



Neoliberal Control Mechanisms and Their Impact on Islamic Educational Governance

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ABSTRACT

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Islamic education in Indonesia is increasingly confronted with neoliberal governance that emphasizes efficiency, accountability, and competitiveness, potentially marginalizing its spiritual mission. This study aims to examine how neoliberal control mechanisms and knowledge capitalism operate in madrasah governance and how Islamic educational values respond to these pressures. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach with a single case study design, the research was conducted at MTsS Al-Maziyyah Cilaku, Cianjur Regency. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, documentation, and indirect observation, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The findings reveal that accreditation systems, national assessments, performance reporting, and bureaucratic supervision significantly shape institutional management, reflecting neoliberal control and knowledge commodification. The madrasah demonstrates adaptive capacity by internalizing Islamic values such as *amanah*, *ihsan*, and *ikhlas* as ethical foundations of managerial practice. This study concludes that Islamic educational institutions are not passive recipients of neoliberal pressure but active agents capable of negotiating it through "managerial soft resistance." The study contributes theoretically by enriching Islamic educational management discourse with an empirical model that integrates spirituality, professionalism, and critical engagement with neoliberal education policies.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic education plays a crucial role in shaping moral integrity, social cohesion, and intellectual development within Muslim societies (Badrun, 2024). In Indonesia, Islamic educational institutions are not merely sites of knowledge transmission but also moral communities tasked with preserving Islamic values such as sincerity (*ikhlas*), trustworthiness (*amanah*), and social benefit (*maslahah*) (Ilhamsyah & Ramli, 2024). Contemporary educational governance

increasingly prioritizes efficiency, accountability, and competitiveness, values largely derived from neoliberal rationality (Sellami, 2025). This shift matters for society because education directly influences the ethical orientation of future generations (Wahyudi, 2025). Empirical evidence shows that neoliberal reforms have transformed education into a market-oriented system where performance indicators, accreditation, and institutional branding dominate decision-making (Mas'udi et al., 2021). When education is reduced to measurable outputs, its moral and spiritual dimensions risk marginalization. Therefore, examining how Islamic education responds to neoliberal pressures is socially significant, as it determines whether education remains a public good rooted in ethical values or becomes a commodity shaped by market logic.

The central problem underlying this research is the growing tension between value-based Islamic educational ideals and the expansion of neoliberal governance in education. Neoliberalism promotes deregulation, competition, and market efficiency, reshaping public institutions through managerial surveillance and performance measurement (Sellami, 2025). In Islamic education, this paradigm manifests through standardized accreditation systems, national assessments, and bureaucratic accountability mechanisms that prioritize numerical achievement over ethical formation (Hajar, 2024). Putri (2025) argue that such policies have intensified commercialization and inequality in Indonesian education, including Islamic institutions. As a result, madrasas increasingly operate under pressure to demonstrate competitiveness, secure funding, and enhance institutional reputation. This condition creates a structural dilemma: Islamic schools must comply with external demands to survive while simultaneously safeguarding their spiritual mission. The inability to reconcile these competing logics risks transforming Islamic education into a symbolic religious institution devoid of substantive ethical practice. Addressing this problem is essential to ensure that Islamic education remains aligned with its foundational worldview amid systemic transformation.

This tension is clearly observable in the daily governance of many madrasas, including MTsS Al-Maziyah Cilaku. Field observations indicate that the institution faces intense administrative pressure to meet accreditation standards, comply with ANBK requirements, and produce detailed BOS financial reports. These mechanisms function as tools of control, shaping institutional priorities and managerial behavior. Efforts to project an image of being "excellent," "competitive," and "high-performing" have become integral to institutional strategy, reflecting the logic of knowledge capitalism in which academic achievements, certificates, and reputation are commodified (Haque, 2019). Nevertheless, MTsS Al-Maziyah simultaneously strives to maintain religious routines, moral discipline, and spiritual practices. This dual orientation

illustrates a complex negotiation between professionalism and spirituality. Rather than outright rejection, the madrasa adopts adaptive strategies to survive within neoliberal constraints while preserving Islamic values. This empirical context provides a fertile ground for examining how neoliberal control operates at the micro level of Islamic secondary education.

Scholars have extensively discussed neoliberalism's impact on education from critical and philosophical perspectives. George & Pandey (2024) contends that neoliberalism redefines schooling as an instrument for economic productivity rather than moral and civic development. In Islamic education studies, Salim (2023) demonstrates how market ideology drives institutional commercialization, while Fitzgerald et al (2025) highlights its role in deepening educational inequality. Internationally, Arar, Hallinger, and Chen (2021) reveal that leaders of Islamic educational institutions struggle to balance spiritual commitments with performance-based accountability. From a theoretical standpoint, Buttner (2025) calls for decolonizing planning theory to liberate educational institutions in the Global South from Western capitalist dominance. Hamada (2022) similarly proposes an Islamic worldview as an alternative framework for development and education. These studies collectively underscore the pervasive influence of neoliberal rationality and the need for value-based alternatives in educational governance.

Despite their contributions, most existing studies remain predominantly conceptual and normative. They critique neoliberalism at the macro level or propose philosophical alternatives without sufficient empirical grounding. In the Indonesian context, few studies investigate how neoliberal control mechanisms concretely shape daily managerial practices in Islamic secondary education, particularly at the madrasah tsanawiyah level. Moreover, research rarely explores how Islamic values function not merely as ideals but as lived practices that mediate institutional responses to external pressure. Yani (2024) emphasizes that Islamic educational management requires its own epistemological foundation, rather than superficial religious justification of modern management theories. However, empirical evidence demonstrating this epistemological negotiation remains limited. Consequently, there is a critical gap in understanding how Islamic educational institutions actively negotiate, reinterpret, or subtly resist neoliberal governance while remaining operationally compliant. Addressing this gap is essential to move beyond abstract critique toward grounded theoretical development.

The novelty of this research lies in its integration of the philosophy of Islamic educational management with empirical analysis of neoliberal practices at the madrasa level. Unlike prior studies that focus on normative prescriptions, this study examines lived governance through interviews, observations, and

institutional documents at MTsS Al-Maziyyah Cilaku. It introduces the concept of “subtle resistance” to describe how Islamic educational institutions preserve spiritual values through worship habituation, moral regulation, and the internalization of sincerity (ikhlās) amid administrative surveillance. By synthesizing critiques of neoliberal rationality with maqāṣid al-sharīʿah and Islamic management principles such as tawḥīd, amānah, and iḥsān (Sapdi, 2022), this research offers a state-of-the-art analytical model. This approach advances Islamic educational management as a critical, context-sensitive discipline capable of responding to globalization without losing its ethical core.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this research addresses three central questions: how neoliberal control mechanisms emerge in the governance of MTsS Al-Maziyyah; how knowledge capitalism influences its institutional culture and policies; and how Islamic management values are implemented in response to these pressures. The core argument of this study is that Islamic educational institutions are not passive victims of neoliberalism but active agents that negotiate its influence through value-based practices. While administrative compliance is unavoidable, Islamic values function as an ethical counterbalance that reshapes managerial meaning and purpose. This argument challenges deterministic views of neoliberal domination by highlighting institutional agency rooted in religious epistemology. Consequently, the study contributes theoretically by expanding Islamic educational management beyond normative discourse and practically by offering insights into sustainable governance strategies for Islamic schools operating under systemic pressure.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. The selection of this approach was grounded in the objective of gaining an in-depth and contextual understanding of social, managerial, and philosophical phenomena embedded in the governance of Islamic educational institutions. Qualitative descriptive research is particularly suitable for exploring meanings, perceptions, and practices as experienced by participants within their natural settings, without imposing predetermined variables or hypotheses. As emphasized by Creswell (2018), qualitative inquiry allows researchers to interpret how individuals make sense of policies, actions, and institutional realities (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024). In this study, the descriptive qualitative design enabled the researcher to capture how neoliberal control mechanisms and knowledge capitalism manifest in madrasa management and how Islamic educational values are articulated as adaptive responses. The research was framed within an interpretivist paradigm, which prioritizes subjective meaning-making and reflective understanding of social reality. Accordingly, the study

focused on lived experiences and institutional practices rather than causal measurement.

The research was conducted at MTsS Al-Maziyyah Cilaku, located in Cianjur Regency, Indonesia. This madrasa was purposively selected due to its strategic position as a private Islamic secondary education institution operating under significant external regulatory pressure. MTsS Al-Maziyyah is required to comply with national education policies, including accreditation standards, the National Computer-Based Assessment (ANBK), and BOS financial accountability mechanisms, while simultaneously maintaining Islamic educational values and religious traditions. This dual obligation makes the institution an illustrative case for examining the interaction between neoliberal governance and value-based Islamic management. Furthermore, preliminary observations indicated the presence of strong spiritual routines alongside professional managerial practices, suggesting an ongoing negotiation between administrative compliance and religious commitment. These characteristics render MTsS Al-Maziyyah a relevant and information-rich case for exploring neoliberal control and knowledge capitalism within the context of Islamic education.

Data collection was conducted using three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, documentation, and indirect observation. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with purposively selected informants who were directly involved in institutional governance and instructional processes. These interviews explored themes related to neoliberal control mechanisms, knowledge capitalization, and the implementation of Islamic educational management values. Documentation analysis included institutional records such as vision and mission statements, accreditation reports, ANBK results, BOS financial reports, and digital materials including pamphlets, official websites, and social media publications. Indirect observation was employed to capture routine practices, religious activities, and managerial interactions within the madrasa environment. The combination of these techniques enabled comprehensive data collection and facilitated cross-verification between verbal accounts and institutional evidence.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of three interconnected stages. First, data condensation (reduction) was conducted by selecting, coding, and categorizing relevant information derived from interviews, documents, and observations. This process allowed the researcher to focus on meaningful patterns related to neoliberal control, knowledge capitalism, and Islamic value implementation. Second, data display was carried out through thematic narrative descriptions and matrices that organized findings according to

analytical categories. This stage facilitated interpretation and comparison across data sources. Third, conclusion drawing and verification were performed iteratively throughout the research process. Emerging interpretations were continuously tested against empirical data to ensure logical consistency and analytical rigor. This cyclical process ensured that conclusions were firmly grounded in the field data.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were employed. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from different informants occupying various structural and instructional roles. Method triangulation was applied by aligning interview data with documentary evidence and observational notes. In addition, member checking was undertaken by returning preliminary interpretations to key informants for confirmation and clarification, ensuring that the researcher's analysis accurately reflected participants' perspectives. These strategies enhanced the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study, thereby strengthening the overall validity of the qualitative findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Policy Pressures and Neoliberal Control Mechanisms

The findings reveal that all informants experience substantial pressure from various external policies that shape the governance of MTsS Al-Maziyyah Cilaku. The principal, vice principal, and senior teachers consistently emphasized that government regulations, such as BAN-S/M accreditation, the Computer-Based National Assessment (ANBK), educational performance reports, supervision from Ministry of Religious Affairs inspectors, and administrative requirements related to the School Operational Assistance (BOS) program, serve as critical determinants of institutional management.

Based on interview results, respondents described these policy instruments as having a "relevant," "highly determinant," and even "significant impact" on program planning, instructional strategy, and the evaluation of teacher performance. Overall, the data indicate that MTsS Al-Maziyyah operates within a managerial environment shaped by the logic of standardization and bureaucratic accountability, resulting in internal institutional dynamics that are strongly regulated through top-down control mechanisms.

Table 1. Respondents' Perceptions of the Influence of Government Policy

| Informant | Government Policy on Madrasah Management |
|------------------|--|
| Principal | "Accreditation requirements, National Examination (AN), and School Operational Assistance (BOS) reports significantly influence policy direction." |
| Deputy Principal | "Central government policies are highly relevant and serve as a |

| | |
|-----------|---|
| | reference in program development." |
| Teacher 1 | "Accreditation and educational reports significantly influence learning activities." |
| Teacher 2 | "Government policies encourage institutions to be more orderly in their administration." |
| Teacher 3 | "Central government policies serve as the basis for madrasahs' actions in achieving their targets." |

Dominance of External Policies and Neoliberal Managerial Logic

All informants demonstrated a similar response pattern: external policies are perceived as the dominant force shaping the direction of institutional management. The pressures experienced are not limited to administrative obligations alone, but directly affect instructional practices and the daily workflow of the school. Teachers are required to adjust teaching methods, complete instructional documents, and undergo periodic supervision in order to comply with accreditation standards. At the same time, the principal is expected to ensure that all administrative files, financial reports, and curriculum documents are prepared in accordance with regulatory requirements.

These findings indicate that the institution's mode of operation is largely governed by the logic of neoliberal control, characterized by standardization, performance indicator achievement, and bureaucratic efficiency, conditions that are clearly evident within the context of a mid-level Islamic secondary institution (madrasah).

Achievement Culture and Knowledge Capitalism

The next set of findings reveals the presence of knowledge capitalism, reflected in institutional branding practices, an orientation toward achievement, and the commodification of academic and non-academic accomplishments. Most respondents acknowledged that MTsS Al-Maziyyah develops flagship programs, participates in various competitions, offers certification training, and organizes self-development activities as strategies to enhance public appeal.

Many informants reported that showcasing accomplishments through social media platforms, such as Instagram, the school's Facebook page, and promotional materials for new student admissions (PPDB)—has become a key strategy for navigating inter-school competition. This practice emerges in response to increasing competition among educational institutions and a growing public perception of education as a form of long-term investment in children's futures.

Table 2. Forms of Knowledge Capitalism at MTsS Al-Maziyyah

| Aspects | Field Findings |
|---------|----------------|
|---------|----------------|

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Flagship Program | Extracurricular activities, academic competitions, memorization, and skills |
| Branding | Regular posting of student achievements on the institution's social media |
| Achievement Orientation | Motivation to participate in competitions to improve the image of the madrasah |
| Certification | Teacher training activities and publication of competency certificates |
| Teacher 3 | "Central policies are the basis for the madrasah's actions in achieving its targets." |

Based on the questionnaire results, teachers perceived that the pressure to demonstrate achievement is extremely high. This is reflected in the Likert scale scores (1–5), where most respondents selected values of 4 or 5. Consequently, the emergence of a competitive culture is not solely attributed to external forces but is also reinforced by the institution's internal strategy that positions achievement as the primary benchmark of educational success.

Knowledge capitalism becomes evident when achievements, certifications, and academic quality are transformed into commodities promoted to the public as indicators of the madrasa's superiority. These findings suggest that education is perceived not merely as a process of character formation, but also as a means of generating institutional market value within a competitive educational landscape.

Islamic Values, Balance, and "Subtle Resistance"

Despite being situated under neoliberal control mechanisms, the findings indicate that MTsS Al-Maziyyah remains committed to upholding core Islamic educational management values. Respondents mentioned that the principles of *amānah* (trustworthiness), *ikhhlāṣ* (sincerity), *maṣlahah* (public benefit), and *iḥsān* (excellence) continue to serve as fundamental foundations of institutional activity.

Teachers and school leaders explained that various religious habituation practices, such as *ṣalāt ḍuḥā*, *tadarrus*, short sermons (*kultum*), and routine study circles, function as forms of subtle resistance against bureaucratic administrative pressures. These religious practices are seen as mechanisms for preserving the spiritual identity of the institution, while also affirming that Islamic education does not fully submit to market-based logic, even as it must adapt to the realities of modern competition.

Table 3. Islamic Values Maintained in Institutional Management

| Informant | Main Islamic Values Form of | Implementation |
|-----------|--------------------------------|----------------|
|-----------|--------------------------------|----------------|

| | | |
|------------------|--------------------|--|
| Principal | Amanah, Ihsan | Developing a habit of daily worship and discipline |
| Deputy Principal | Maslahah, Ikhlas | Emphasizing morals in learning |
| Senior Teacher 1 | Sincerity | Cultivating a habit of prayer and moral counseling |
| Senior Teacher 2 | Justice | Developing equitable policies for students |
| Senior Teacher 3 | Exemplary Behavior | Providing examples of Islamic behavior |

Spiritual Values as an Institutional Shield Against Neoliberal Pressure

The findings indicate that spiritual values serve as a primary safeguard for the institution in responding to the pressures of neoliberal education. Educators emphasized that Islamic education cannot be reduced to mere numerical outcomes or formal achievements; rather, it must encompass the formation of moral character, the strengthening of ethical conduct, and the embodiment of exemplary behavior.

The notion of “subtle resistance” becomes increasingly apparent when spiritual activities are employed as internal mechanisms to counterbalance escalating administrative demands. Through consistent religious practices, the institution is able to create a space of resistance to the logic of knowledge capitalism and preserve its religious identity as the core of its educational mission. Thus, the madrasa is not entirely trapped within a market-oriented paradigm, but instead presents an alternative value system rooted in spiritual culture.

Educators’ Reflections on Islamic Educational Management

This part of the findings highlights how educators reflect upon the major challenges faced in the governance of Islamic education today. A majority of informants stated that the dominance of administrative obligations and the pressure to meet performance targets have diminished opportunities to enhance learning processes and nurture students’ character development. This situation raises concerns that the spiritual dimension of education may become marginalized if increasing bureaucratic demands are not balanced with efforts to reinforce Islamic values.

Table 4. Teacher Challenges in the Modern Education System

| Challenges | Teacher's Explanation |
|--------------------------|---|
| Excessive Administration | Teachers must keep up with reports, equipment, and supervision. |

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Target Pressure | Demands for achievement and improvement in AN scores. |
| Moral Development Time | Reduced due to focus on meeting standards. |
| Technology Adaptation | Demands for digitalization in the learning process. |
| Imbalance | Between bureaucratic tasks and moral-spiritual tasks. |

The majority of informants stated that the greatest challenge in managing the madrasa lies in maintaining a balance between administrative pressures and the preservation of Islamic values. Nevertheless, educators expressed optimism that Islamic education can grow stronger if it succeeds in integrating modern professional standards with moral principles deeply rooted in spiritual values.

For teachers and school leaders, the future of the institution is envisioned as one that is “progressive,” “more competitive,” “adaptive,” and yet consistently grounded in Islamic spirituality and noble moral character. This shared belief demonstrates a collective confidence that the identity of Islamic education will remain resilient, even as the national education system increasingly shifts toward neoliberal and competitive orientations.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that neoliberal control mechanisms have significantly shaped the governance of MTsS Al-Maziyyah through policy instruments such as BAN-S/M accreditation, ANBK, inspector supervision, and performance-based reporting systems. This finding aligns with Neophytou (2025) argument that neoliberalism restructures schooling through performativity, measurable indicators, and bureaucratic surveillance, shifting the focus from holistic human development toward technical compliance. Similarly, Labraña & Villalobos (2025) demonstrates that performance-oriented policies penetrate educational institutions at multiple levels, intensifying managerial pressure and narrowing pedagogical space. However unlike much of the existing literature that emphasizes higher education, this study extends the discussion to the madrasah tsanawiyah level, thereby contributing empirical evidence that neoliberal governance has deeply penetrated Islamic secondary education (Hajar, 2024; Ali et al., 2024) The implication is theoretically significant, as it challenges the assumption that lower-level Islamic institutions remain relatively insulated from global managerial regimes.

In terms of institutional culture, the findings regarding knowledge capitalism are consistent with Muzaka (2024) analysis of knowledge commodification under neoliberal restructuring. At MTsS Al-Maziyyah, academic achievements, certificates, competition outcomes, and digital branding function as symbolic capital to enhance institutional competitiveness. This resonates with Salim’s (2023) observation that Islamic education in Indonesia is

increasingly shaped by market-oriented logic and promotional strategies. However, this study advances prior research by demonstrating that commodification does not merely operate externally as a marketing tool but also reshapes internal institutional dynamics, fostering competition among teachers and students. The theoretical implication lies in expanding the concept of knowledge capitalism to include its internal cultural effects, while the practical implication highlights the need for school leaders to critically manage achievement-oriented cultures so they do not undermine collegiality and educational ethics (Asemota, 2025).

At the same time, the findings diverge from deterministic views of neoliberal domination by revealing how Islamic values function as a form of adaptive resistance. The persistence of *amanah*, *ihsan*, and *ikhlas* in managerial practices supports Yani (2024) argument that Islamic educational management must be grounded in its own scientific paradigm rather than merely adopting secular managerial frameworks. This also reinforces Sapdi's (2022) assertion that Islamic education must uphold spiritual foundations when engaging with global competition. Theoretically, this study contributes by operationalizing these values as lived managerial practices rather than abstract ideals. Practically, it suggests that institutional leaders can embed Islamic values into routine administration, transforming compliance activities into acts of worship and ethical responsibility rather than purely technical tasks.

Furthermore, the articulation of "managerial soft resistance" enriches existing discussions on leadership and spirituality in Islamic education. Arar, Hallinger, and Chen (2021) argue that leaders in Muslim educational contexts employ spirituality to navigate tensions between global performance demands and local religious commitments. This study supports their conclusion while extending it empirically by identifying concrete practices such as worship habituation, moral discipline, and sincerity in administrative work that operate as subtle counterweights to neoliberal rationality. The theoretical implication is the refinement of resistance theory within Islamic educational management, shifting from overt opposition to value-based negotiation. Practically, this model offers a realistic strategy for madrasas that must remain compliant with state policies while safeguarding their spiritual identity.

Finally, educators' reflections reveal that neoliberal governance increases administrative workload and performance pressure, corroborating Watson's (2021) claim that Western-derived management models often constrain pedagogical depth in the Global South. Yet, the findings also demonstrate that spirituality remains a central professional compass for educators at MTsS Al-Maziyyah. This underscores a critical implication: Islamic educational institutions are not merely sites of policy implementation but spaces of ethical

agency. Theoretically, this positions Islamic education as an active contributor to alternative governance models grounded in moral purpose. Practically, it highlights the importance of leadership policies that protect time and space for character formation, ensuring that Islamic education does not lose its transformative mission amid the demands of neoliberal accountability.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that neoliberal control mechanisms and knowledge capitalism have penetrated the governance of Islamic education at the madrasah level, particularly through accreditation systems, national assessments, performance reporting, and bureaucratic supervision. The most important lesson derived from this research is that Islamic educational institutions are not passive objects of neoliberal governance. MTsS Al-Maziyyah Cilaku demonstrates a strong adaptive capacity by internalizing Islamic values such as *amanah*, *ihsan*, *ikhlas*, and spiritual exemplarity as ethical foundations of managerial practice. These values function as a form of “managerial soft resistance,” enabling the madrasah to fulfill administrative demands while preserving its spiritual mission. This finding affirms that spirituality can operate as a living managerial resource rather than a symbolic or peripheral element, offering a meaningful model for balancing professionalism and Islamic educational identity.

The primary strength and scholarly contribution of this study lie in its empirical articulation of “managerial soft resistance” as a value-based strategy within Islamic educational management. This concept enriches existing theoretical frameworks by bridging critiques of neoliberalism with Islamic management philosophy, reinforcing the arguments of Irawan and Sapdi regarding the necessity of a distinct Islamic epistemological paradigm. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its single-case qualitative design and the absence of quantitative measurement, which constrains broader generalization. Future research is therefore encouraged to adopt comparative, multi-site, or mixed-method approaches to further examine variations of soft resistance across different Islamic educational settings, including pesantren and Islamic higher education institutions.

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