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TOPIC

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AUTHORS

1. Layma Mehmood, Research Scholar, Department of Quran & Sunnah, University of Karachi, Pakistan. Email: lmagha2017@gmail.com
2. Dr. Sana Jadoon, Jadoon (Ph.D Islamic studies), Surprenant, Beuro of curriculum, Directorate of Education, Quetta, Pakistan.
Email: Sanahamas22@gmail.com

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The Educational and Intellectual Situation of Muslims in ASEAN

¹ Layma Mehmood² Sana Jadoon

ABSTRACT:

The Educational and intellectual landscape of Muslims in the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) region reflects a complex interplay of diversity, resilience, and transformation. With over 250 million Muslims across countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, and the Philippines, the region showcases a rich mosaic of religious and secular educational systems that contribute significantly to Southeast Asia's cultural and academic fabric. Significant progress has been made in nations like Malaysia and Indonesia in harmonizing Islamic values with contemporary education. Nevertheless, challenges persist in areas such as equitable access, academic quality, and intellectual autonomy. In minority contexts, particularly Thailand and the Philippines Muslims often encounter structural marginalization, which constrains both educational advancement and the freedom of intellectual expression. Historical legacies, political dynamics, and socio-economic disparities further shape the educational trajectories of Muslim communities. Emerging developments include the establishment of Islamic universities, regional and international academic collaborations, the growing use of digital learning technologies, and a renewed interest in classical Islamic sciences alongside modern disciplines. The expanding role of Muslim women in education and the impact of transnational Islamic movements on local reform initiatives also form critical aspects of this evolving landscape. Findings from this research highlight both notable achievements and persisting deficiencies in Muslim education across ASEAN. These insights aim to inform regional policy debates and offer strategic recommendations for fostering inclusive, high-quality, and context-sensitive educational frameworks that empower Muslim communities throughout Southeast Asia.

Keywords: intellectual landscape, Southeast Asian Nations, diversity, resilience, transformation.

Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) encompasses a diverse array of cultures, religions, and educational systems. Among its population, Muslims constitute a significant demographic, particularly in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, and the Philippines. This paper explores the educational and intellectual landscapes of Muslim communities within ASEAN, examining historical developments, current challenges, and future prospects.

Historical Context of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia

Islamic education in Southeast Asia has deep historical roots, dating back to the 13th century with the spread of Islam through trade and Sufi missionaries. Traditional institutions like *pesantren* in Indonesia and *pondok* in Malaysia and Thailand have been instrumental in disseminating Islamic knowledge. These

institutions emphasized religious studies, including Quranic exegesis, Hadith, and jurisprudence, fostering a rich intellectual tradition among Southeast Asian Muslims.¹

Contemporary Islamic Educational Institutions

Indonesia

Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, boasts a vast network of Islamic educational institutions. The *pesantren* system continues to thrive, adapting to modern educational needs by incorporating secular subjects alongside religious studies. Institutions like Ma'had Al-Zaytun represent modern *pesantren* that offer comprehensive curricula, blending Islamic teachings with contemporary sciences.²

Malaysia

Malaysia has made significant strides in integrating Islamic education within its national education system. The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) stands as a premier institution, offering programs that combine Islamic principles with modern academic disciplines. Additionally, the government's support for Islamic education is evident through policies that incorporate Islamic studies into public schooling.³

Brunei

Brunei's commitment to Islamic education is exemplified by the establishment of the Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University (UNISSA). Founded in 2007, UNISSA aims to produce scholars proficient in both Islamic and secular knowledge, aligning with the nation's vision of promoting Islamic values in all aspects of life.⁴

Thailand

In southern Thailand, where Muslims are a minority, Islamic education faces challenges due to political tensions and limited resources. Despite these obstacles, *pondok* schools continue to serve as centers for Islamic learning, preserving religious identity and cultural heritage among the Muslim communities.⁵

Philippines

The Philippines has witnessed efforts to integrate Islamic education into the national framework, particularly in Mindanao. Institutions like Jamiatu Muslim Mindanao play a pivotal role in providing Islamic education, striving to balance religious teachings with the demands of modern education.⁶

Challenges Facing Islamic Education in ASEAN

Curriculum Standardization

A significant challenge across ASEAN countries is the lack of standardized curricula in Islamic education. Variations in teaching methods and content can lead to disparities in educational outcomes, affecting the quality and recognition of Islamic education regionally.⁷

Resource Constraints

Many Islamic educational institutions face resource limitations, including inadequate funding, lack of trained teachers, and insufficient infrastructure. These

constraints hinder the ability to provide quality education and adapt to modern pedagogical approaches.⁸

Political and Social Pressures

In regions where Muslims are minorities, Islamic educational institutions often operate under political and social pressures. Issues such as discrimination, lack of government support, and societal misunderstandings can impede the development and acceptance of Islamic education.⁹

Intellectual Contributions of Southeast Asian Muslims

Southeast Asian Muslims have made significant intellectual contributions, blending Islamic scholarship with local cultures. Historical figures like Hamza Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniri exemplify the region's rich tradition of Islamic thought. Contemporary scholars continue this legacy, engaging in discourses that address modern challenges while rooted in Islamic principles.¹⁰

The Role of Women in Islamic Education

Women have increasingly taken active roles in Islamic education across ASEAN. From teaching positions to leadership roles in educational institutions, Muslim women contribute significantly to the dissemination and development of Islamic knowledge, challenging traditional gender norms and promoting inclusivity.¹¹

Integration of Technology in Islamic Education

The advent of technology has transformed Islamic education in ASEAN. Online platforms, digital resources, and virtual classrooms have expanded access to Islamic knowledge, enabling institutions to reach wider audiences and adapt to contemporary learning preferences.¹²

Recommendations for Enhancing Islamic Education in ASEAN

1. Curriculum Development:

Establish a standardized Islamic education curriculum across ASEAN to ensure consistency and quality. It also means creating a common framework of Islamic studies that all ASEAN countries can use as a guideline. The purpose is to make sure that Muslim students across the region receive education based on the same core principles, learning outcomes, and academic standards, regardless of their country, school system, or local resources.

2. Capacity Building:

Invest in teacher training programs to enhance pedagogical skills and subject matter expertise. It also means allocating resources—such as funding, training opportunities, workshops, and professional courses—to improve the abilities of teachers. This investment helps teachers become better at:

- **Pedagogy (teaching methods):**

Learning how to teach more effectively, engage students, use modern techniques, manage classrooms, and adapt lessons to different learning needs.

- **Subject matter expertise:**

Deepening their knowledge of the subjects they teach whether Islamic studies, language, science, or any other field so they can provide accurate, updated, and high-quality instruction.

When teachers receive continuous training and development, the overall quality of education improves. Students learn better, schools perform stronger, and the education system becomes more consistent and professional.

3. **Infrastructure Improvement:**

Allocate resources for the development of educational facilities and access to learning materials. It also means that governments, institutions, or organizations should provide money, equipment, and support to improve schools and ensure students have what they need to learn effectively.

This includes:

- **Building and upgrading classrooms**, libraries, laboratories, and training centers.
- **Providing essential materials**, such as textbooks, digital tools, computers, and teaching aids.
- **Ensuring equal access** so that students in remote or disadvantaged areas receive the same quality of facilities and learning resources as those in well-developed regions.

By investing in better infrastructure and materials, the education environment becomes more effective, modern, and supportive of student learning.

4. **Policy Support:**

Encourage governments to recognize and support Islamic educational institutions through favorable policies and funding. It also means urging state authorities to formally acknowledge the importance of Islamic schools, colleges, and universities, and to help them grow by creating supportive laws and providing financial assistance.

This support may include:

- **Favorable policies:** accreditation, curriculum approval, legal recognition, easier registration procedures, and quality assurance support.
- **Funding:** grants, scholarships, teacher salaries, building improvements, and provision of learning materials.
- **Institutional inclusion:** giving Islamic institutions a voice in national education planning and allowing them access to government programs.

When governments recognize and assist Islamic educational institutions, it helps ensure better quality, stability, and equal educational opportunities for Muslim communities.

5. **Community Engagement:**

Foster community involvement in educational initiatives to ensure relevance and sustainability. It also means encouraging parents, local leaders, religious scholars,

and community organizations to actively participate in planning, supporting, and improving education programs.

Community involvement helps in several ways:

- **Relevance:** When local people are part of decision-making, the education system reflects their cultural, social, and religious needs.
- **Support:** Communities provide feedback, volunteer help, and sometimes financial or material contributions.
- **Sustainability:** When people feel ownership of educational projects, they are more committed to maintaining them long-term.

In short, involving the community makes educational initiatives more practical, culturally appropriate, and durable.

Conclusion

The Educational and intellectual landscape of Muslims in ASEAN is characterized by a rich heritage, ongoing challenges, and promising developments. By addressing existing obstacles and leveraging opportunities, Islamic education in the region can continue to thrive, contributing to the holistic development of Muslim communities and the broader ASEAN society.

Improving Islamic education in ASEAN requires a comprehensive approach that integrates curriculum development, teacher capacity building, infrastructure enhancement, policy support, and community engagement. Establishing a standardized curriculum ensures consistency and quality across the region, while investing in teacher training strengthens pedagogical skills and subject expertise, leading to more effective learning outcomes. Adequate infrastructure and access to learning materials create a supportive and equitable educational environment, and government recognition and funding provide stability and legitimacy to Islamic educational institutions. Finally, active community involvement ensures that educational initiatives remain relevant, culturally sensitive, and sustainable over time. Together, these strategies can foster a high-quality, inclusive, and resilient Islamic education system across ASEAN, empowering Muslim students to thrive academically, socially, and intellectually.

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