Open Access
AL-MANAR: Jurnal Komunikasi dan Pendidikan Islam
Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2026
https://journal.staimsyk.ac.id/index.php/almanar/index

Education Policy in the Global Era: Challenges for Islamic Religious Education in the Merdeka Curriculum

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ARTICLE INFO
Article history:
Received
May 06, 2026
Revised
May 20, 2026
Accepted
June 02, 2026

Abstract

Through the Merdeka Curriculum, an education policy that places flexibility, innovation, and relevance at the center of our focus on how best to prepare students to respond to 21st-century issues. This policy must address many challenges, such as poor infrastructure, untrained teachers, and resistance to curriculum change. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a library research approach based on previous research findings to explore challenges in Islamic Religious Education. Research findings indicate that the lack of educational facilities, low teacher competency in information technology, and lack of coordination between schools, parents, and the community are major obstacles in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This study uses literature review, so its limitation lies in its dependence on previous research results without more in-depth field data. This study highlights the important role of resource enhancement, continuous professional learning for teachers, and collaborative efforts among various stakeholders to ensure that this policy can be successfully implemented to produce a generation that is religious, competent, and responsive to global developments. This article contributes by examining the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in the context of Islamic Religious Education, and emphasizes the synergy between religious, technological, and global competencies.

Keywords: Policies, Merdeka Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education

Published by STAI Masjid Syuhada Yogyakarta
Website https://journal.staimsyk.ac.id/index.php/almanar/index
ISSN 2615-8879
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INTRODUCTION

In the education system, the curriculum is one of the most important components. It is an aspect that serves as a guideline in planning teaching and learning activities as well as a basis for achieving greater educational goals, namely producing outstanding individuals with character who are able to adapt to the challenges of the times (Ariyanti et al., 2024; Siregar, 2023). The curriculum occupies a strategic position in the Islamic education paradigm, namely in integrating religious values with the demands of today's world, so that Islamic education produces individuals who are not only able to understand religious teachings but also have the competencies needed in a global society (Rahmafitri et al., 2024; Selamet et al., 2023).

To achieve this goal, the Indonesian government has launched the Merdeka Curriculum, a program that gives schools the autonomy to formulate curricula based on student needs. This curriculum focuses on post-pandemic recovery and remediation for large-scale learning loss. The Merdeka Curriculum enables more adaptive, agile, and

relevant learning, which ultimately supports students' literacy, numeracy, and character skills (Ariyanti et al., 2024; Rahmafitri et al., 2024).

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) is one of the subjects considered to be very important in shaping the character of the nation. In this era of globalization and foreign cultural influences, IRE is at the forefront of educating students about morals, faith, and piety. However, the implementation of IRE at various levels of education lacks the affective aspects that are urgently needed to address the moral challenges of 21st-century society (Kurnadi, 2018). Thus, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum IRE is a golden opportunity to fortify the moral and spiritual aspects of local students along with the mastery of 21st-century skills (Khumaini et al., 2022; Selamet et al., 2023).

The Merdeka Curriculum policy will enhance learning experiences through a balance between literacy, numeracy, and character development. This policy is in line with the demands of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 era, which emphasizes critical and innovative thinking skills. Under this policy initiative, students are specifically designed to excel academically, but also in character and skills tailored to meet global challenges (Ariyanti et al., 2024; Rahmafitri et al., 2024).

Islamic religious education is very important in shaping a generation that is faithful, devout, and has noble character. However, globalization poses challenges to the relevance of religious education. The internalization of Islamic values in the Merdeka Curriculum is an opportunity to produce students who are able to adapt to the modern world without losing their Islamic identity (Selamet et al., 2023). Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum is a breath of fresh air for Islamic schools that have not had a holistic learning environment. This also involves capacity building in the areas of attitude, knowledge, and skills. Based on this theoretical foundation, religious education is not merely about memorizing doctrines, but rather building the character of students in a contextual manner based on the needs of global society (Kurnadi, 2018; Selamet et al., 2023).

The Indonesian government is reforming education in an effort to improve its quality by changing the curriculum through the Merdeka Curriculum. In fact, the education crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has made it necessary to update the curriculum if we want to prevent further learning loss. This context creates a golden opportunity for religious education to increase its role in shaping the character of the younger generation (Awwalin & Valentin, 2024; Rahmafitri et al., 2024). Islamic religious education in Indonesia has a history of shaping a society with character. The Islamic education curriculum has undergone several changes over time to respond to the challenges of the times. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, Islamic religious education is expected to contribute more to producing a generation that is globally competitive (Ariyanti et al., 2024; Lestari et al., 2025; Maharani & Iksan, 2024; Selamet et al., 2023).

Strengthening education based on local values but with a global perspective is one of the substantive policies in the Merdeka Curriculum. Islamic religious education is the main means of shaping students' character. Thus, religious values become the main foundation in facing the rapid tide of globalization (Khumaini et al., 2022; Rahmafitri et al., 2024). An Merdeka Curriculum Model with Active, Creative, and Adapted Project-Based Learning. This model provides opportunities for students to participate in learning that is driven by their needs. This method can be implemented in the context of religious education through experience-based understanding and religious projects (Rahmafitri et al., 2024).

In the context of education digitization, the Merdeka Curriculum provides opportunities for the development of technology-based learning media. Technology-based Islamic Religious Education can provide a more engaging and captivating learning experience. Through this project, Islamic values can be conveyed in a more targeted manner to the millennial generation (Khumaini et al., 2022; Rahmafitri et al., 2024). This involves redefining one of the biggest challenges of the Merdeka Curriculum, namely the readiness of teachers as learning facilitators. Islamic Religious Education teachers are

required to be able to create character-oriented and globally competent learning. This curriculum will be successfully implemented through training and mentoring (Rahmafitri et al., 2024).

In accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum mentioned above, strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile is a character development program related to character building. The values contained in this profile are highly relevant to Islamic teachings, namely mutual cooperation, justice, faith, and belief in God. This means that religious education can be a strategic partner in achieving the objectives of the curriculum (Ariyanti et al., 2024; Rahmafitri et al., 2024). Therefore, religious education must serve the increasingly diverse needs of students. When we are in an Merdeka Curriculum school, there is room for teachers to design learning that meets students where they are and explores their interests and potential. In this way, religious education can be more personal or meaningful to each individual (Awwalin & Valentin, 2024; Rahmafitri et al., 2024).

Research by (Irawati et al., 2022) confirms that strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile through differentiated learning is a strategic effort in realizing the nation's character, where curriculum flexibility allows religious education to accommodate the diversity of student needs in a more personal and meaningful way. A study by (Budi et al., 2022) on the workshop of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) and the Merdeka Curriculum assessment shows that the implementation of projects based on the values of mutual cooperation and faith can serve as an effective vehicle for Islamic religious education to develop students' social skills and leadership, in line with the demand to produce a generation that is not only faithful but also beneficial to society. Research by (Ahadiyah et al., 2023) on the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers in shaping the Pancasila Student Profile found that PAI teachers hold a central position as facilitators who are able to bridge Islamic principles (such as justice, tolerance, and humanity) with the dimensions of the student profile, so that religious education can be strategically positioned to build an inclusive and civilized society.

Using the example of Islamic religious education, the Merdeka Curriculum offers quality education that can be implemented in more aspects of this field. In addition to issues related to the spirit, religious teaching can help in shaping students, such as social and leadership skills. This is important to produce a generation that is not only faithful but also useful (Selamet et al., 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum bridges Islamic principles and global principles such as justice, tolerance, and humanity. Thus, religious education can be strategically positioned to build an inclusive society (Khumaini et al., 2022; Rahmafitri et al., 2024).

Therefore, based on the above background, there is a need for a study to answer key questions, namely how Education Policy is implemented in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum for Islamic Religious Education, and what are the main obstacles faced? Thus, this article aims to discuss the challenges of education policy in the Merdeka Curriculum for Islamic Religious Education.

METHOD

This study was conducted using a descriptive qualitative method according to (Sugiyono, 2021) to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (IRE). This study also adopted a library research approach that sought to analyze and assess findings in relevant literature. The data used was collected from various secondary sources such as accredited scientific journals, relevant reports, and research articles. The literature included in this review was filtered based on inclusion criteria, namely research containing explanations about the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education, published in the last five years, and

having high relevance and credibility. The analysis was conducted by following a data reduction process aimed at selecting appropriate information.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Transformation of Islamic Religious Education Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum brings significant changes to Islamic Religious Education (Halim et al., 2023) by promoting in-depth, flexible, and relevant learning (Aulia et al., 2022; Aulia, Rokhimawan, et al., 2025; Rokhimawan et al., 2025). Its implementation emphasizes strengthening students' character in accordance with the Pancasila profile, such as faith, global diversity, and creativity (Nirwana & Khoiri, 2023; Ramah & Rohman, 2023; Santoso et al., 2024). This approach provides space for students to explore Islamic values in the context of everyday life, while honing critical and innovative thinking skills relevant to the challenges of the times (Adiyono et al., 2024; Husna, 2024). Through learning that is more focused on individual needs, students are empowered to develop their potential to the fullest without neglecting the moral and ethical values taught in IRE.

Innovative Approach

The emphasis on curriculum innovation, including the application of technology and interactive learning strategies, aims to address the challenges of modernization and globalization (Khovi et al., 2024; Yu, 2024). With this approach, students are not only encouraged to understand the material in depth but are also given the opportunity to hone their digital and critical thinking skills, which are highly relevant to the needs of the 21st century (Golden, 2023). Technology is used as a tool to create a more engaging and immersive learning experience, enabling students to collaborate effectively, both inside and outside the classroom (Javaid et al., 2024; Petersen et al., 2023). Interactive learning strategies, such as project-based discussions, simulations, and case-based problem solving, provide space for students to explore their potential more broadly and deeply (Amruddin et al., 2023; Sultoni et al., 2024).

This approach also integrates Islamic values (Aulia & Nafiisah, 2023; Munajat et al., 2024) into every learning process, so that technology is not only a tool but also a means to strengthen students' religious character and ethics (Mar, 2024). Teachers act as facilitators who help students connect religious values with the real challenges they face, both in local and global contexts (Waghid, 2024; Yemini et al., 2023). Thus, this curriculum not only addresses academic needs but also builds students with strong character, adaptable to changing times, and able to contribute to global society (Iksal et al., 2024; Rocha et al., 2023) without losing their Islamic identity. This makes curriculum innovation an important element in creating a competent, creative, and moral generation in the era of modernization.

Teacher Readiness

IRE teachers have demonstrated their readiness to implement the Merdeka Curriculum through measures such as adapting teaching materials and applying formative and summative assessments. However, the challenge of improving technological competence remains a focus. Many teachers have successfully designed teaching materials that are relevant to students' needs, integrating Islamic values with 21st-century skills (Rochmat et al., 2023; Sartika & Tanjung, 2024), and providing comprehensive evaluations to measure students' overall understanding. However, there are still obstacles in terms of mastering the technological tools needed to support effective online and offline learning (Santoso et al., 2024; Sudur et al., 2024).

Ongoing training and mentoring for teachers is an urgent need to ensure they are able to make optimal use of technology in lesson planning, implementation, and evaluation (Handiko et al., 2024; Hennessy et al., 2022). In addition, adequate infrastructure support is needed, especially in areas with limited access to technology. By overcoming these challenges, IRE teachers will not only be more confident in implementing the Merdeka

Curriculum but also be able to create a more interactive and meaningful learning experience for students. These steps are expected to strengthen the learning process, which not only instills religious values but also equips students with relevant skills to face global challenges.

The Role of Infrastructure and Resources

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires adequate facilities and resources, including ongoing training for teachers so that they can integrate Islamic values with global challenges (Asna Lutfa et al., 2024; Nazaruddin et al., 2023). Facilities such as computer laboratories, stable internet access, and other supporting devices are important elements to support technology-based learning processes. In addition, intensive training for IRE teachers is needed to improve their understanding of the use of technology in learning, the development of contextual teaching materials, and assessment methods in line with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum (Arofah et al., 2024; Aziz & Aryani, 2024). Without such support, the implementation of the curriculum risks being hampered, especially in areas with limited infrastructure.

This training should also cover the integration of Islamic values with 21st-century competencies, such as critical, creative, and collaborative thinking, so that students not only understand religion as a theory but also as a practical guide in everyday life (Fauzi et al., 2024; Riwanda et al., 2024). Support from the government, the education community, and the wider community is needed to ensure the equitable availability of resources, especially in madrasas and schools facing geographical or economic constraints. With good collaboration and investment in resources, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum can produce a generation that is religious, competitive, and able to face global challenges with confidence and strong integrity.

Strengthening Religious Identity in the Global Era

The Merdeka Curriculum in IRE provides space for strengthening Islamic identity amid the tide of globalization. This approach helps students to uphold Islamic values and develop critical and innovative thinking skills. With a focus on strengthening Islamic-based character, this curriculum not only aims to instill a deep understanding of religion but also equips students with the ability to face modern challenges while remaining grounded in strong spiritual values. Students are encouraged to explore the relevance of Islamic teachings in the context of global life, making religion a practical guide in daily decision-making and problem-solving (Nirwana & Khoiri, 2023; Sultoni et al., 2024).

In addition, the application of interactive and flexible learning methods gives students the freedom to learn according to their own style and pace, without losing the substance of religious values. This curriculum also emphasizes the integration of technology as a tool to support learning, so that students not only understand Islamic teachings but are also able to use them as a basis for adapting to an ever-changing world (Aulia et al., 2022; Aulia, Ichsan, et al., 2025). With the support of assessments based on individual student development, the critical and innovative values developed in this curriculum provide space to hone creativity and strategic thinking, while strengthening their religious identity. This approach ensures that students are not only academically competent but also contribute to building a harmonious and ethical society amid global dynamics.

Implementation Complexity

The implementation of this curriculum faces obstacles such as limited infrastructure in certain schools/madrasas, lack of training for teachers, and resistance to curriculum change. Inadequate infrastructure, such as limited internet access, technological devices, and other learning support facilities, poses a major challenge, especially in remote areas. This hinders the optimal implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which requires intensive use of technology. In addition, the lack of training and mentoring for teachers makes it difficult for them to understand and apply the new approaches introduced in this

curriculum, including project-based teaching methods and formative assessment (Amruddin et al., 2023; R. Saputri & Ningrum, 2024).

Dynamics of Assessment and Evaluation

The assessment approach in the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes formative and summative principles. Teachers play a major role in evaluating competency-based learning. Formative assessment is conducted continuously to provide relevant feedback, helping students improve and enhance their understanding during the learning process. Meanwhile, summative assessment is used to assess students' overall achievement at the end of the learning period (Santoso et al., 2024; Sultoni et al., 2024).

This approach ensures that evaluation focuses not only on cognitive aspects but also includes affective and psychomotor aspects, which are in line with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum to produce students who are religious, competent, and creative. Teachers are required to have the skills to design assessments that are tailored to students' needs and relevant to the learning context (Amelia et al., 2023). With this approach, students are encouraged to be active in the learning process, develop analytical skills, and strengthen their character and Islamic values. This makes assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum a strategic tool to support meaningful and sustainable learning.

Multistakeholder Collaboration

Curriculum implementation requires cooperation between schools, parents, and the community. This is important to ensure that educational goals are achieved amid global challenges. Schools are responsible for providing a conducive learning environment and a relevant curriculum, while parents play an important role in supporting the learning process at home. This collaboration is strengthened by the involvement of the community, which provides moral and material support, such as through tutoring programs or additional facilities for students (Aziz & Aryani, 2024; Sudur et al., 2024).

Effects of National Policy

The Merdeka Curriculum, as part of the national education policy, is expected to enable Indonesia to compete at the international level. This approach supports the development of superior human resources. By giving students the freedom to explore their potential through flexible and relevant learning methods, this curriculum creates individuals who not only have academic excellence but also the critical thinking and innovative skills needed in the era of globalization (Aziz & Aryani, 2024; R. Saputri & Ningrum, 2024).

The Merdeka Curriculum also reinforces local and Islamic values that synergize with universal principles, such as cooperation, tolerance, and diversity, so that students can adapt to the global environment without losing their cultural and moral identity (Malizal, 2025; Mursak et al., 2024). Through the integration of technology in the teaching and learning process, this curriculum allows students to access global information and resources, making them more competitive and ready to face the dynamics of the future world of work. With the full support of the government, teachers, and the community, the Merdeka Curriculum is an important strategy for improving the quality of national education and positioning Indonesia as a country with human resources capable of contributing significantly on the international stage.

Sustainability of Education

The Merdeka Curriculum aims to produce sustainable learning, both in terms of innovation and spiritual values. Teaching materials are continuously developed to remain relevant to the challenges of the times. Teaching materials are designed to integrate 21st-century competencies, such as critical, creative, and collaborative thinking, with moral and spiritual values that are relevant to students' daily lives. This approach ensures that students not only learn to meet academic requirements but also to build a deep understanding of their role in society (Amruddin et al., 2023; Arofah et al., 2024).

In addition, adaptive teaching materials provide teachers with the flexibility to tailor learning to the local context and individual needs of students. With the support of technology, learning materials can be enriched with digital resources, such as educational videos, simulations, and interactive platforms, which make the learning process more engaging and effective. This not only improves the quality of learning but also prepares students to face increasingly complex global dynamics. By continuing to innovate and strengthen spiritual values, the Merdeka Curriculum creates holistic and meaningful learning, producing a generation that is religious, has good character, and is able to compete in an ever-changing world.

The results of the study (S. D. Saputri & Andriyani, 2024) state that the Merdeka Curriculum for Islamic Education at SMA N 1 Bangsri has been implemented well. Outside the classroom, students are required to carry out the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). There are several issues related to the application of the Merdeka Curriculum in IRE subjects, such as teachers not attending training, the difficulty of implementing differentiated learning, and a lack of learning support facilities, such as slow internet speeds. These issues can be resolved through meetings between teachers, condensing the material, and sharing between teachers.

The results of the study (Uluwiyah et al., 2024) also show that IRE and Budi Pekerti teachers at public elementary schools in Siwalan District, Pekalongan Regency, have benefited from the Merdeka Mengajar Platform, including gaining inspiration, references, and a deeper understanding of the essence and application of the Merdeka Curriculum. These teachers feel motivated to continue learning, teaching, and innovating through the environment provided by the Merdeka Mengajar Platform. Thus, this study concludes that teachers have used the Merdeka Mengajar Platform effectively to accelerate the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. In line with the research (Masrifah et al., 2024), the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the problem-solving method in Islamic Religious Education at SMK Negri 9 Garut has been running well. This was revealed directly by the Deputy Principal of SMK Negri 9 Garut, who stated that SMK Negri 9 Garut is one of the leading schools and pilot schools in the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, which is the latest curriculum and also an experimental curriculum. Similarly, in Islamic Education learning, this is evidenced by the existence of a Merdeka curriculum module, such as the material in class X at SMK Negri 9 Garut.

In contrast to the results of the study (Yahya et al., 2024), the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at MTs Minhajut Tholabah Purbalingga still needs to be further improved. The madrasah continues to conduct intensive evaluations to improve shortcomings in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. These evaluations are conducted both internally and externally. Similarly, research (Lutfiyah, 2024) at MTsN 1 South Tangerang found that there were problems in the implementation of Islamic Religious Education, namely that educators did not participate in training and differentiated learning was not maximized. Therefore, efforts were made to overcome these problems by participating in training to increase teacher creativity.

Meanwhile, the same thing also happened at MAN 2 Padangsidimpuan (Marsela et al., 2024) where the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum faced several challenges, such as limited resources and teachers' readiness in designing a flexible curriculum. In line with the research (Haj et al., 2024) in the subject of Fiqh at MAN 1 Jombang, there are challenges ranging from time constraints and confusion among some teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Also, in the research (Ginting & Pohan, 2024) at MTsN 1 Medan and the research (Albab et al., 2023) at MTs Ribatulmuta'alimin Pekalongan, obstacles in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum were found, including limited infrastructure, difficulties in conducting assessments, teachers' workloads, and limited learning time.

In their research (Alfikri et al., 2024), it is stated that the obstacles faced by madrasahs in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum include teachers still experiencing weak learning, inconsistent learning approaches, use of time, and others. The challenges faced by madrasahs in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum are the readiness of teachers (human resources) as the main pillar of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation, the ability of teachers to support digital-based technology facilities, the improvement of communication and collaboration networks between educational units and stakeholders, and the difficulty of implementing the learning evaluation function as an integral part of learning. Learning assessment is an important component that is often overlooked by schools in achieving curriculum objectives.

Challenges in implementing IRE in the Merdeka curriculum. Furthermore, research (Kadi, 2024) shows a number of challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, including a lack of understanding of Learning Outcomes (CP) and Learning Objective Flow (ATP), limited access to and use of technology, and difficulties in implementing effective learning differentiation. Research (Soleha & Mujahid, 2024) mentions that resource limitations can cover several aspects, such as textbooks that are in line with the Merdeka Curriculum, learning technology devices, and innovative teaching materials. Teachers who do not have adequate access to these resources, either due to budget constraints in their schools or a lack of support from relevant parties, are hindered in their ability to provide rich and varied learning experiences in line with the philosophy of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Similarly, (Nasution, 2023) mentions that the challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Education subjects are 1) teacher readiness (human resources) as the main pillar of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation; (2) teachers' ability to support digital-based technology facilities; (3) improving communication and collaboration networks between educational units and stakeholders; and (4) difficulties in implementing learning evaluation functions as an integral part of learning. Learning assessment is an important component that schools often overlook in achieving curriculum objectives.

CONCLUSION

The policy of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum for Islamic Religious Education (IRE) is a strategic step in responding to global challenges and increasing the relevance of national education. Through a flexible and innovative learning system, this curriculum seeks to strengthen Islamic values that are in synergy with the Pancasila profile: faith, global diversity, creativity, and independence. However, there are still several significant obstacles to its implementation, including limited infrastructure, lack of professional training for teachers, and resistance to change. In overcoming these challenges, this adaptation requires support from all relevant parties, such as the government, the school environment, parents, and the surrounding community, by providing adequate educational facilities, competent teaching staff, and facilitating the adjustment to this new curriculum. Therefore, I hope that the Merdeka Curriculum will help foster a generation of religious and competent 20th-century graduates who are ready to face the 21st century, and that these challenges will be overcome through strong cooperation and sustainable partnerships. This study emphasizes the need to review and improve education policies so that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum runs smoothly and achieves its expected goals.

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