



Navigating Bureaucratic Pressures and Preserving Islamic Pedagogy: Institutional Strategies of Mu'allimin Pesantren

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how cadre-based Mu'allimin pesantren in Indonesia navigate the tension between preserving Islamic identity and adapting to bureaucratic educational reforms. Using a qualitative multi-case design, the study analyzes four pesantren through the lens of neo-institutional theory and Bourdieu's habitus. The findings show that these institutions engage in active institutional work via curricular hybridization, cultural filtering, leadership hybridity, and market-responsive adaptation. Rather than passive compliance, pesantren strategically balance symbolic conformity with pedagogical continuity, ensuring both legitimacy and distinctiveness. Conceptualizing resilience as embedded, adaptive, and symbolic labour, this study advances institutional theory by demonstrating how faith-based schools enact resilience not only through decoupling but also by mobilizing hybrid logics and symbolic practices. In practical terms, the findings provide insights for policymakers and Islamic educators on governance frameworks that can respect religious authenticity while meeting regulatory demands. By highlighting the strategies of Mu'allimin pesantren, the study contributes to broader debates on institutional resilience, bureaucratic adaptation, and the future of Islamic educational reforms in Indonesia.

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini menelaah bagaimana pesantren kader Mu'allimin di Indonesia menavigasi ketegangan antara menjaga identitas keislaman dan beradaptasi dengan reformasi pendidikan yang bersifat birokratis. Dengan menggunakan desain kualitatif multi-kasus, studi ini menganalisis empat pesantren melalui kerangka teori neo-institusional dan konsep habitus Bourdieu. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pesantren melakukan institutional work secara aktif melalui hibridisasi kurikulum, penyaringan budaya, hibriditas kepemimpinan, dan adaptasi berbasis pasar. Alih-alih hanya patuh secara pasif, pesantren menyeimbangkan kepatuhan simbolik dengan kontinuitas pedagogis, sehingga mampu menjaga legitimasi sekaligus kekhasan institusionalnya. Dengan memaknai resiliensi sebagai kerja kelembagaan yang tersemat, adaptif, dan simbolik, penelitian ini memperluas teori kelembagaan dengan menunjukkan bagaimana lembaga pendidikan berbasis agama membangun resiliensi tidak hanya melalui decoupling, tetapi juga dengan menggerakkan logika hibrid dan praktik simbolik. Secara praktis, temuan ini memberikan wawasan bagi pembuat kebijakan dan pendidik Islam untuk merancang kerangka tata kelola yang menghargai autentisitas religius sekaligus memenuhi tuntutan regulasi negara. Dengan menyoroti strategi pesantren Mu'allimin, studi ini berkontribusi pada diskusi yang lebih luas mengenai resiliensi institusional, adaptasi birokratis, dan arah reformasi pendidikan Islam di Indonesia.

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Introduction

Amid rising bureaucratic pressures on Islamic education in Indonesia, Mu'allimin pesantren stand out as institutions that strategically negotiate state standardization while preserving religious pedagogy. These cadre-forming institutions have historically served as the backbone of Muslim intellectual and moral development, producing not only graduates with religious credentials but also individuals equipped to lead and serve their communities (Hefner, 2008; Lukens-Bull, 2019). Yet, as Indonesia undergoes waves of bureaucratic standardization through national curricula, accreditation mandates, and quality assurance mechanisms, these institutions confront a pressing dilemma, remain faithful to their religious-educational ethos while responding to the imperatives of modern governance.

This dilemma has attracted scholarly attention. Previous research has mapped pesantren as loci of cultural resistance and ideological autonomy in the face of state and market pressures (Burhani, 2017; Lukens-Bull, 2001). Other studies have examined the institutional incorporation of pesantren into national regulatory frameworks, often highlighting issues such as compliance, accreditation, and standardization (Siraj et al., 2022; Yusuf & Taufiq, 2020). A third line of scholarship focuses on how pesantren engage in selective adaptation and innovation, drawing on local habitus, leadership practices, and cultural capital to negotiate external pressures (Budiman & Lathifah, 2019; Nurdianto, 2019). However, while this literature explains pesantren's general responses, little research has investigated how Mu'allimin pesantren, designed for cadre formation and leadership training, uniquely combine curricular hybridization and symbolic compliance as strategies of institutional resilience.

This study addresses that gap by focusing on the institutional reproduction of Mu'allimin pesantren, which operate under a dual mandate: sustaining Islamic scholarly traditions while preparing future educators and leaders. By analyzing how these schools balance bureaucratic adaptation with religious authenticity, the article offers fresh insights into how institutional resilience is conceptualized in religious schools facing state-driven reforms. It extends neo-institutional theory by demonstrating that resilience in faith-based education is enacted not merely through decoupling, but through symbolic labour, embedded habitus, and hybrid logics.

The contribution of this study also lies in its comparative significance. While madrasahs in South Asia (Zaman, 2018), Christian seminaries in Africa (Theobald, 2023), and Buddhist monastic schools in Thailand (Phiri, 2013) have been studied in relation to state oversight, few accounts emphasize the distinctive strategies of Mu'allimin pesantren. Unlike their counterparts, these Indonesian institutions institutionalize resilience through a deliberate synthesis of curricular innovation and symbolic continuity, allowing them to comply formally with regulatory demands while safeguarding pedagogical authenticity.

By situating Mu'allimin pesantren within both Indonesian and global debates on religious schooling, this study contributes to advancing theoretical discussions of institutional adaptation. It reframes resilience not as passive endurance but as active, symbolic, and negotiated work. In doing so, it highlights how faith-based institutions can sustain legitimacy and distinctiveness amid bureaucratic standardization, offering a transferable framework for analyzing religious education in plural and regulated contexts worldwide.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative multi-case study design to examine the institutional reproduction strategies of four Mu'allimin pesantren in Indonesia: Pondok Modern Gontor, KMI Al-Amien Prenduan, KMI Syeikh Abdul Wahid, and Darunnajah Jakarta. The selection of cases reflects maximum variation in institutional age, geography, and organizational orientation, allowing for comparative insight across distinct yet structurally similar pesantren (Bourdieu et al., 1977; Creswell, 2010).

A multi-case qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this research because the phenomenon under study, institutional resilience under bureaucratic pressures is inherently complex, context-specific, and mediated by local cultures and leadership practices. Unlike surveys or quantitative analysis, which might capture patterns at a broad level but risk overlooking subtle dynamics, a multi-case study enables the exploration of lived practices, symbolic negotiations, and organizational logics that are not easily measurable. It allows for attention to variation and similarity across institutions, thereby capturing both shared pressures and divergent adaptive strategies. In this sense, the method is best suited to uncover the nuanced ways in which Mu'allimin pesantren perform institutional work, balancing bureaucratic compliance and religious authenticity. (Yin, 2011).

The multi-case design also supports theoretical replication. Each pesantren is analyzed not only as an independent case but also as a comparative point of reference, revealing convergent and divergent pathways of adaptation. This methodological choice thus strengthens the explanatory power of the study by linking micro-level practices (e.g., curriculum adjustments, leadership negotiations) with macro-level theoretical concerns (neo-institutionalism, habitus, institutional resilience)

Data were collected through a triangulated method comprising document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and field observations. Curricular documents, policy archives, and organizational records were examined to understand formal engagements with regulatory frameworks. Interviews with pesantren leaders, senior teachers, alumni, and stakeholders, alongside field observations of daily routines and leadership practices, provided rich contextual insight.

Data were analyzed using an inductive-deductive thematic analysis. This hybrid approach combined grounded, open coding of field data with theory-driven interpretation rooted in neo-institutional theory and Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus. Themes were developed iteratively to capture both emergent patterns and theoretically salient phenomena such as hybridization, symbolic compliance, and institutional work. Triangulation across data types ensured analytical rigor and interpretive depth.

Results and Discussion

In understanding how Mu'allimin pesantren adapt to contemporary pressures, curriculum emerges as the most visible and contested site of negotiation. This section explores how these institutions hybridize traditional Islamic pedagogy with modern educational demands as part of their institutional survival strategy

Curricular Hybridization: Negotiating Tradition and Standardization

Curricular hybridization within Mu'allimin pesantren represents a sophisticated negotiation between the preservation of Islamic educational traditions and the imperatives of bureaucratic standardization. This dual commitment manifests in a pedagogical structure that sustains religious integrity while aligning with national curriculum requirements and modern societal expectations. As observed in Pondok Modern Gontor, Al-Amien Prenduan, Syeikh Abdul Wahid, and Darunnajah, hybridization is not merely a compliance mechanism but a dynamic form of institutional creativity and resilience.

A defining characteristic of this approach is the integration of classical Islamic content with contemporary educational strategies. Putra (2024) emphasizes that negotiated curricula foster student autonomy, a principle reflected in pesantren where tarbiyah (character formation) holds equal importance with cognitive achievement. At Gontor, for instance, students are trained in both traditional and modern sciences within a unified and disciplined pedagogical system. "We teach both kitab kuning and modern sciences with equal discipline," explained Ustd. Hanif Hafidz, a senior teacher, illustrating the pesantren's effort to maintain balance between heritage and innovation. This integration demonstrates an intention not to dilute religious teachings but to contextualize them within contemporary realities. Mardiyah (2023) observes that meaningful curricula enable learners to connect knowledge with their lived experiences, a goal also pursued in pesantren through personalized instruction, character mentoring, and contextual learning.

Technology plays a pivotal role in reinforcing curricular hybridization within Mu'allimin pesantren. Adaptive educational systems, including multimedia applications and AI-supported platforms, are carefully integrated to strengthen differentiated learning (Fanani et al., 2022). At Darunnajah, for example, a teacher named Hadyanto emphasized that "tablets and digital assessments support, not replace, our kitab tradition," highlighting the effort to accommodate diverse learning styles while preserving religious instruction.

Hybridization is also shaped by cultural responsiveness, particularly in pesantren like Syeikh Abdul Wahid, where students from rural areas participate in tailored transition programs. "We adjust the curriculum so new students don't feel alienated," noted Kiai Rasid, underscoring the institution's sensitivity to socio-cultural diversity and its commitment to inclusive pedagogy (Prasetyo, 2024). The importance of personalized learning further strengthens this approach. At Al-Amien, academic mentoring is embedded within communal life, fostering intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement. Teachers serve not only as instructors but also as murabbi—moral guides who nurture students' intellectual and ethical development within a holistic educational ecosystem.

From the perspective of neo-institutional theory, this strategy exemplifies institutional work: pesantren leaders selectively adopt state requirements while embedding them in existing pedagogical frameworks, thereby engaging in what Meyer and Rowan (1977) term decoupling. Yet, unlike the passive decoupling often described in the literature, Mu'allimin pesantren employ symbolic compliance to secure legitimacy while simultaneously reinforcing their internal logic of religious education. This indicates that institutional resilience is not about resisting change, but about reinterpreting external pressures in ways that protect core values.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus further illuminates this process. The hybrid curriculum reflects a collective pedagogical disposition that values both kitab kuning mastery and modern sciences. Teachers and leaders enact this duality through daily practices, mentoring students in classical Islamic texts while also preparing them for standardized assessments. Such practices embody the pesantren habitus, where disciplinary routines, moral formation, and intellectual training are interwoven. Hybridization thus becomes not only a structural adjustment but also an embodied strategy sustained by long-standing dispositions within the pesantren community.

This finding highlights the novelty of the study: Mu'allimin pesantren are not passive recipients of bureaucratic reform but active agents who reinterpret regulation through hybrid institutional logics. By doing so, they demonstrate that religious schools can preserve distinctiveness while maintaining external legitimacy. This extends existing scholarship on pesantren adaptation (Burhani, 2017; Lukens-Bull, 2001) by showing that cadre-based pesantren operationalize resilience through deliberate curricular recombination rather than mere compliance or resistance.

At the same time, curricular hybridization raises questions that resonate with broader theoretical debates. While institutional bricolage provides tactical flexibility, it also carries the risk of homogenization, in which the distinctive features of Islamic pedagogy may gradually be diluted. Another possible interpretation is that hybridization reflects pragmatic market responsiveness, as pesantren adapt their curricula to meet the expectations of parents who desire both spiritual and secular outcomes. This perspective suggests that institutional resilience does not follow a uniform trajectory but is shaped by competing imperatives that are bureaucratic, market oriented, and cultural in nature.

In practical terms, these findings underscore the importance of policy frameworks that allow religious schools sufficient flexibility to contextualize national curricula without eroding their epistemological particularities. For educators, hybridization illustrates how tradition and modernity can be integrated as complementary resources, rather than opposing forces.

Cultural Filtering and Minimalist Compliance

In navigating Indonesia's evolving educational bureaucracy, Mu'allimin pesantren adopt two key strategies: cultural filtering and minimalist compliance. These approaches enable pesantren to formally align with regulatory demands while preserving epistemological autonomy and religious integrity.

From a neo-institutional perspective, cultural filtering exemplifies selective coupling, where pesantren strategically incorporate state-mandated policies into their frameworks while retaining distinctive pedagogical cores. At Al-Amien Prenduan, for example, the adoption of the Pendidikan Diniyah Formal (PDF) model functioned less as structural transformation than as symbolic alignment with state expectations. In doing so, pesantren engage in institutional work to maintain legitimacy while preserving their Mu'allimin curriculum.

Minimalist compliance illustrates another dimension of neo-institutional dynamics: decoupling. By fulfilling visible requirements such as documentation, facility upgrades, or accreditation reports, while leaving pedagogical practices largely unchanged, pesantren demonstrate how organizations negotiate coercive pressures through symbolic compliance (Scott & Meyer, 1984). Yet unlike classic accounts where decoupling implies superficial adaptation, Mu'allimin pesantren transform these practices into active strategies of resilience. The symbolic fulfilment of bureaucratic requirements not only secures recognition but also safeguards autonomy by limiting state intrusion into pedagogical spaces.

Darunnajah offers a further example: while the school integrates general subjects and state assessments, its religious identity is reinforced through extracurricular programs like tahfiz, tarbiyah, and dormitory-based spiritual instruction. This blending of formal compliance with informal authenticity reflects flexible formalization (Munawiroh et al., 2022). In contexts where state oversight is weaker or more ambivalent, such as in remote or pluralistic regions, these strategies become even more critical. For example, in response to restrictions on Islamic education in public schools in North Minahasa, pesantren nearby increased their outreach efforts to maintain religious learning access (Mustafa & Tunru, 2022).

Bourdieu's concept of habitus enriches this analysis. Cultural filtering and minimalist compliance are not simply tactical choices but reflect embodied dispositions cultivated within pesantren communities. The emphasis on preserving kitab kuning instruction, moral formation, and community rituals shapes a habitus that prioritizes continuity of religious authority, even while navigating external constraints. In this sense, habitus enables pesantren actors to reinterpret bureaucratic policies through the lens of long-standing dispositions, embedding symbolic compliance within the everyday life of the institution.

The novelty of these findings lies in showing that Mu'allimin pesantren are not merely bending under state regulation but exercising agency through calculated compliance. By filtering and selectively complying, pesantren move beyond the binary of resistance versus submission. Instead, they perform a distinctive mode of institutional resilience, combining symbolic alignment with substantive autonomy. This extends previous scholarship that framed pesantren primarily as sites of resistance (Burhani, 2017) or passive incorporation (Yusuf & Taufiq, 2020), offering a more nuanced account of negotiated adaptation.

Alternative explanations suggest that these strategies may be shaped less by institutional logics and more by pragmatic resource considerations such as securing funding, legal recognition, or community trust. While this perspective is valid, the consistent pattern across cases indicates that symbolic compliance is more than pragmatic opportunism; it is embedded within the institutional habitus and sustained as part of the pesantren's identity work.

For policy and practice, these findings underscore the importance of regulatory flexibility that accommodates contextual implementation. Overly rigid standardization risks undermining pedagogical distinctiveness, whereas frameworks that allow for cultural filtering encourage religious schools to maintain both legitimacy and authenticity.

Market-Responsive Adaptation

To sustain institutional relevance in a competitive educational landscape, Mu'allimin pesantren increasingly adopt market-responsive strategies. These approaches reflect agility in addressing the expectations of students, parents, and broader Muslim communities, while remaining grounded in religious values.

At Gontor, the Kulliyatul Mu'allimin Al-Islamiyah (KMI) program exemplifies this strategy by combining Islamic sciences with modern subjects like mathematics and foreign languages. "Our graduates are expected to be both ustadz and diplomats," noted one senior administrator, highlighting the pesantren's dual emphasis on spiritual grounding and global literacy. This dual positioning illustrates what institutional theorists call institutional hybridity: the strategic combination of distinct logics to achieve legitimacy across multiple audiences. Similarly, Darunnajah actively monitors enrolment trends and parental preferences, aligning programs with emerging aspirations such as tahfiz combined with STEM education. These cases demonstrate how pesantren adopt market-coupled institutional work to ensure sustainability without undermining their Islamic mission.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps explain how market responsiveness remains anchored in pesantren identity. Rather than abandoning religious dispositions, Mu'allimin pesantren embed new programs within their pre-existing moral and educational ethos. For example, at Al-Amien, the use of digital platforms for admissions and parent engagement does not merely reflect managerial efficiency but also reinforces the pesantren's reputation as both modern and authentically Islamic. This illustrates how habitus enables pesantren to absorb external demands while retaining symbolic capital as moral institutions.

The novelty of these findings lies in demonstrating that Mu'allimin pesantren do not adopt market strategies opportunistically. Instead, they reframe market responsiveness as part of their institutional habitus, integrating technological engagement, leadership training, and diversification into their broader mission of cadre formation. This challenges portrayals of religious schools as reluctant or resistant to modernization (Lukens-Bull, 2001) by showing that cadre-based pesantren proactively negotiate market pressures to reinforce, rather than dilute, their legitimacy.

Alternative explanations suggest that market adaptation may primarily serve economic sustainability or competition in the Islamic education sector. While financial pressures and parental demand are indeed influential, the consistent framing of reforms in moral and pedagogical terms indicates that adaptation is also symbolic. It is not only about attracting students but about demonstrating that pesantren can embody both ta'dib (moral cultivation) and modern competencies.

In practical terms, these findings highlight the importance of policy frameworks that recognize the market dimension of Islamic education. Rather than treating market responsiveness as a threat to authenticity, policymakers and educators should see it as an opportunity for pesantren to innovate while maintaining their moral foundations. Supporting digital integration, curriculum diversification, and alumni-driven leadership training can enhance the resilience of pesantren while preserving their religious distinctiveness.

Leadership Orientation and Institutional Habitus

Leadership orientation and institutional habitus serve as foundational forces shaping the governance and pedagogical ethos of Mu'allimin pesantren. These two dimensions, one rooted in individual leadership disposition, the other in collective institutional memory, interact dynamically to influence how pesantren respond to external pressures and pursue internal reforms. At Gontor, for example, leadership is highly centralized in the hands of the kyai council, yet decision-making is often collective, involving senior teachers, alumni, and even student bodies. As one senior staff member explained: "The kyai lead with vision, but they always consult. It's not authoritarian; it's charismatic leadership with institutional memory." (Interview, Gontor, July 2023).

From a neo-institutional perspective, leadership practices in Mu'allimin pesantren embody forms of institutional work. At Gontor, decision-making reflects a blend of charismatic authority and distributed governance, where kyai councils work collaboratively with senior teachers and alumni. This hybrid leadership illustrates how pesantren secure legitimacy across multiple audiences: charismatic legitimacy rooted in Islamic authority and professional legitimacy aligned with modern managerial standards. At Al-Amien Prenduan, the separation of religious-cultural authority (Majlis Kyai) from administrative and academic management demonstrates how pesantren institutionalize structural hybridity to accommodate both traditional and bureaucratic demands. This reflects a sophisticated form of distributed leadership, where pedagogical leadership is shared among multiple actors, fostering a culture of mutual accountability and collective innovation (Heikka & Suhonen, 2019). As noted by a mid-level administrator at Al-Amien: "We have a musyawarah structure that enables participation from all units, ranging from dormitory managers to subject heads, in the planning process. This collective arrangement strengthens the system by making it both more resilient and more responsive." (Interview, Al-Amien, August 2023)

Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides deeper insight into how these leadership styles are sustained. Leadership is not simply an individual trait but the embodiment of collective dispositions shaped by pesantren traditions. At Syeikh Abdul Wahid, for instance, leadership is marked by asceticism and deference to seniority, reflecting a habitus that prioritizes moral authority over managerial efficiency. At Darunnajah, by contrast, leadership emphasizes delegation and strategic communication, reflecting a habitus shaped by expansion and adaptation to urban environments. These differences underscore how leadership habitus mediates institutional adaptation, shaping how bureaucratic and market demands are interpreted and enacted.

This deeply rooted habitus often coexists with an emerging demand for adaptive leadership, especially in pesantren engaged in educational reform or social activism. At Darunnajah, where the pesantren manages over 20 branches, leadership emphasizes flexibility, delegation, and strategic communication. As a branch director described: "We teach our leaders to be both murobbi (spiritual mentors) and managers. Without adaptation, pesantren cannot grow." (Interview, Darunnajah, June 2023). This approach signals an institutional shift: from charismatic-centralized authority toward a professionalized and scalable leadership culture that still respects traditional symbols and rituals of legitimacy. Moreover, the leadership culture in pesantren is also shaped by regional and historical factors. Gontor, with its legacy of modernism and organizational discipline, has cultivated a leadership style that is methodical, strategic, and consciously distinct from traditional pesantren models. Meanwhile, Syeikh Abdul Wahid maintains a more contemplative, lineage-based leadership ethos that privileges spiritual depth over outward expansion. These contrasting orientations demonstrate how institutional habitus operates as a mediating structure, shaping how leadership strategies are interpreted and enacted

The novelty of these findings lies in demonstrating that Mu'allimin pesantren develop hybrid leadership logics that go beyond simple charismatic or bureaucratic models. By combining traditional moral authority with modern organizational practices, these pesantren craft leadership cultures that are resilient, scalable, and context-sensitive. This challenges existing portrayals of pesantren leadership as either strictly patriarchal or fully modernized, showing instead that leadership hybridity is itself a form of institutional resilience.

The interplay between leadership orientation and institutional habitus in Mu'allimin pesantren illustrates the complex negotiations between authority and adaptability. Through hybrid, distributed, and adaptive leadership models, these institutions navigate the demands of modernization while safeguarding their religious ethos. Far from being static, leadership in pesantren is dynamic, contextual, and deeply embedded in the socio-historical fabric of the institution. This demonstrates that resilience in educational governance depends not only on who leads but also on how leadership is anchored in collective memory and institutional culture.

However, these adaptive innovations also raise critical concerns about long-term identity preservation. One notable issue is the risk of homogenization, in which the very strategies that enable pesantren to survive within modern regulatory and market systems may also contribute to the gradual erosion of their unique pedagogical and cultural identity. As pesantren align with national standards, adopt managerial logics, and respond to middle-class aspirations, there emerges a danger that their epistemological distinctiveness, including the halaqah learning style, kitab kuning mastery, and traditional community rituals, will be marginalized or reduced to performative symbols.

While hybridization and minimalist compliance offer tactical flexibility, they can also mask a deeper process of assimilation, where pesantren slowly come to resemble secular educational institutions with only symbolic traces of Islamic tradition. The shift toward standardized outcomes, digital integration, and formal recognition may pressure pesantren to prioritize institutional survival over pedagogical diversity. This tension calls for a more critical examination of how adaptation can safeguard not only institutional legitimacy but also epistemic plurality, ensuring that pesantren continue to serve as spaces of innovation rooted in religious and cultural particularity rather than evolving into homogenized versions of state-defined schooling.

Alternative explanations suggest that leadership hybridity may be driven more by pragmatic necessity than by institutional habitus, particularly in large pesantren like Darunnajah, where scaling requires delegation. While this is true, the consistency with which pesantren frame leadership as both murobbi (moral mentor) and manager indicates that hybridity is not merely functional but also symbolic, reinforcing their dual legitimacy as religious and educational institutions.

Despite the broad institutional consensus on adaptive strategies, not all voices within Mu'allimin pesantren fully embrace these changes. Interviews reveal internal tensions and subtle resistance, particularly among senior teachers and long-time staff who perceive modern adaptations as potentially eroding the pesantren's epistemological core. At Syekh Abdul Wahid, a senior ustadz expressed concerns over increasing managerialism, stating, "Sometimes I feel we are becoming more like a school than a pesantren. The ruh (spiritual essence) of learning fades when everything is turned into schedules and efficiency." (Interview, July 2023). This sentiment highlights a perceived trade-off between bureaucratic adaptation and spiritual authenticity.

Santri voices also reflect ambivalence. A student from Al-Amien noted, "We are taught kitab and management skills, but sometimes I wonder if we are being prepared more for jobs than for da'wah." This comment suggests a generational awareness of shifting institutional goals—where productive citizenship risks overshadowing spiritual mission. Some kyai also resist what they see as symbolic co-optation. At Gontor, a respected elder commented, "Kita bisa ikut akreditasi, tapi jangan sampai kita menjadi sekolahan." Such expressions signify a nuanced form of institutional conservatism—not rejecting change outright but warning against assimilative overreach.

These internal critiques signal that adaptation is not always smooth or uncontested. They underscore the importance of safeguarding the epistemological distinctiveness of pesantren—the embodied practices, oral traditions, and spiritual rhythms that define pesantren learning beyond its formal curriculum. Attending to these tensions is crucial in ensuring that institutional resilience does not come at the cost of intellectual and cultural homogenization. However, this resilience is also shaped by internal debates and critical reflection. Institutional work in pesantren is not only about adaptation but also about negotiating diverse interpretations of what should be preserved, changed, or resisted.

For policy and practice, these findings highlight the importance of supporting leadership development in pesantren that balances religious charisma with professional competencies. Programs that cultivate distributed leadership and alumni involvement can enhance institutional resilience while preserving the moral ethos that defines Mu'allimin pesantren.

Resilience through Institutional Work

Resilience through institutional work has become a critical lens for understanding how pesantren sustain their mission, identity, and operations amidst shifting regulatory, social, and economic environments. Rather than viewing resilience as mere endurance or reactive recovery, this perspective highlights the intentional efforts of institutional actors to preserve, adapt, and strengthen their frameworks in the face of ongoing pressures. In the context of Mu'allimin pesantren, institutional work takes the form of strategic decisions, symbolic reaffirmations, and adaptive reforms that secure both legitimacy and continuity. At Gontor, for example, daily routines, communal discipline, and moral education operate as mutually reinforcing practices that strengthen the institution's internal cohesion. As one teacher remarked: "The system runs even when the leadership changes. Our resilience is in our structure, in the way we live and teach." (Interview, Gontor, July 2023).

The resilience also involves the maintenance of key relationships in pesantren, this includes ties with alumni, parents, government bodies, and international networks. These relationships are maintained through symbolic work (ritual events, newsletters, community outreach) and practical strategies (alumni-run schools, coordinated fundraising, waqf-based endowments). Such strategies are designed not only to support financial and operational stability but also to preserve the moral legitimacy of pesantren as trusted educational and spiritual institutions. Institutional resilience, in this view, is the product of ongoing institutional work that enables organizations to negotiate external conformity while preserving internal integrity.

Institutional conflict, particularly between traditional logics and modern bureaucratic demands, is another site where resilience is enacted. Bonomi et al. (2020) argue that organizations develop resilience by managing and synthesizing competing institutional logics. At Pesantren Syekh Abdul Wahid, for instance, state educational mandates are adopted selectively and integrated symbolically, allowing the institution to appear compliant while maintaining doctrinal and pedagogical independence. This strategic decoupling illustrates the tension management that is central to institutional resilience.

In the pesantren context, such maintenance work includes the preservation of symbolic markers (e.g., uniforms, marching formations, kitab kuning curriculum), institutional storytelling, and the continuity of leadership training that reproduces the pesantren's core ethos across generations. These practices not only serve to resist coercive pressures but also fortify the pesantren's identity in increasingly competitive and regulatory educational markets.

Institutional resilience in Mu'allimin pesantren is achieved not by avoiding change, but by engaging in intentional, collaborative, and strategic institutional work. Through preparedness, agility, symbolic continuity, and negotiated adaptation, pesantren sustain their values while remaining responsive to the realities of modern governance. This model of resilience offers a compelling framework for understanding how religious educational institutions can thrive amid constraints while at the same time maintaining their identity and mission.

To synthesize the five key dimensions of institutional adaptation identified in this study, Table 1 presents a structured model that highlights the pillars, definitions, and key practices underpinning the institutional reproduction of Mu'allimin pesantren.

Table 1. Institutional Reproduction Model of Mu'allimin Pesantren

Pillar	Definition	Key Practices
Curricular Hybridization	Integration of classical Islamic pedagogy with modern national curricula to balance religious integrity and bureaucratic demands	Kitab kuning + STEM subjects
Cultural Filtering & Minimalist Compliance	Selective adaptation and symbolic compliance with state policies to maintain formal legitimacy while preserving epistemological autonomy.,	PDF formalization with internal curriculum intact
Market-Responsive Adaptation	Adaptation to market expectations through diversification, branding, and technological innovation without compromising Islamic identity	Program diversification
Leadership Hybridity & Institutional Habitus	Blending charismatic religious authority with participatory and managerial leadership models grounded in institutional memory	Kyai-led governance with alumni-professional division of roles
Strategic Institutional Work for Resilience	Intentional actions by institutional actors to sustain identity, legitimacy, and operations through adaptation, symbolic rituals, and community networks.	Symbolic rituals

This model demonstrates how pesantren develop multi-layered strategies that allow them to balance Islamic authenticity with modern regulatory and societal demands, while maintaining organizational identity and resilience.

The model of resilience through institutional work developed in this study offers a conceptual lens that is transferable to the analysis of other religious organizations operating under regulatory or cultural pressure. By foregrounding agency, symbolic continuity, and strategic adaptation, this model moves beyond static depictions of religious institutions as either resistant or compliant. Instead, it reveals how such institutions actively negotiate legitimacy, maintain organizational coherence, and cultivate stakeholder trust across shifting governance environments. This approach can be applied to examine how churches, madrasahs, Hindu ashrams, or Buddhist monastic schools respond to similar pressures of bureaucratization, marketization, or political oversight. It invites scholars to investigate how religious organizations perform institutional work—not only to survive—but to sustain their normative visions through culturally embedded, historically informed, and strategically enacted practices. In doing so, the model contributes to broader discussions in the sociology of religion, organizational theory, and institutional resilience across diverse socio-political contexts.

In terms of broader implications, this synthesis contributes to debates on how faith-based institutions worldwide negotiate the pressures of bureaucratization and modernization. Mu'allimin pesantren illustrate a distinctive model where cadre formation, curricular hybridity, and symbolic compliance converge. For policymakers, these findings underscore the need for regulatory frameworks that accommodate symbolic diversity and institutional particularity. For educators, they highlight the value of embedding resilience not only in structures but also in the dispositions and practices that sustain institutional identity.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Mu'allimin pesantren such as Gontor, Al-Amien Prenduan, Darunnajah, and Syeikh Abdul Wahid are not passive recipients of bureaucratic reform. Instead, they actively engage in institutional work that strategically balances religious identity with regulatory and market demands. By analyzing five pillars of institutional reproduction, curricular hybridization, cultural filtering and minimalist compliance, market-responsive adaptation, leadership hybridity and institutional habitus, and resilience through institutional work, this study reframes resilience as an active, symbolic, and negotiated process rather than mere endurance.

This article advances neo-institutional theory by demonstrating how religious schools enact resilience through symbolic labour, embedded habitus, and hybrid institutional logics. It challenges binary assumptions of compliance versus resistance, showing instead that Mu'allimin pesantren act as adaptive agents that reinterpret bureaucratic reforms while safeguarding religious authenticity.

The findings highlight the importance of designing regulatory frameworks that recognize symbolic compliance as a legitimate mode of engagement. Accreditation and standardization policies should allow flexibility for pesantren to contextualize curricula, ensuring that compliance does not erode epistemological distinctiveness. Supportive measures such as differentiated accreditation pathways, waqf-based financial support, and recognition of pesantren's hidden curriculum, can enhance institutional resilience without homogenization.

This study illustrates strategies that can be replicated or adapted. Curricular hybridization demonstrates how tradition and modernity can be integrated without dilution; cultural filtering shows the importance of selective adaptation; and leadership hybridity underscores the need to cultivate both moral authority and managerial competence. Other religious institutions such as madrasahs, Christian seminaries, or Buddhist schools may apply similar strategies to navigate bureaucratic reforms while preserving their spiritual ethos.

First, policymakers should institutionalize mechanisms for participatory dialogue between pesantren and regulatory bodies, ensuring that reforms are co-designed rather than imposed. Second, accreditation models should be diversified to account for different institutional missions and pedagogical traditions. Third, investment in leadership development and digital infrastructure for pesantren can strengthen both legitimacy and competitiveness. Finally, comparative exchange programs between pesantren and other faith-based schools, both nationally and internationally, can provide learning platforms for institutional resilience across contexts.

By situating Mu'allimin pesantren within broader debates on religious education and institutional adaptation, this study not only deepens theoretical understanding but also offers actionable pathways for policymakers, educators, and religious leaders committed to sustaining resilience in plural, regulated, and dynamic environments

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