ANALYSING THE POTENTIAL OF PESANTREN AS AN AGENT OF INTER-RELIGIOUS HARMONY

Fazlul Rahman
Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran, Surabaya, Indonesia
E-mail: fazlul.rahman.agrotek@upnjatim.ac.id

Faiqotul Mala
Institut Agama Islam Syarifuddin Lumajang, Indonesia
E-mail: faiqotulmala@iasyarifuddin.ac.id

Dedon Dianta
Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran, Surabaya, Indonesia
E-mail: 21071010027@student.upnjatim.ac.id

Abstract: This article attempts to look at great potential of pesantren as the oldest Islamic religious institution in Indonesia. This research analyzes the three primary assets owned by pesantren (human capital, social capital, and intellectual capital) to become agents of inter-religious harmony. It is based on field research conducted in two Islamic boarding schools with great attention to issues of inter-religious harmony, namely the Aswaja Nusantara Islamic Boarding School, Mlangi, Yogyakarta, managed by Kiai Muhammad Mustafid and the Roudhatus Sholihin Islamic Boarding School, Demak, managed by KH. Abdul Qodir, Lc. The primary data sources of this study were taken from interviews with the leaders and notes from Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with representatives of students. Based on the SWOT analysis of the collected data, this study concludes that Pesantren has excellent potential to become an agent of inter-religious harmony because of its social and intellectual capital and the diverse backgrounds of its students. However, this still requires pesantrens to conduct collaborative-comprehensive efforts to maximize their potential.

Keywords: Capital; inter-religious harmony; pesantren; SWOT analysis.

Article history: Received: 17 March 2022; Revised: 13 June 2022; Accepted: 21 August 2022; Available online: 01 September 2022

How to cite this article:
Rahman, Fazlul, Faiqotul Mala, and Dedon Dianta. “Analysing the

**Introduction**

The plurality of religious backgrounds and the plurality of society is a socio-historical fact of Indonesia¹ which is a double-edged sword. It can manifest as an essential asset in realizing national unity in the frame of diversity. But on the other hand, this plurality will likely become the main factor in Indonesia’s division. In this case, the management of pluralism is a necessity that must be sought by various elements of the Nation for a better future for Indonesia.² This study argues that *pesantren*, with their human, social, and intellectual resources, can be the principal agent in realizing inter-religious harmony.

From academic perspective, the problem of inter-religious harmony worldwide, especially in Indonesia, has become a concern of various groups.³ Various legal and social formulations were proposed; either through inter-religious dialogue initiatives,⁴ dialogue between religious texts and contexts,⁵ empowerment of community organizations,⁶ strengthening the role of religious figures and leaders,⁷ and others.⁸ All of those are to be able to find the best formula to

---


194 **RELIGIO: JURNAL STUDI AGAMA-AGAMA**
minimize division and create harmony, according to this research, all of which boils down to two main problems: the practice of religious teachings and the experience of religious adherents themselves.

It is a common consensus that no religious teachings instruct its adherents to do evil to others regardless of their religion. However, it turns out that these dogmas about tolerance are not enough to prevent acts of violence against different religions. Sometimes religious teachings are forcibly withdrawn to legitimate violent behavior towards those with different faiths. At this point, this study sees the urgency of an experiential-based religious learning model, which aims to understand learning materials and reflect and actively practice them.9

In addition to learning to respect others and share social responsibility, in the context of religious harmony, it is also necessary to promote the principle of harmony without uniformity, which is actually following one of the principles of the Indonesian identity, namely Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity).10 In such a pluralistic Indonesian society, experience and adapting to a pluralistic environment are essential prerequisites for realizing inter-religious harmony.

My previous research on religious-other hospitality among students of Pesantren found that although the students had long been educated in the pesantren environment and were intensively provided with various kinds of habituation and learning of Islamic scholarship over the years, there are still concerns from the pesantren managers about their ability to adapt and respond to various religious problems in a more heterogeneous society. According to one of the caregivers, this is because the students have been living in a homogeneous environment, the pesantren environment. They have never experienced life directly in a society with a different faith background, let alone being a minority.

---

The problem of inter-religious harmony becomes more complicated in an era full of media attacks, or Deuz calls “media life”. Deuz said that in this very fluid life, we must continue to adapt to the constant changes that occur in society. Consequently, as a media scholar, Deuze sees that the media will increasingly enter the sides of people’s lives so that people no longer live with the media but in media life. Consequently, the various conceptions of society that have been firmly established so far will change and adapt to the logic of the media. Including the many conceptions of religion, precisely the conception of inter-religious harmony.

Based on data released by the Islamic Boarding School Database of the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, there are at least 27,722 Islamic boarding schools with a total of 4,175,623 students in Indonesia. This study sees that this number shows Indonesia’s great potential in realizing religious communities by making Islamic boarding schools centers of education and the practice of inter-religious harmony. Unfortunately, only a small number of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia have exceptional attention to developing a tolerant religious education model that is tolerant and leads to the realization of inter-religious harmony. This study aims to examine the problem of inter-religious harmony more deeply, primarily related to the potential of pesantren as an agent to realize such harmony and all its contestations.

Based on the above background, this research raises the problem: how to measure the potential of pesantren resources (human, social, and intellectual) to be able to act as agents of inter-religious harmony?

Method

At least two themes will be explored in this literature study: first, literature on inter-religious harmony (definition and standards of inter-religious harmony, factors triggering inter-religious conflict in the world and particularly in Indonesia, and various inter-religious conflict resolution formulas that have been there is). Second, literature on education and conflict resolution between religions (the role and methods of education in supporting conflict resolution, as well as the challenges of education in realizing inter-religious harmony).

---

Analysing the Potential of Pesantren as an Agent of Inter-Religious Harmony

harmony). It is important to conduct a study on the above themes first in this research series before the researcher goes into the field. This literature study obtained a more comprehensive and applicable theoretical basis to be used as an initial perspective before going into the area.

As stated previously, this research raises the problem of the potential of pesantren in realizing inter-religious harmony; therefore, this research then goes to several pesantren which are known to have attention to the issue of tolerance between religious communities. There are at least two pesantren that fall into this category: Pondok Pesantren Roudhatus Sholihin, Demak and Pondok Pesantren Aswaja Nusantara, Mlangi, Yogyakarta.

The field research activities include interviewing the leader and the asatidz board of the Islamic boarding school. Second, conducting Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with representatives of male and female students. Interviews and FGDs will be focused on exploring the perceptions of caregivers and pesantren residents regarding the reality and challenges of inter-religious harmony in the pesantren world, as well as the potential of pesantren to be able to realize this. Third, this research will also observe pesantren’s activities, which are oriented towards realizing inter-religious harmony.

Result

The data in this sub-discussion are collected from interviews with pesantren leaders regarding the potential of pesantren to become agents of inter-religious harmony. They are compiled based on the SWOT Analysis method, which focuses on elaborating on the points of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Related to pesantren’s strengths which are the internal factors of the pesantren to become agents of inter-religious harmony, as stated by Kiai Mustafid, the strength or capital of pesantren to become agents of harmony is the existence of pesantren as not only a place for tafaqquh fiddin, but also a da’wah institution that provides religious information from “first hand”. Pesantren is an authoritative institution that delivers authoritative religious messages, an essential strength of pesantren to

Fazlul Rahman, Faiqotul Mala, Dedon Dianta

become agents of harmony. Because harmony between religions can only occur if there is a correct understanding of religion, and this proper understanding can only happen if it is delivered from authoritative sources.¹³

The second strength of the pesantren is the diverse cultural background of its students. As is well known, Islamic boarding schools are institutions open to anyone to study, regardless of their varied backgrounds. The life of the plural santri certainly has positive implications for many things, and the main thing is the high level of ability of the santri to maintain their existence amid diversity. In the context of efforts to realize inter-religious harmony, the life factor of santri in a culturally heterogeneous environment is essential. The santri have indeed been conditioned to understand and experience these differences directly. This habituation will eventually shape the mindset and attitude of students who can not only accept cultural and religious diversity¹⁴ but can take advantage of this diversity for concrete things that have a positive value to society in the wider community when they leave the pesantren.

The third strength of the pesantren is its intellectual strength built in the spirit of tafaqqub fiddin, open-mindedness, inclusion, and not a blind fanatic.¹⁵ Like it is in the two Islamic boarding schools that were the object of this research and in most Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. Islamic teachings are delivered from various perspectives and different schools of thought, making the theme of religious moderation a hidden curriculum that asatidz always insert during their

---


teaching (pengajian). Another example is the *bahtsul masail* tradition preserved in the Nahdhatul Ulama Islamic boarding schools, which is a form of *pesantren* effort to intellectually respond to contemporary problems by comprehensively referring to various thoughts. This strength becomes essential in preparing the students to become agents of inter-religious harmony. When faced with complex problems related to inter-religious conflicts, with the provision of a comprehensive intellectual building, the *pesantren* community is expected to have a broad outlook to see the problem comprehensively and formulate integrative solutive steps.

The last strength of the *pesantren* is its social capital among the community. Historically, the presence of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesian society has had many positive impacts (M. Syaifudin et al. 2021; Assa’idi 2021). Moreover, the *pesantren* has made a real contribution to the struggle of the Indonesians against colonialism. The same thing happened at the Pesantren Mlangi Islamic, where the founder is a figure who promotes learning and memorizing the Qur’an in society. So it is not surprising that the Mlangi community grew many memorizers of the Quran at that time. Pesantren’s real contribution to society socially fostered the trust and closeness of the surrounding community towards the *pesantren*. This social capital factor is crucial for realizing inter-religious harmony in Indonesia. With the strong influence that *pesantren* have in the broader community, it significantly can contribute to provide the understanding and invite the community to accept and care for inter-religious harmony.

After understanding the strengths of *pesantren* to become agents of inter-religious harmony, on the other hand, this research also looks at the weaknesses of *pesantren*. Among them are most *pesantren* that do not have a particular movement that is concerned with the issue of

---


inter-religious harmony. Although many pesantren have initiatives and exceptional attention to this matter, unfortunately, it is only within the scope of one or two pesantren. There is no one particular joint movement from various Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia to create inter-religious harmony. This weakness, unfortunately, made the pesantren-based tolerance movement only partial and sectoral.

Another weakness of the pesantren is the weak management of human resources, especially in preparing cadres engaged in interfaith tolerance activities. As conveyed by Kiai Mustafid, the pesantren have human resources in quantity and quality are very good. But unfortunately, there is no specific management that is professionally organized and measurable to process these human resources into those ready to become agents of inter-religious tolerance.

In addition to the internal strengths and weaknesses of the pesantren, as described above, this research also highlights some of the opportunities and threats from outside factors of pesantren to maximize their potential to become agents of inter-religious tolerance. Among the external threats faced by pesantren is that Islamic boarding schools are prone to become hotbeds of radicals. Indonesian history saw radical ideology succeed in sneaking into Islamic boarding schools.\(^{18}\) With the various influences possessed by pesantren, there is no doubt that jihadists are targeting pesantren as a basis for spreading their ideas. Related to the context of inter-religious harmony, it is clear that this is a real threat that must be seriously anticipated and addressed.

---

In addition to the threat of transnational ideas, in its development, pesantren must also face the negative stigma of society which does not like the existence of pesantren. Various negative issues were intentionally blown up by elements who wanted to thwart the progress of the pesantren and even bring down the dignity of the pesantren to distance the pesantren from society and reduce its influence in society. The controversial issue of the Pondok Roudhotus Sholihin’s santri who perform rebana in the church, for example, is a clear example of how a particular group of society that does not understand and take advantage of the moment deliberately undermines the authority of the pesantren in the eyes of the community.19

Apart from the two threats above, another threat that needs to seriously unpacked is that Islamic boarding schools are prone to becoming political commodities that can insert radical ideas. In the political context, the existence of pesantren in society has its bargaining value. It is not surprising, then, that many Kiai are tempted to enter politics and cause a shift in the function of the pesantren, which initially focused on religious education, to become a political commodity that is used to gain power. Regardless of the pros and cons of the pesantren leaders’ involvement in politics,20 in this context, the author sees the threat of using pesantren as a political vehicle with radical nuances. Of course, the role of pesantren in politics is a positive thing. However, pesantren must still be aware of the interests of radical groups who use pesantren for their political interests.

After revealing the strengths, weaknesses, and threats that pesantren must face, the last factor that is important to show is the opportunity factor from outside the pesantren which can maximize the potential of pesantren to become agents of inter-religious harmony. The first opportunity is the openness of the public sphere in the real world and the digisphere. The pesantren community should take this critical opportunity to contribute to providing valid information about Islamic teachings and spreading peaceful religious ideas. This


opportunity is essential in rampant messages of hatred in the name of religion that spread freely in public spaces.

The second opportunity that Islamic boarding schools can utilize is the existence of information and communication technology (ICT) which is widely available and affordable. As we know, technology products’ accessibility and affordability are currently growing. Islamic boarding schools should also take advantage of these products to develop the pesantren and develop educational facilities for a wider audience. In the context of inter-religious harmony, the availability and affordability of ICT facilities can at least contribute to connecting Islamic boarding schools with the outside world. With the availability of adequate ICT facilities, Islamic boarding schools can do many things, such as spreading messages of peace through live-streaming recitations or interactive and exciting video clips uploaded to the Internet. With adequate technological support, Islamic boarding schools can also interact with other religious communities in various parts of the world to build collaborations. Islamic boarding schools can also create special online courses to develop soft skills to interact with people and many other important initiatives.

Discussion

In the previous sub-discussion, this article has presented several points from the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the Islamic Boarding School to be an Agent of Inter-religious Harmony. The next step in a SWOT analysis is to discuss those key points based on the following question prompts; How can the (S) take advantage of the existing (O)?; How to overcome the (W) to get the (O)? How can the (S) deal with the (T)? How to deal with the (W) to prevent external (T)?

The first question, What are the strengths possessed by pesantren (Islamic boarding schools have several strengths to be agents of inter-religious harmony, namely: pesantren are authoritative institutions in terms of conveying information about religion, the diversity of backgrounds of pesantren residents, studies that are not fanatical about one school of thought, and strong social capital) can take advantages of the current opportunities (openness of public space and availability and affordability of access to technology)? In the context of the first question, this article proposes two things that pesantren can do; inviting as many pesantren leaders as possible to fill online and offline public
spheres with harmonious religious discourses. The religious public space in Indonesia is filled with hateful narratives from various individuals who want to destroy the unity and peace of Indonesia. Not only in the real public sphere, but the war of hate narratives against peace is also even more prolific in the digital public sphere. In this hate narrative war, this research sees the importance of inviting as many pesantren leaders as possible who have qualified Islamic scientific capacity and the ability to convey religious messages flexibly and peacefully to participate or be given a place to contribute to sharing messages of peace. The phenomenon of the emergence of experts from Islamic boarding school leaders (like KH. Bahauddin Nur Salim, commonly known as Gus Baha, KH. Mustofa Bisri, KH. Anwar Zahid, and KH. Ahmad Muwafiq) in the Indonesian public sphere is a real example of how to maximize the potential of Islamic boarding schools by utilizing the openness of the public sphere.

Apart from inviting as many potential pesantren cadres as possible into the public space, pesantren can take advantage of the opportunities available by promoting digital media literacy and skills among students and asatidz of pesantren. As previously stated, IT products are now very easy to obtain at affordable prices. This certainly requires increasing Islamic boarding schools’ ability to utilize these IT products, both hard and soft skills. Consequently, digital media literacy and skills must be introduced and encouraged among...

pesantren residents. Literacy and skills are the ability to technically utilize various kinds of technological products and use them wisely. Admittedly or not, radical groups have taken the lead in utilizing these IT products. They have used a lot of technology in their actions.26

Related to the second question, how to overcome the weaknesses of the Islamic Boarding School (the absence of a massive and collaborative movement to ward off radicalism and weak human resource management) to get the opportunity? This article proposes two opinions; firstly, to raise pesantren’s awareness towards the importance of collaborative programs to counter radicalism and their essential role in public spaces. This can be done by establishing cooperation between pesantren leaders and state institutions that deal with issues of radicalism, such as the National Counter Terrorism Agency (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme), the police, and some NGOs working in the same field as ruangobrol.id, Yayasan DeBintal, etc. In addition, the government, represented by the Ministry of Religion, can initiate inter-religious activity programs specifically for Islamic boarding schools. Such as summer schools, inter-religious camps, inter-religious tours, etc. From these various initiatives, the Islamic boarding school community, from the leaders to the students, might understand the dangers of radicalism and the importance of collaboration in dealing with it.

The third question that must be answered in practice SWOT analysis is how the (S) is able to deal with the (T)? in the context of this research, this means answering how the various strengths possessed by pesantren can face external challenges in maximizing their potential to become agents of inter-religious harmony. As previously stated, there are at least three external threats; the entry of radical ideas into the world of Islamic boarding schools, the negative stigma of Indonesian society towards Islamic boarding schools, and the use of Islamic boarding schools as political commodities. In dealing with those, this article argues the importance of strengthening the identity of the pesantren society as an open-minded, firmly attached to Islamic

Analysing the Potential of Pesantren as an Agent of Inter-Religious Harmony

tradition, politically neutral, and baraka-oriented society. This can be done through various activities, such as initiating forums of *silaturahim* and ‘*silatul afkar*’ between Islamic boarding school alumni. Apart from that, it is also important to inniate *sowan* to the elderly Kiai who understand the problems and the history of the struggles of the pesantren community in ancient times and to visit the deceased elders.

Another thing that can be done is to gather political actors from the pesantren circles. In this way, the cadres can introspect and remind each other that they are santri who must uphold the values of the pesantren not only when they are still studying at the pesantren but also when they carry out their mandate in society.

The last question in the SWOT analysis series is how to deal with the weaknesses of the Islamic Boarding School (the absence of a massive and collaborative movement to ward off radicalism and weak human resource management) to prevent external threats. As previously known, the challenges that pesantren must face are the introduction of radical ideas into pesantren, the negative stigma of the society towards pesantren, and the use of pesantren as political commodities. Pesantren, at this point, should have a systematic regeneration program concerning religious moderation. Islamic boarding schools must start having a cadre program for students who care about moderation with clear stages and targets. With good human resource management, Islamic boarding schools can anticipate and respond to ideas that enter and have the potential to ruin the pesantren’s tradition. The cadres can also contribute to educating people outside the pesantren regarding the dangers of radical ideas. Moreover, they can also contribute to bonding Muslims and non-Muslims in society to collaborate and avoid potential conflicts. In practical politics, they can also enter into the government system to make politics a vehicle for creating religious harmony in society, not only for personal and group interests.

**Conclusion**

The diversity of cultural and religious life of the Indonesian people is God’s grace for which the entire community should be grateful by taking a role in protecting it. In this article, we discussed the potential of Islamic boarding schools to help maintain this diversity by becoming agents of inter-religious tolerance. Based on the SWOT analysis conducted previously, this article finds that Islamic
boarding schools as Islamic religious learning institutions with unique characteristics have great potential to become agents of inter-religious harmony due to their human, social and intellectual capital. However, this still requires Islamic boarding schools to make collaborative-comprehensive efforts to maximize their potential. At this point, at least four things need to be done by the pesantren: first, in terms of human resources, Islamic boarding schools conduct a cadre program for students concerned with religious harmony that is managed professionally with clear and measurable goals and targets. Second, related to pesantren’s intellectual capital, this study sees that pesantren should deliver Islamic studies and teachings (pengajian) according to Indonesia’s social context of religious and cultural diversity. Third, with its social capital, pesantren have to collaborate with state institutions and non-governmental organizations that are concerned about creating interfaith harmony.

Bibliography
Analysing the Potential of Pesantren as an Agent of Inter-Religious Harmony


