradictions, and even conflicts. In the context of the transformation of PTKI's religious views, the paradigm differences between modernity (rationality) and religion (traditionality) have the potential for these dynamics, contradictions, and conflicts to occur. Understanding religion, which has been repeatedly reproduced in traditional understanding, must have a dialogue with a rational academic paradigm. Often, the academic paradigm criticizes established religious understanding, even on sensitive matters, such as the definition of the “infidel”, “Muslim”, and so on. This article explores the dynamic processes, conflicting thoughts, and transformation of 3 PTKI in Indonesia.

Numerous studies on the transformation of PTKI have been conducted. People have yet explored deeply into the thought dynamics and conflicts that exist between the paradigms of rationality and traditionalism. The study conducted by Marsudi et al. did raise the issue of educational transformation at PTKI. Still, the discussion was directed at demographic aspects in the form of land conversion for investment in religious education in Tulungagung (Mashudi et al., 2022). Nur Khafid's study also raised the theme of transformation in PTKI, but the focus was directed to the external area of PTKI itself, namely Pucangan Village, Kertasura. Through his studies, Khafid claims that IAIN Surakarta has contributed to transforming the religious values of the Kertasura Society (Kafid & Rohman, 2018). Meanwhile, Sumiati et al. examine policy strategies, research trends, challenges, and opportunities in the transformation of Islamic State Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN) in general, aimed at enhancing competitiveness. In addition to analyzing PTKIN in general, this study also considers their position within the broader context of global educational competition (Sumiati & Tekke, 2024) .

The study could provide a more in-depth analysis of how the transformation of religious education in PTKIs affects the life of the state in Indonesia, as well as its implications for education policy and social life. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the dynamics and intellectual conflicts between rational and traditional paradigms within three Indonesian PTKIs, an aspect that has been rarely explored empirically in previous studies which tended to remain normative or literature-based. By employing an inductive qualitative approach, this study provides fresh insights into how rationality and traditionality interact, clash, and transform in academic and social settings. The urgency of this research is reflected in the fact that PTKIs play a strategic role in shaping the religious understanding of future educators, leaders, and policymakers, making the findings highly relevant for formulating education policies that foster moderation, strengthen democratic life, and preserve Indonesia's plural and tolerant identity.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method in order to elicit the most profound significance of the various data obtained. The data used as material for analysis were obtained from interviews with actors at three PTKI, observations, and documentation studies. The informants for interviews consisted of lecturers, as well as related officials, and students at the 3 PTKIs studied. According to the informant's request, and to make the interview discussion process more flexible, the informants' names were merely initials. The total number of sources questioned was 11, with 6 men and 5 women, selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of key actors relevant to the study's focus. The balance between the number of sources from the gender aspect is to ensure data validity, as well as to fulfil equity, or to borrow Creswell's term, fulfill the saturation point aspect (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

In observation, the data used was the setting of the education carried out, as long as the researcher is a lecturer at one of the PTKI. In the document study, the data used were institutional data in the form of vision and mission, various works by lecturers at 3 PTKI, and research, service, and publications. The three selected PTKIs were the State Islamic University (hereinafter termed as UIN) K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta, and UIN Walisongo Semarang. Data collection and analysis can be carried out simultaneously using comparative methods, which is inductive, as is characteristic of qualitative studies (Patton, 2015). From the data obtained, coding is done to categorize the issues that arise during interviews and dialogues (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Emerson et al., 2016; Saldana, 2013). The various issues that arises were then analyzed based on the characteristics of rational and traditional religious views.

Results and Discussion

The concept map of the research findings is presented in the following table:

| Main Theme | Sub-Theme | Details |
|----------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Transformation | Shift | From <i>Traditional</i> → <i>Rational</i> |
| | Drivers | -Modernity- Bureaucratic logic- Academic culture |
| Dynamics | Debates | - Lecturers vs Students- Senior vs Junior Lecturers |
| | Institutional Vision | Promotion of rational Islam |
| | Preservation of Identity | Religious rituals, traditions maintained |
| Conflicts of Thought | Rational Paradigm | Contextual, inclusive, humanistic |
| | Traditional Paradigm | Doctrinal, rigid, preservationist |
| | Polarisation | Generational gap, ideological resistance |
| Implications | Education | Curriculum design, moderation discourse |
| | Society | Religious practices, tolerance, democracy |
| | State Life | Balancing modernity & religious identity in public policy |

Theoretical Framework: Rational and Traditional Religious Views

Although Muslim religious views differ, these varied religious ideas can be essentially categorised into logical and traditional religious perspectives. In Syafi'i Anwar's terminology, there are two major schools of Islamic thought, namely substantive inclusive and legal exclusive (Fauzi, 2019). Inclusive substantive thinking focuses on context so that Islam is interpreted as a spirit to spread Islamic values in the form of humanity, justice, peace, and so on. This group does not focus on the formal aspects of religion but more than that focuses on the substantive aspects of religion. Meanwhile, legally exclusive thoughts are thoughts that interpret texts verbally, so Islam must be a single color for various realities. At a particular stage, this group often fights to apply Islamic shari'a as the official state law (Bruinessen, 2002; Eliraz, 2004).

Discover the three PTKIs in Indonesia

The Islamic Higher Education (PTKI) is a religious university that has an Islamic identity. Because of its religious identity (Islam), PTKI is governed by the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia. Currently, the number of PTKI in Indonesia is 896, with a total number of students totaling 1,150,504. Of the 896 PTKI, 59 of them have state status, and the rest have private status. PTKI has 3 levels, including High School, Institute and University levels (Diktis, 2023).

The three PTKI that were used as research samples were UIN Gus Dur Pekalongan, UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta, and UIN Walisongo Semarang. In 1997, STAIN Pekalongan

was inaugurated in Pekalongan City, Central Java. In 2016, STAIN Pekalongan changed its status to become IAIN, and in 2022, it will switch status to UIN (Interview with IK, May 15, 2023). UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta also initially had the status of STAIN, established in 1997. Subsequently, STAIN Surakarta changed its status to become IAIN in 2011 and UIN in 2021 (Interview with ZA July 11, 2023). Slightly different from the two previous UINs, which started at the STAIN level, UIN Walisongo Semarang immediately had the status of an IAIN, which was established in 1970. In 2014, STAIN Walisongo changed its status to become UIN Walisongo Semarang (Interview with Sy July 13, 2023).

Transformation of Three PTKI in Indonesia: Between Rationality and Traditionality

The investigation of the potential transformation of religious perspectives within PTKI, with regards to the interplay between rationality and traditionality, poses a challenge due to the vast nature of the factors involved. Consequently, researchers will limit their investigation to documentary sources, encompassing scholarly works, research papers, dissertations, and published materials, alongside interview data obtained from key stakeholders involved in the field of religious education. The subsequent study work conducted by Lecturer 3 of PTKI is subjected to analysis utilising the frameworks of rationality and traditionality.

1) Work by Lecturers at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan

Lecturer works that were successfully obtained from the research work, dedication, and publications of lecturers for 2020–2022 based on the research conducted by the researchers. The following is a tabulation of lecturer works related to rationality and traditionality (Documentation of Research, Community Service, and Publication of Pekalongan State Islamic University Lecturers in 2020, 2021, and 2022, n.d.).

| Year of Work | Number of Works | Not associated with rationality and traditionality | Traditional nuanced works | Rational nuanced works | The percentage comparison of works with traditional nuances to all works | Percentage of comparison of works with rational nuances to all works |
|--------------|-----------------|--|---------------------------|------------------------|--|--|
| 2020 | 49 works | 30 works | 6 works | 13 works | 12.24 % | 26.53 % |
| 2021 | 64 works | 47 works | 1 works | 16 works | 1.56 % | 25 % |
| 2022 | 83 works | 64 works | 2 works | 17 works | 2.41 % | 20.48% |

2) Work by Lecturers at UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta

The works presented here are the scholarly contributions of lecturers over the years 2019 and 2022. During the period of 2020 and 2021, UIN Solo refrained from initiating research, community empowerment, and publication projects due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. The present tabulation indicates the findings of a study undertaken by researchers, documenting the scholarly contributions of lecturers at Surakarta State Islamic University in the years 2019 and 2022. The focus of this investigation was on works pertaining to the themes of rationality and traditionality (Documentation of Research, Community Service, and Publication of Surakarta State Islamic University Lecturers in 2019 and 2022, n.d.).

| Year of Work | Number of Works | Not associated with rationality and traditionality | Traditional nuanced works | Rational nuanced works | The percentage comparison of works with traditional nuances to all works | Percentage of comparison of works with rational nuances to |
|--------------|-----------------|--|---------------------------|------------------------|--|--|
|--------------|-----------------|--|---------------------------|------------------------|--|--|

| | | | | | | all works |
|------|-----------|----------|---------|----------|-------|-----------|
| 2019 | 100 works | 79 works | 5 works | 16 works | 5 % | 16 % |
| 2022 | 56 works | 37 works | 2 works | 17 works | 3.58% | 30.36 % |

3) Work by Lecturers at UIN Walisongo Lecturer Semarang

The works of Lecturers of UIN Walisongo Semarang presented here are the works of Lecturers in 2021 and 2022. The works presented are seen from the title of research, dedication and publication. Based on the research conducted by the researchers, the following is a tabulation of lecturer works related to rationality and traditionality (Documentation of Research, Community Service and Publication of Semarang State Islamic University Lecturers in 2021 and 2022, n.d.).

| Year of Work | Number of Works | Not associated with rationality and traditionality | Traditional nuanced works | Rational nuanced works | The percentage comparison of works with traditional nuances to all works | Percentage of comparison of works with rational nuances to all works |
|--------------|-----------------|--|---------------------------|------------------------|--|--|
| 2021 | 155 | 126 | 1 | 28 | 0.64 % | 18.06 % |
| 2022 | 191 | 168 | 1 | 23 | 0.52 % | 12.04 % |

Information

- According to researchers, works that are not associated with rationality and traditionality cannot be utilised as a means of evaluating the theological perspectives of the author with regards to reason and traditionality. Research in this particular category is typically conducted by researchers with a foundation in broad scientific disciplines. Based on our analysis within the field of religious studies, the undertaken work carried out is more neutral, does not contain ideological implications aimed at disseminating the concepts of rationality or traditionality in comprehending religion.
- Works with rationality nuances are works that according to researchers can be categorised as works resulting from a rational religious view. For example, the spirit to contextualise religious doctrine with the times, while at the same time being oriented towards solving the problems of everyday life.
- Works with traditional nuances are classified by researchers as works that stem from traditional religious perspectives. For instance, works that depart from a normative, verbalist, religious perspective orient towards past traditions, when the religious doctrine was passed down or works that are oriented towards preserving the originality (purification) of Islamic traditions in the past. This traditional form of work does not necessarily reflect the radical or intolerant religious views of the researcher.

Based on the data tabulation provided, it is evident that a significant majority of the works analysed are not associated with the aspects of rationality and traditionality. This phenomenon may be attributed to the extensive scope of the lecturer's academic discipline, which necessitates a comprehensive evaluation beyond the limited dimensions mentioned. However, it is noteworthy that every year, there continues to be discoveries of works that can be classified as possessing rational and traditional nuances. Based on the provided statistics, it is evident that there is a greater prevalence of works characterised by rational nuances as opposed to those characterised by traditional nuances. The data presented in this study demonstrates the progressive shift of PTKIN, particularly within the three institutions examined, from a traditional to a rational framework.



The three PTKINs under study show an institutional perspective that reflects a rational approach to comprehending religion. The stated vision of UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid is “to become a distinguished Islamic University that contributes to the advancement of knowledge for the betterment of humanity, while being rooted in the national culture” (Documentation of Vision and Mission of State Islamic University of Pekalongan, n.d.). The stated objective of UIN Raden Mas Said Solo is “to become a distinguished and innovative Islamic University with the aim of contributing to the development of an advanced and culturally refined Indonesian society by the year 2034” (Documentation of objective and Mission of State Islamic University of Surakarta, n.d.). The vision of UIN Walisongo is: “To become the leading research-oriented Islamic University by the year of 2038. This vision is grounded in the integration of many branches of knowledge for the betterment of humanity and the advancement of civilization.” (*Documentation of Vision and Mission of State Islamic University of Semarang*, n.d.).

Based on testimonies from actors in the three PTKIs, educational programs, research, and publications are directed toward realizing institutional visions that emphasize human values. At UIN Pekalongan, issues such as gender equality, social justice, and the defense of marginalized groups are central (Interview with MNA April 28, 2023, FK, April 26, 2023; IK, May 15, 2023). while UIN Solo stresses preserving local traditions and developing contextual understandings of Islam (Interview with HJ July 11, 2023, MZA July 11, 2023). UIN Semarang, meanwhile, highlights religious moderation and local cultural issues through dedicated research clusters, reflecting the need to engage with Indonesia’s plural and multi-ethnic society (Interview with Sy, July 13, 2023, TR July 13, 2023, AI, May 11, 2023).

Overall, the visions of the three PTKIs demonstrate a commitment to cultivating Islamic knowledge that transcends normative interpretations and contributes to justice, equality, tolerance, and humanity. This aligns with Moeslim Abdurrahman’s idea (2003) of “Transformative Islam,” which emphasizes diversity and rational engagement with modernity. Participants in all three universities acknowledged that rationality in religious thought continues to grow, although the degree varies by context, discipline, and individual background.

At the same time, the modernization of PTKIs has been reinforced by bureaucratic logic (Mahajan, 2024) through accreditation systems and lecturer promotion requirements, which encourage the production of high-quality scholarly work. Consequently, while PTKIs maintain their religious identity, rational approaches to religion have become inevitable alongside modern academic demands. Although religious understanding in the three PTKIs has generally shifted toward rationality, their strong Islamic identity as a marker of traditionality remains intact. This is reflected institutionally in their visions that explicitly emphasize Islam and is reinforced through campus religious activities such as *istighosah*, Qur’an recitations, and integration of scientific disciplines with theology (Interview with IK, May 15, 2023; MNA, April 28, 2023). Interviews further highlight the continued importance of faith, piety, and the protection of religion as PTKI’s scientific foundation, serving both to preserve tradition and to counter perceptions of excessive liberalism (Interview with Nm, July 11, 2023; HJ, July 11, 2023). . At UIN Semarang, for example, the slogan “Unity of Science” underscores the balance between academic advancement and Islamic identity. Overall, while elements of rationalism are increasingly visible, PTKIs consistently uphold traditional values, demonstrating that rational transformation coexists with the preservation of religious identity (Interview with TR July 13, 2023).

Dynamics and Thought Conflicts of PTKI in Indonesia: Rationality and Traditionality

According to conflict theory, social change is inseparable from conflict, in contrast to structural functionalism, which emphasizes balance and adjustment (Rosana, 2015). In religious life, traditional understandings—normative, dogmatic, and eschatological—are continuously reproduced through families, schools, communities, and institutions. However, these ingrained patterns encounter challenges from modern rationality. While functionalists view modernity as an adaptation process, conflict theorists emphasize resistance by established groups whose interests are disrupted. Religion thus becomes a contested “market of interests,” where differing interpretations trigger disputes (Iannacone, 1998; McCleary, 2011; Segal, 2009). Conflict itself can serve as a means of forming, unifying, and reinforcing group identities (Coser, 1967).

PTKIs represent the primary arena where modernity and religious traditionality intersect. As higher education institutions, they inevitably absorb Western ideologies and discourses of democracy, human rights, justice, and equality. Yet, as Islamic institutions, they simultaneously safeguard traditional values. This dual identity generates contestation, leading to dynamics of conflict between rationalist and traditionalist paradigms. For some groups, modern thought is seen as threatening the purity of religion, reinforcing narratives about the dangers of liberal, secular, or agnostic ideologies. Opposition may arise from religious elites who benefit from established authority or from transnational movements advocating for Islamic governance (Bruinessen, 2002; Tibi, 2012).

Notably, Islam shows particular persistence in resisting modernity compared with other religions, which often experience secular decline (Gellner, 1983). Instead, modernity in Muslim societies has sparked a religious resurgence, visible in the strengthening of symbols and practices (Shirazi, 2016; Wiktor-Mach, 2011). Contemporary scholars also affirm that religious conflict in the era of globalization stems from struggles over authority and identity (Casanova, 2019). In the PTKI context, opposition to rationalization reflects both local and transnational pressures, demonstrating that conflict is not merely a disruption but a constitutive force in shaping religious education and its societal role.

Field data show that conflicts and dynamics are evident among students at the three PTKIs. At UIN Pekalongan, some students resisted lecturers’ new religious perspectives, particularly those with strong pesantren backgrounds, while others with less doctrinal exposure were more receptive (Interview with FM, May 15, 2023). Similar dynamics appeared at UIN Solo, where students’ responses ranged from rejection to cautious acceptance, often sparking debates both in class and informally (Interview with Nm, July 11, 2023). At UIN Semarang, new perspectives also provoked initial shock but gradually led some students to more open views, while others remained traditional; these differences were shaped by diverse religious affiliations such as NU, Muhammadiyah, and MTA (Interview with NJ, July 13, 2023).

Resistance was also encountered at the lecturer–student level. For example, when minority groups or alternative historical interpretations were presented, students frequently defended orthodox views and challenged the findings, reflecting a clash between rational and traditional paradigms (Observation of Susanto, 2022). Overall, these dynamics illustrate how PTKIs serve as arenas where rational religious thought and entrenched traditional beliefs continuously interact, conflict, and negotiate.

Field data indicate that conflicts among PTKI lecturers are most visible at UIN Solo, where polarization emerges between senior lecturers who uphold traditional, rigid views and younger lecturers who adopt more rational and progressive perspectives (Interview with MZA, July 11, 2023). According to Anwar, this polarization often surfaces in lecturer WA



groups and academic forums. MZA recalled resistance when inviting figures like Haidar Bagir (2017) and Habib Ja'far (2021), both accused of Shia affiliation. The events drew protests, demonstrations, and even threats, reflecting deep divisions between rationalists seeking dialogue and traditionalists fearing doctrinal deviation.

This polarization is reinforced by Solo's socio-religious context, which includes strong conservative groups such as MTA and DSKS, as well as the influence of HTI, whose local involvement even extended to a UIN lecturer later dismissed from civil service for promoting HTI ideology (Interview with MZA, July 11, 2023). Despite Solo's rich Javanese traditions and *abangan* culture, local conservatism remains powerful, shaping academic dynamics.

At UIN Walisongo Semarang, similar tensions appear. TR noted that debates arise around issues like polygamy, with some lecturers firmly legitimizing it through Qur'anic arguments, while others emphasize contextual reinterpretations. Resistance is also evident toward inviting non-Muslim or unveiled speakers, seen by some as inappropriate for an Islamic campus (Interview with TR, July 13, 2023). These cases demonstrate that PTKIs remain arenas of contestation where rational and traditional perspectives continuously clash, shaped both by internal academic culture and the broader socio-religious environment.

Religious interpretations among lecturers at UIN Semarang reveal that patriarchal and traditional perspectives persist. TR, a gender equality activist, actively challenges such views, often engaging in debates both in academic and informal settings (Interview with TR, July 13, 2023). For instance, in response to arguments legitimizing polygamy through Q.S. An-Nisa 3, TR stressed the Qur'anic requirement of absolute fairness, which the text itself acknowledges as unattainable, thereby limiting polygamy. He further opposed misogynistic interpretations, such as the belief that women were created from men's ribs, arguing instead from Q.S. An-Nisa 1 that both men and women originate from the same soul, thus affirming equality. TR also criticized commercialized practices of polygamy seminars and bureaus, which, under the guise of religious duty, exploit religion for profit.

Although TR resists traditionalist readings, he does so through alternative interpretations rooted in Islamic texts, thereby demonstrating that rational perspectives in PTKI are not detached from religious identity. His stance refutes accusations of liberalism often directed at rationalist scholars. These dynamics confirm that the transformation from traditionality to rationality in PTKIs does not eliminate tradition but reshapes it within rational frameworks.

The findings also highlight broader implications. First, they demonstrate that educational transformation in PTKIs varies depending on institutional culture, socio-cultural context, and scholarly productivity. Where academic climates foster critical inquiry, transformation toward rationality is stronger. Second, these shifts hold significant implications for Indonesia's education policy and social life. By promoting rational and contextual interpretations while respecting religious identity, PTKIs can contribute to cultivating inclusive, gender-just, and democratic religious education. This not only strengthens the state's vision of moderation (*wasatiyyah*) but also equips society to address pressing issues of justice, equality, and pluralism in a modern democratic Indonesia (Hefner, 2000).

Conclusion

The three PTKINs examined are experiencing a clear shift from traditional to rational religious orientations, though at varying levels depending on academic culture, socio-cultural context, and lecturers' scholarly productivity. Institutions with stronger scientific

advancement undergo faster transformation, yet traditional elements—such as the preservation of Islamic identity, piety, and moral character—remain firmly embedded. This coexistence of modernity and tradition generates intellectual debates and thought conflicts within PTKIs.

The findings imply that PTKIs hold a strategic role in shaping education and social empowerment in Indonesia. By integrating rational and contextual approaches into religious curricula, they can strengthen inclusive education, promote gender justice, and counter religious conservatism. Moreover, through research and community engagement, PTKIs can empower local communities with transformative religious thought that fosters pluralism, democracy, and social cohesion. Thus, the transformation of PTKIs not only advances higher education policy but also contributes significantly to building a more moderate and empowered Indonesian society.

Recommendation

The findings on PTKI transformation should be followed up with further research to examine its sustainability and the dynamics between traditionalism and modernity. Policymakers and educators in PTKIs need to design policies and learning strategies that balance rational innovation with the preservation of Islamic identity. To manage conflicts of thought in PTKIs and society, it is essential to strengthen academic dialogue, integrate peace education into curricula, and foster inclusive community engagement. These measures will help transform potential conflicts into constructive discourse, supporting both educational reform and social empowerment in Indonesia.

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