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Transformational Leadership Style of Kiai Hasan Abdullah Sahal at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor

Ana Dwi Marlia^{*1}, Hanifah Azzahra², Alvina Lydia Jati³, Arjuw Fayyazah⁴, Hanif Indra Kusuma⁵

¹⁻⁵ Universitas Darussalam Gontor

*e-mail corresponding: anadwimarlia88@gmail.com

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Abstract

This research presents the transformational leadership of Kyai Hasan Abdullah Sahal in managing the modern Islamic boarding school darussalam gontor, ensuring gontor remains active in educating and teaching the students. In the face of rapid global developments, gontor has managed to balance Islamic education with the advancement of the times. In carrying out his duties as a Kyai at the darussalam gontor boarding school, Kyai Hasan Abdullah Sahal applies transformational leadership in educating his students. The study of Kyai Hasan Abdullah Sahal's leadership is particularly interesting due to his transformational leadership style, inspirational motivation, and spiritual values in educating his students, shaping them into faithful and pious individuals, possessing noble character, resilient and steadfast in personality, and committed to upholding Islam and its glory. As a result, both the students and alumni of the darussalam gontor boarding school contribute positively to both national and international spheres, providing benefits from their knowledge in both ordinary society and government. This research employs a qualitative approach of library research. The findings indicate that Kyai Hasan, in leading the modern darussalam gontor boarding school, embodies values that align well with the advancement of civilization, characterized by transformational leadership, inspirational motivation, spiritual values, and exemplary inspiration. The outcome of all the values imparted by Kyai Hasan Abdullah Sahal is that the students are able to apply Islamic values in facing the challenges of the times

Key Word:

Transformational Leadership

Kyai Hasan Abdullah Sahal ,

Pesantren Gontor

INTRODUCTION

A leader is an individual who possesses the capacity to achieve collectively determined goals, a function that is integral to educational management. Leadership styles can be classified into several types, one of which is transformational leadership — a style that encourages followers to generate significant impact on collective progress (Bashori, 2019).

In maintaining its stability, a pesantren requires a Kiai who embodies a transformational leadership model to sustain institutional advancement. The pesantren itself is an authentically Indonesian religious institution that upholds a diverse range of noble traditions and values (Usman, 2023). Pondok Pesantren Gontor is a boarding educational institution led by a Kiai, assisted by a body of teachers (*asatidz*) who bear collective responsibility for the education of students (*santri*) (Bakar & Mardiyah, 2020). In addition to its teaching facilities, the institution provides dormitories as residential spaces where students interact daily with the Kiai, teachers, and other pesantren administrators (Khusnul et al., 2023).

Building a civilization grounded in Islamic values requires a capable leader who is willing to act and mobilize others, to struggle and advocate for Islamic teachings, and to bring progressive change to the Muslim community (Falah, 2019). The leadership of modern Islamic boarding schools, including Gontor, adopts a transformational leadership style. Several indicators are used to assess this leadership prototype, including: the commitment to managing communal interests while remaining open to criticism and constructive input; the effort to create a collegial environment that prioritizes effective cooperation; the application of dynamic creativity to encourage teachers to take initiative; and the continuous pursuit of knowledge to become a leader who is well-informed, firm, and wise. This leadership model is considered the most appropriate for implementation, grounded as it is in the leadership principles of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor has stood for one hundred years in the Hijri calendar, having been founded in 1926 by Kiai Haji Imam Zarkasyi, Kiai Haji Zainuddin Fanani, and Kiai Haji Ahmad Sahal — the three founding figures collectively known as the *Trimurti* of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor. The institution stands as a national educational establishment that leads the transformation of knowledge through numerous branches across Indonesia.

Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor has played a significant role in the development of Islamic education in Indonesia, both within and beyond the pesantren context, through the establishment of educational institutions such as the Gontor Pesantren Division and affiliated pesantren in the surrounding areas. These branch institutions have expanded rapidly and are now present across several islands in Indonesia, including Java, Sumatra, and Sulawesi (Khusnul et al., 2023).

Pondok Pesantren Gontor maintains a deep commitment to upholding the value system espoused by its founders. In one of his addresses, Kiai Haji Hasan Abdullah Sahal stated: *"The pondok has a uniqueness that is preserved because there are specificities that*

cannot be found outside the pondok” — meaning that as long as the pesantren continues to stand, the values instilled by the founders remain actively present within it.

In leading Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, Kiai Hasan Abdullah Sahal integrates within himself a transformational leadership approach focused on spiritual leadership. Consequently, his stewardship of the students extends beyond academic instruction to encompass the cultivation of spiritual values, with the expectation that Gontor graduates will consistently apply the Islamic values instilled during their education to every dimension of their daily lives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Biography and Leadership Background of Kiai Hasan Abdullah Sahal

Kiai Hasan Abdullah Sahal was born in Gontor Village, Ponorogo, on 24 May 1947, within the environment of Pondok Pesantren Gontor, which had been founded by his father, Kiai Haji Ahmad Sahal, together with Kiai Haji Imam Zarkasyi and Kiai Haji Zainuddin Fanani — the three figures collectively known as the *Trimurti* of Gontor (Bianca et al., 2022). Documentation indicates that Kiai Hasan completed his foundational education at Gontor in 1959 and was accepted into the Kulliyatul Muallimin al-Islamiyyah of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, graduating in 1965.

His academic journey continued at the Faculty of Ushuluddin of the Institut Pendidikan Darussalam — now Universitas Darussalam Gontor — after which he pursued further studies at the Faculty of Da'wah and Ushuluddin at the Islamic University of Madinah, Saudi Arabia in 1967, and subsequently obtained a master's degree in Hadith from Al-Azhar University, Egypt in 1992 (Bianca et al., 2022). Analysis of his biographical record indicates that this international educational background contributed significantly to the formation of his transformational leadership vision.

Kiai Hasan's leadership career formally commenced when he assumed the position of leader of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor in 1985. He subsequently founded and led Pondok Pesantren Putri Al-Mawaddah in Coper, Jetis, Ponorogo in 1989, and Pondok Pesantren Tahfidz Quran Al-Muqoddasah in Nglumpang, Mlarak, Ponorogo in 1992.

Transformational Leadership Values of Kiai Hasan Abdullah Sahal

The leadership of Kiai Hasan Abdullah Sahal reflects four principal dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Mukri & Tamam, 2021). Documentation indicates that Kiai Hasan held a firm conviction that the values of an Islamic institution must be created and enacted by all members of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, so

that every student would feel a sense of ownership and commitment to applying those values in daily life (Dacholfany, 2015).

This study finds that within his transformational leadership, Kiai Hasan applied the capacity to identify problems, seek solutions, and take the necessary actions to resolve them in a systematic and strategic manner (Mukri & Tamam, 2021). This approach is consistent with the principles of transformational leadership, which emphasize positive change through idealized influence and inspirational motivation.

The literature further identifies that Kiai Hasan's educational philosophy centers on the aspiration that students not only understand what they have learned, but also practice it and convey it to others (*dakwah*) (Handayani, 2018). Documentary analysis reveals that this principle draws inspiration from the Qur'an, Surah Al-Anfal verse 60, which emphasizes the preparation of maximum strength in the face of challenges. Documentation further indicates that Kiai Hasan did not educate his students to pursue any particular profession — whether entrepreneur, civil servant, or official — but rather to become true individuals possessing knowledge, practicing it, and disseminating it to society, regardless of the professional path they would eventually take (Handayani, 2018). This holistic approach reflects the individualized consideration dimension of transformational leadership, which attends to the comprehensive development of each individual.

Student Leadership System and the Cultivation of Independence

Documentation indicates that at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, the Kiai holds full leadership authority, meaning that the institution's progress or failure is largely dependent upon the quality of the Kiai's leadership capacity (Mukri & Tamam, 2021). The literature identifies that one of Kiai Hasan's most significant contributions is the implementation of a student leadership system that has had a broad impact on the formation of leadership character among students (Ghifari, 2022). This system enables students to learn leadership practically through various organizational structures within the institution, wherein the Kiai educates his students to become individuals who are both ready to lead and ready to be led (Ghifari, 2022). Documentary analysis indicates that the student leadership system encompasses multiple levels, including residential supervision (*ri'ayah*), the Organisasi Pelajar Pondok Modern (OPPM), various extracurricular committee chairpersons, and event committees such as the Basic Scout Course (*Kursus Pramuka Dasar*), the Stage of Joy (*Seni Panggung Gembira*), and Arena Drama (*Drama Arena*) (Ghifari, 2022).

As an inspirational figure, Kiai Hasan sought to cultivate a spirit of leadership and independence in his students through the boarding system, which requires students to

manage all aspects of their daily lives autonomously (Perawironegoro et al., 2023; Fahmi, 2016). Documentation indicates that this system has proven highly effective in transforming student behavior: students who previously depended on their parents must now learn to wash their own clothes, manage their time, and attend to their personal needs independently. Analysis further shows that under the guidance and supervision of the Kiai and residential advisors, students are educated to live independently through active participation in various activities including sports clubs, scouting, and a range of organizations and committees (Alamin, 2020). This system of independence formation reflects the individualized consideration dimension of transformational leadership, which attends to the development of each student's individual potential.

Development of International Networks and Cooperation

Throughout his career, Kiai Hasan endeavored to establish cooperative relationships with both domestic and international educational institutions as a strategy for enhancing the quality of education at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (Amalia, 2019). The literature identifies that Gontor has pursued international cooperation with countries from both the East and the West, including Middle Eastern nations such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Morocco, Qatar, Jordan, and Kuwait; Western nations such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Turkey, France, and Germany; and Asian nations including Pakistan, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, and Australia (Amalia, 2019). Documentary analysis indicates that this international collaboration has yielded substantial benefits for Gontor, not only in terms of educational quality enhancement but also as a form of pesantren diplomacy with foreign nations in pursuit of shared interests.

Further documentation notes that this cooperative network has been utilized to the fullest extent to advance and expand Gontor's influence, including through the international recognition of the Kulliyatul Muallimin al-Islamiyyah diploma by various international educational institutions (Bakar, 2024). Documentation indicates that this international recognition has opened pathways for Gontor alumni to pursue further education at leading international universities, participate in international seminars, and receive study scholarships in other countries.

Modernization Strategy and Educational Innovation

This study identifies at least three primary strategies employed by Kiai Hasan Abdullah Sahal in sustaining the existence and advancement of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor: Arabic-medium instruction, institutional modernization, and a

cadre formation system (*kaderisasi*). Documentation indicates that in Arabic language teaching, Kiai Hasan emphasized the importance of maximizing practice without reliance on translation, focusing instead on the development of written and oral competencies (Assiroji, 2018). The literature records one of Kiai Hasan's well-known maxims: "*al-Kalimah waahidah fi alfi jumlah khairun min alfi kalimah fi jumlatin waahidah*" — meaning it is better to understand one word and be able to construct it into a thousand sentences than to know a thousand words yet only combine them into a single sentence (Muhammad Heriyudanta, 2022). This approach prioritizes practice over theory, consistent with the principles of modern and effective language teaching.

The modernization of Pondok Gontor represents a major advancement in Islamic education in Indonesia, encompassing not only the adoption of a more progressive curriculum but also the cultivation of an open disposition toward scientific ideas and scholarly output, as well as engagement with developments in technology and knowledge (Dahri, 2018). The literature indicates that Gontor's modernization, in its social dimension, has contributed to improving the quality of human resources through systematically designed education with a focus on character formation grounded in the Qur'an and Sunnah. Gontor's modernization stands as an example of how tradition can be integrated with modernity to enhance educational quality and prepare students to meet the challenges of the age. This strategy reflects the intellectual stimulation dimension of transformational leadership, which encourages paradigm shift and adaptation to contemporary developments.

The continued success of Pesantren Gontor depends substantially on the effectiveness of its cadre formation process, which has enabled the institution to continue developing to the present day (Bakri, 2016). Documentation indicates that Kiai Hasan's educational concept — which integrates religious and general subjects through a teaching approach built upon extensive experience and wide literary reading — has produced the right cadres to carry forward his mission (Mustafidah et al., 2023).

Discussion

Transformational Leadership in the Pesantren Context

The findings of this study indicate that the leadership of Kiai Hasan Abdullah Sahal reflects the four dimensions of transformational leadership advanced by Bass and Avolio. The literature demonstrates that transformational leadership in the pesantren context does not focus solely on managerial aspects, but also emphasizes the transformation of students' values and character (Arifin & Suharto, 2021). Previous research identifies that transformational leaders in pesantren are capable of redirecting students' orientation from self-interest toward collective interest (Hidayat et al., 2022).

This is consistent with the finding that Kiai Hasan educated his students not merely to understand knowledge, but to practice it and convey it to the broader community.

Recent studies indicate that transformational leadership in Islamic educational institutions must integrate spiritual integrity, ethical governance, and future-oriented competencies (Syamsuri & Ishaq, 2024). This is clearly evident in Kiai Hasan's leadership practice, which combines religious and general education within a modern approach. Research demonstrates that the integration of Islamic values with twenty-first century skills constitutes the key to effective transformational leadership in the digital era (Rahman & Ahmad, 2024). This approach distinguishes pesantren leadership from conventional leadership models that emphasize only technical aspects without a spiritual foundation.

The Charismatic and Spiritual Dimensions of Kiai Leadership

This study finds that the leadership of Kiai Hasan possesses strong charismatic characteristics. The literature identifies that charismatic leaders hold a compelling vision, communicate that vision effectively, are willing to assume personal risk, and exhibit extraordinary and unconventional behavior (Fauzi, 2020). These characteristics are evident in Kiai Hasan's bold development of three distinct pesantren, each with a unique focus. Research indicates that the charismatic leadership of a kiai plays a strategic role in mobilizing and motivating students to strengthen their faith and practice religious teachings more meaningfully (Mustofa, 2022).

The spiritual dimension constitutes the primary distinguishing feature of leadership in the pesantren. Studies show that spirituality-based leadership complements conventional leadership styles with the values of Islamic teaching, including *tauhid*, *amanah*, and *ilmu* (Fahrurrozi, 2022). Leaders in Islamic education must embody spiritual leadership wherein both the leader and members perform their work from sincere conscience, strive to present their best effort, and remain accountable for the trust (*amanah*) they carry (Suharto & Mahmud, 2023). This spiritual approach generates a depth of commitment that surpasses what managerial approaches alone can achieve.

Exemplary Conduct as an Instrument of Effective Leadership

The findings of this study affirm that exemplary conduct (*keteladanan*) constitutes the primary instrument of Kiai Hasan's leadership. Research identifies that exemplary conduct is an action that is admired and praiseworthy precisely because it aligns with the values of truth and goodness (Nurdin, 2019). Studies demonstrate that the principle of exemplary conduct draws its foundation from the leadership of the Prophet

Muhammad ﷺ as the ultimate model for Muslims (Samsul & Fahmi, 2020). In the pesantren context, exemplary conduct encompasses not only the manner of speaking and dressing, but also the manner in which the leader fulfills his duties and responsibilities (Abdullah, 2021).

The Islamic leadership principles of honesty, trustworthiness, justice, deliberation (*musyawarah*), and exemplary conduct carry a direct impact on the effectiveness and legitimacy of leadership (Hakim & Rosyid, 2023). This is evident in Kiai Hasan's international educational experience, which he subsequently applied to advance Gontor. The concept of leadership developed upon the four obligatory qualities of the Prophet — *shiddiq*, *amanah*, *fathanah*, and *tabligh* — can serve as a foundation for Islamic education leaders in effecting significant change (Ridwan, 2018). Kiai Hasan's exemplary conduct in pursuing higher education abroad provided ongoing inspiration for students to develop a global perspective.

The Student Leadership System as a Leadership Laboratory

The student leadership system at Gontor demonstrates an innovative approach to leadership character formation. Research identifies that religion-based character education constitutes the primary foundation for student character formation through the integration of religious education with the cultivation of moral character traits such as honesty, patience, and leadership. The diverse student organizational structures provide students with practical opportunities to learn both leading and being led. Studies indicate that the boarding system enables intensive interaction among students, teachers, and the kiai across twenty-four hours, allowing moral and ethical values to be thoroughly internalized (Wardi & Sholihin, 2021).

The findings of this study demonstrate that the pesantren's strategies for developing student character encompass learning proper conduct (*adab*), studying classical texts, and cultivating praiseworthy character traits (*akhlaq mahmudah*) (Mahmud & Khoiri, 2022). This holistic approach is consistent with the finding that Gontor does not educate students for any particular profession, but rather to become true individuals prepared to contribute across diverse fields. Gontor teaches that the integration of tradition and modernization in character education must be pursued carefully so as not to sacrifice the foundational values already established (Rosyada, 2020). The student leadership system at Gontor has succeeded in maintaining this balance by adhering to the *Panca Jiwa Pondok* as the foundation of all institutional activities.

International Network Development Strategy

The findings regarding Gontor's international cooperation demonstrate a visionary strategy in institutional development. It can thus be understood that pesantren, which previously maintained strong networks within the regional sphere, have now extended their networks to the international stage (Zamroni, 2020). The continued existence of pesantren in the face of modernization and globalization proves that pessimism regarding the future of pesantren in the modern era has not been borne out (Huda, 2019). Research indicates that a number of modern pesantren, through the higher education institutions they have established, have already developed cooperative relationships with universities both domestically and internationally (Barizi & Munir, 2021).

Studies demonstrate that global networks and partnerships encompass cooperation with universities and educational institutions across the Middle East, Europe, Australia, and the Americas, as well as the development of academic programs incorporating credit transfer systems and global competency certification (Malik, 2024). This is consistent with the finding that the Gontor diploma is recognized by numerous international educational institutions. Cooperation extends beyond the academic sphere to include joint research and publication (Qomar, 2018). This strategy reflects the intellectual stimulation dimension of transformational leadership, which encourages openness to knowledge and global perspectives.

Pesantren Modernization: Preserving Tradition within a Contemporary Framework

The findings regarding Gontor's modernization demonstrate a successful integration of tradition and modernity. The modernization of Islamic education plays an important role in improving educational quality through the use of technology, a more relevant curriculum, and effective management (Sholeh, 2023). Research indicates that nearly all pesantren have experienced a shift in their emphasis on classical textual materials as a result of modernism (Nasir, 2019). Gontor, however, has succeeded in maintaining a balance by continuing to teach the classical *kitab kuning* while integrating general subjects and international languages.

Studies show that modernization in educational curricula is also reflected in the emergence of a large number of pesantren-affiliated higher education institutions (Arifin, 2020). This is consistent with the finding that Gontor established Universitas Darussalam Gontor as a continuation of its established educational system. Pesantren modernization must continue to attend to traditional values such as discipline, responsibility, and honesty as an integral dimension of character education (Fatoni,

2021). Gontor's success in pursuing modernization without abandoning its traditional values has established it as a model for other pesantren across Indonesia.

The Cadre Formation System as a Guarantee of Institutional Continuity

The findings regarding Gontor's cadre formation system (*kaderisasi*) underscore the importance of planned leadership regeneration. The transformation of pesantren leadership faces challenges in preparing the next generation of leaders who are capable of preserving traditional values while adopting modern innovations (Subhan, 2024). Gontor's cadre formation system — which begins from the moment a student enters the institution through the gradual assignment of leadership responsibilities — produces cadres who are prepared to lead. Research demonstrates that transformational leadership must incorporate individualized attention to the development of each organizational member's potential (Fauzan & Hidayat, 2021).

Studies indicate that an effective cadre formation process requires long-term commitment and a structured system (Maarif, 2019). This is evidenced by Gontor's success in producing alumni who have spread across diverse fields and established new pesantren modeled on the same principles. The literature emphasizes that cadre formation is not merely the transfer of knowledge, but also the cultivation of values, character, and commitment to the struggle for Islamic education (Ismail & Sofyan, 2022). Gontor's cadre formation system — which integrates formal education, non-formal education, and direct leadership practice — creates a comprehensive learning ecosystem.

The leadership model of Kiai Hasan has exerted a significant influence on the development of pesantren across Indonesia. The charismatic leadership of the kiai plays a strategic role in developing the organizational culture of the pesantren (Anwar, 2020). The large number of pesantren that have adopted Gontor's educational system reflects widespread recognition of the effectiveness of this model. Research demonstrates that transformational leadership grounded in Islamic values is capable of enhancing organizational effectiveness, educator satisfaction, and innovation in educational policy (Lubis & Syafri, 2023).

As the leader of Gontor, Kiai Hasan demonstrates that innovative transformation in the pesantren encompasses the development of a shared vision, the empowerment of members, and the creation of a culture of innovation (Warits, 2024). This is consistent with Kiai Hasan's practice of involving multiple stakeholders in Gontor's development. The literature emphasizes that transformational leadership in the era of globalization and social change plays a crucial role in enhancing institutional performance (Nurhasanah & Salim, 2024). Gontor's success in becoming an international model for

modern Islamic education proves the effectiveness of Islamic values-based transformational leadership within the pesantren context.

CONCLUSION

In leading Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, Kiai Hasan Abdullah Sahal has brought about numerous positive transformations — for his students, alumni, and the surrounding community alike. This is attributable to the leadership spirit within Kiai Hasan Abdullah Sahal, which has proven capable of influencing and mobilizing the inner lives of his students, awakening their enthusiasm to continuously advance in goodness. It is therefore unsurprising that many students and alumni take Kiai Hasan Abdullah Sahal as a model figure in their daily lives.

In educating his students, Kiai Hasan consistently instills a spiritual dimension within them, so that upon completing their education at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, students continue to apply the teachings and principles they were guided by during their time at Gontor. This is evidenced by the large number of Gontor alumni who have made meaningful contributions across diverse fields — entirely in accordance with the aspiration of Kiai Hasan Abdullah Sahal to develop Pondok Gontor into a distinguished educational institution that produces graduates of noble character and broad perspective, possessing a forward-looking vision and a constant commitment to being of benefit to others.

Kiai Hasan Abdullah Sahal demonstrates integrity, harmony, and a high degree of dedication, such that Pondok Gontor has undergone substantial change and renewal under his leadership. He has also endeavored to pursue institutional development by applying a flexible and inclusive leadership approach in his capacity as both caregiver (*pengasuh*) and institutional leader. He does not act solely as an educator, but also as a supporter, leader, evaluator, and direct participant in all aspects of life within the pesantren.

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