

Reclaiming the Faith: Islamic Education Reform in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan and Post-New Order Indonesia

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Abstract

This article explores how two post-authoritarian Muslim societies, Uzbekistan and Indonesia, have sought to reclaim Islamic education as part of national reconstruction after decades of political control. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) and Indonesia's New Order regime (1998), both countries faced the challenge of rebuilding faith within radically different legacies: seventy years of Soviet atheism versus thirty-two years of bureaucratic depoliticization. Through a comparative historical analysis of policy documents, institutional reforms, and scholarly literature, the study examines how each state and society redefined Islamic education's role in shaping modern Muslim identity. Findings reveal two divergent paradigms of *reclamation*. Uzbekistan represents a state-managed revival, where the government reintroduces Islam under strict supervision, framing it as a moral resource for nationalism and stability. Religious academies such as the Imam Bukhari Center and Tashkent Islamic Academy symbolize revival with restraint, faith reborn but domesticated. Indonesia, by contrast, embodies a societal-driven integration, characterized by plural, decentralized, and intellectually open reform. Civil society organizations, scholars, and universities (UINs) lead efforts to integrate religious and secular knowledge, producing a vibrant but uneven ecosystem of Islamic education. The comparison suggests that reclaiming faith after authoritarianism is not a simple restoration but a negotiated reconstruction shaped by memory and power. Uzbekistan struggles to move from control to confidence, while Indonesia must evolve from expansion to coherence. Both, however, reveal that faith reclaimed is faith still in motion, learning anew how to think, to teach, and to belong in the modern world.

Keyword: Reclaiming the Faith, Islamic Education Reform, Post-Soviet Uzbekistan, Post-New Order Indonesia

Introduction

History rarely offers clean pages to write on; it gives us palimpsests, layers of memory and policy, faith and fear, scribbled one over another. In the landscapes of Uzbekistan and Indonesia, two dates stand out as turning points that changed the ink: 1991 and 1998. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, taking with it an avowedly atheistic state that had spent seven decades disciplining religion into silence, or at least into the safety of private whispers. In 1998, Indonesia's New Order fell, ending thirty-two years of a different kind of control, one that depoliticized Islam, bureaucratized piety, and kept religious authority close enough to manage but far enough to defang. Both collapses

loosened the grip on Islamic life, yet the air that rushed in was not the same. One society faced a vacuum where institutions had been dismantled; the other found a noisy public square suddenly open to competing visions of what Islam could be.

For Uzbekistan, 1991 felt like a rediscovery. Mosques reopened, Qur'ans reappeared, and words once spoken in code, *ilm*, *iman*, *ummah*, returned to the vernacular of ordinary life (Urinboyev, 2025). But the euphoria was complicated. The educational infrastructure of Islam, madrasas, scholarly guilds, even the memory of pedagogy, had been fractured by state atheism (Anceschi, 2024). Rebuilding required more than zeal; it required curriculum, teachers, libraries, and a careful negotiation with a new state that feared religious enthusiasm might morph into political dissent. The post-Soviet promise of freedom quickly met post-Soviet insecurity (Ubaydullaeva, 2024).

Indonesia's 1998 turning point felt different. Islam had never vanished from the public, but it had been domesticated. Under Suharto, faith was encouraged as morality and charity, discouraged as politics and critique. When Reformasi arrived, it uncapped long-suppressed energies: student movements, civil society organizations, new Islamic schools, and a richer public theology. The challenge was not reanimation but reorientation, how to channel the plural, sometimes cacophonous, expressions of Muslim aspiration into institutions that could both democratize and deepen Islamic education. Where Uzbekistan needed to plant, Indonesia needed to prune and graft.

Out of these divergent openings emerges our central proposition: both countries embarked on projects to reclaim the faith through education, but they started from radically different coordinates. One from scarcity, the other from restraint; one seeking to rebuild, the other to reorganize. The distance between 1991 Tashkent and 1998 Jakarta is not merely geographic, it is epistemic. And that distance, we argue, continues to shape the forms, ambitions, and limits of Islamic education reform today.

To compare these reforms meaningfully, we need a frame wide enough to hold paradox. By "reclaiming the faith," we do not mean a romantic return to a lost golden age. We mean a political and educational process in which actors, states, muftiates, ministries, universities, civil society, attempt to restore, redefine, and sometimes rebrand Islamic learning for a new era (Urinboyev, 2023). Reclamation, in this sense, is never neutral. It is a struggle over who speaks for Islam, what counts as knowledge, and how authority is distributed between tradition and the modern state.

In Uzbekistan, reclamation begins after an extended erasure. Seventy years of Soviet atheism did not simply suppress religious institutions; it rewired social expectations about religion's place (Collins, 2023). When the Soviet edifice fell, the early 1990s brought a burst of religious rebuilding, mosques, local study circles, nascent madrasas, only to be followed by a tightening of control as the state sought to channel Islam into a domesticated, *traditional* form (Tregubova et al., 2023). The result is a reclamation led from above: carefully curated, Hanafi in jurisprudential coloring, nationally framed, and securitized against transnational currents deemed threatening. The state sponsors scholarship centers and academies, yes, but it also patrols curriculum and licensing. Reclamation here means revival with guardrails (Yémelianova, 2020).

In Indonesia, reclamation proceeds from within a living tradition that had been depoliticized rather than erased. The New Order had encouraged ritual piety while keeping theological debate and institutional autonomy on a short leash. After 1998, those leashes slackened. Civil society, *Nahdlatul Ulama*, *Muhammadiyah*, and a constellation of independent schools and pesantren, stepped forward as co-authors of reform. Ministries still mattered, of course; the state facilitated, accredited, and sometimes nudged. But the intellectual engine was plural and public. Reclamation here means integration and

diversification: the transformation of IAINs into UINs, the mainstreaming of “integration of knowledge,” the rise of modern bilingual pesantren, and an academic culture willing to test new syntheses of revelation and reason.

We should admit that “reclaiming” carries its own risks. In Tashkent, reclamation can harden into curation, with the state deciding which strands of Islam are safe enough to teach. In Jakarta, reclamation can diffuse into fragmentation, with quality uneven and authority contested. Yet both projects reveal a common intuition: that Islamic education, to be more than nostalgia, must become a living architecture, capable of sheltering faith in the public sphere without surrendering it to either ideology or market logic.

Thus our comparative frame: reclamation as a spectrum. On one end, a state-managed revival that rebuilds institutions while narrowing their epistemic bandwidth. On the other, a societal-driven integration that expands bandwidth while testing the capacity of institutions to hold coherence. Between them lies the shared question that will guide the rest of this article: how do different pasts, Soviet atheism and New Order depoliticization, continue to script what is thinkable, teachable, and possible in the future of Islamic education?

Every research project begins with a question, but here the questions multiply as we move between two post-authoritarian worlds that share so little on the surface yet wrestle with a similar anxiety, how to educate believers after decades of control (Troitskiy & Yun, 2021). The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the fall of Suharto’s New Order in 1998 opened spaces that were at once liberating and uncertain (Pritchins, 2021). The madrasas, institutes, and academies that emerged from these political tremors inherited not a blank page, but the heavy sediment of what came before (Laruelle, 2017).

Thus, the first guiding question asks: How did the distinct pre-transition legacies of Soviet atheism and New Order control shape the initial conditions for Islamic education reform in Uzbekistan and Indonesia? In Uzbekistan, seventy years of militant secularism left behind a vacuum, a generation unfamiliar with the grammar of faith, with few trained scholars, and with state institutions still suspicious of religious authority. Reform had to begin from scratch, in a society where Islam was remembered more as culture than as knowledge. Indonesia, conversely, began not from absence but from excess regulation. After thirty-two years of the New Order’s bureaucratic depoliticization, Islamic education was intact but cautious, disciplined to fit state ideology (*Pancasila*) and wary of overt political theology. These differing inheritances, erasure versus domestication, shaped everything that followed. Uzbekistan’s reform was a project of reconstruction under watch; Indonesia’s, of liberation within limits.

The second question turns from conditions to agency: Who were the primary drivers of reform, the state, civil society, or international actors, and what were their objectives? In Uzbekistan, the state re-entered religious life not as a neutral referee but as an architect. The presidential administration and the *Muftiate* assumed near-total control, sanctioning “traditional Islam” (Hanafi-Maturidi) as both moral foundation and political buffer. The aim was not only religious revival but national consolidation, Islam domesticated as cultural heritage, useful in identity-building but safe from dissent. In Indonesia, reform was far more plural and centrifugal. The state remained important, particularly through the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA), but it shared the stage with mass Muslim organizations (*Nahdlatul Ulama*, *Muhammadiyah*), intellectuals, philanthropies, and transnational partners. Their objectives ranged from curricular modernization to moral renewal, from integrating science into Islamic universities to building an education that could thrive in a democratic marketplace of ideas.

The third question seeks to map the outcomes and their enduring tensions: What have been the dominant models, major achievements, and persistent challenges of Islamic

education reform in both countries since their political transitions? Uzbekistan's model might be called state-managed revival, cautious expansion tightly bounded by state oversight. Achievements include the reopening of Islamic academies, the establishment of prestigious institutions like the Imam Bukhari International Research Center, and the partial reintegration of Islamic education into public life. Yet challenges remain profound: limited academic freedom, lingering fear of extremism, and an educational system that still privileges control over creativity.

Indonesia, by contrast, embodies a societal-driven integration. Its major achievements include the transformation of State Islamic Institutes (*IAIN*) into full-fledged universities (*UIN*), the mainstreaming of the "integration of knowledge" paradigm, and the rise of diverse, modern pesantren responsive to global academic standards. Its challenges are the mirror image of its successes: maintaining coherence across a decentralized system, resisting waves of populist conservatism, and ensuring that integration is not merely structural but epistemological, that faith and science meet in dialogue, not in polite separation. Together, these three questions anchor the comparative inquiry that follows. They remind us that Islamic education reform is never a purely theological endeavor. It is a political, cultural, and intellectual negotiation, a process of reclaiming faith not in a vacuum, but in the long shadow of the systems that once sought to control it.

Theoretical Framework

To speak of "reclaiming the faith" in post-authoritarian societies is to speak of a project both moral and political. It is not simply about rebuilding mosques or rewriting curricula; it is about renegotiating power, meaning, and memory in the aftermath of control. Faith, long disciplined or erased by the state, must find its voice again in public life, and education becomes its most important language. This section lays out the conceptual scaffolding for that process, proposing that reclamation unfolds along three intertwined axes: religious revival, historical legacies, and the balance between state and society in steering reform.

1. Religious Revival in Post-Authoritarian Contexts

Authoritarian regimes often silence religion not by eradicating it but by domesticating it. When those regimes collapse, religion returns not merely as belief, but as a form of social energy, sometimes creative, sometimes chaotic. The post-authoritarian moment is therefore both liberating and dangerous: liberation from state control also unleashes the contest to define what faith means in the public sphere.

Drawing on theories of religious marketization (Stark and Finke, 2000) and post-authoritarian pluralism (Casanova, 1994), we can understand religious revival as a re-entry of suppressed moral capital into a newly competitive space. In Uzbekistan, this competition is muted, the state reintroduces religion in controlled doses, shaping a "monopoly" on legitimate Islam through the Muftiate and state-sponsored institutions. In Indonesia, by contrast, democratization opens a bustling market of religious ideas: traditionalist, reformist, progressive, and populist actors all vie for moral authority.

The sociological literature on civil society after authoritarianism (Hefner, 2023) helps us see that this is not merely a theological revival but a civic one. Mosques and madrasas become spaces for community reconstruction, moral discourse, and political participation. Education thus functions not only to transmit faith but to rebuild social trust, the first casualty of dictatorship.

2. Path Dependency: The Weight of the Soviet and New Order Legacies

But revival never starts from zero. Both post-Soviet Uzbekistan and post-New Order Indonesia are haunted by what historical institutionalists call path dependency, the tendency of past institutional arrangements to shape present possibilities. The ghosts of the Soviet *komsomol* and Suharto's *Depag* (Department of Religious Affairs) still linger in the bureaucratic DNA of each state.

In Uzbekistan, the Soviet legacy manifests in a bureaucratic reflex toward centralization (Poujol, 2017). Even after independence, the state retained its suspicion of autonomous religious institutions, reproducing old control mechanisms under new nationalist labels. The *Muftiate*, modeled partly on Soviet administrative hierarchies, continues to function as both religious regulator and political instrument (Teles Fazendeiro, 2017). Thus, while independence allowed Islam to re-enter education, it did so under a technocratic mindset that treats faith as a sector to be managed rather than a community to be trusted (Yémelianova, 2017).

In Indonesia, the New Order's legacy is subtler. Suharto's regime built a dense network of control through co-optation, embedding Islam in bureaucratic routines while purging it of political edge. This created a paradox: the institutional infrastructure for Islamic education (madrasas, IAINs, MORA) remained intact, but its epistemic ambition was narrowed. After 1998, reformers inherited a strong bureaucracy but a cautious mindset. The same ministries and organizations that once implemented depoliticization became the engines of reform, but they carried the habits of regulation into the new age of openness.

Historical institutionalism thus explains why both transitions produced *partial* emancipations. The post-Soviet and post-Suharto orders each opened doors but kept the hinges from rusting shut. In this sense, reclamation is not an escape from the past, it is a dialogue with it, an attempt to bend inherited structures toward new moral horizons.

3. Modes of Reclamation: State-Led vs. Society-Led Reform

If reclamation is the shared goal, the modes differ profoundly. We can imagine a spectrum: at one end, state-led reclamation, where the government orchestrates the return of faith under bureaucratic supervision; at the other, society-led reclamation, where civil actors, educators, and religious communities drive reform from below, sometimes with minimal state coordination.

Uzbekistan lies closer to the state-led pole (Ro'i & Wainer, 2016). Its government claims the mantle of revival, creating official academies, publishing authorized textbooks, and defining what constitutes "authentic" Islam (Babadzhanov, 2015). The logic here is stability: Islam is welcome so long as it is domesticated (Himelfarb & Esipova, 2015). Reclamation becomes a managed narrative, faith recovered, but fenced in (Rasanayagam, 2014).

Indonesia, by contrast, leans toward the society-led end. Civil organizations, intellectuals, and private educators use the newfound political freedom to innovate pedagogically and institutionally. The state facilitates rather than dictates, acting as an arbiter among diverse actors. This produces a dynamic, if sometimes messy, pluralism. Here, reclamation is expansive but diffuse, generating energy at the cost of coherence.

Between these poles lies the fundamental paradox of post-authoritarian Islamic education reform: too much state, and faith becomes another department; too little, and it risks fragmentation or populist capture. The art of reclamation, then, lies in balancing regulation with freedom, structure with spirit.

This theoretical framework conceives reclaiming the faith as a process of re-inhabiting the public sphere after political constraint. It is neither simple restoration nor revolutionary rupture. It is a layered negotiation, between history and hope, bureaucracy and belief, nation and ummah. The following sections trace how these negotiations have unfolded, first in Uzbekistan's state-managed revival and then in Indonesia's society-driven integration, as two contrasting yet convergent paths toward the same human impulse: to make faith think again.

Method

Studying Islamic education reform in post-authoritarian contexts is a bit like tracing watermarks on old paper, visible only when held to the light. The reforms are not loud revolutions; they are incremental, bureaucratic, and deeply embedded in the historical texture of each state. To make sense of them, we need a method that can read between lines, between policy and practice, freedom and fear, aspiration and constraint. For that reason, this study adopts a comparative historical analysis, supported by a process-tracing approach that follows the trajectories of reform across time, institutions, and actors in Uzbekistan and Indonesia.

Comparison, in this study, is not used to rank or measure progress but to understand variation in pathways. Both Uzbekistan and Indonesia underwent political transitions that redefined the relationship between religion and the state, yet their outcomes diverged dramatically. The comparative design treats each as a distinct "laboratory" of post-authoritarian faith reclamation, allowing us to see how context, political culture, institutional memory, and external pressures, shapes reform. This comparative frame is grounded in historical institutionalism, which emphasizes continuity amid change. The aim is to trace how the legacies of Soviet atheism and New Order depoliticization became the scaffolding upon which new educational paradigms were built. Rather than a snapshot, this is a moving picture, showing reform not as a single moment of awakening but as a sequence of adjustments, negotiations, and compromises that unfold over decades.

The research relies primarily on documentary data, interpreted as cultural artifacts that reveal both policy intent and ideological subtext. For Uzbekistan, the primary sources include: (1) Official decrees and education policies issued by the *Cabinet of Ministers*, particularly those related to religious education and curriculum development (1991–2024). (2) Founding documents and publications from the *Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (Muftiate)*, which define state-approved Islamic orthodoxy. (3) Presidential speeches and strategy papers under Islam Karimov and Shavkat Mirziyoyev, especially regarding "enlightened Islam," national identity, and counter-extremism. (4) Institutional profiles of new centers such as the *Imam Bukhari International Research Center* and *Tashkent Islamic Academy*.

For Indonesia, the main sources include: (1) Policy documents from the *Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA)* and *Ministry of Education*, particularly those governing the transformation of IAIN to UIN and the National Education System Law (*Sisdiknas*, 2003). (2) Curricular frameworks, accreditation guidelines, and reform roadmaps from Islamic higher education institutions. (3) Statements and publications from major Muslim organizations (*Nahdlatul Ulama*, *Muhammadiyah*), which illustrate the societal dimension of reform. In addition to these, the study draws on secondary materials, scholarly books, journal articles, and ethnographic accounts, that document the lived experiences of educators, students, and policymakers. Reports from international

agencies such as UNESCO, the Islamic Development Bank, and USAID provide external perspectives on educational modernization in both contexts.

The analysis proceeds through process-tracing, a qualitative method that reconstructs causal sequences over time. This approach identifies key *turning points*, moments when political change or policy reform altered the landscape of Islamic education. In Uzbekistan, for instance, the trajectory moves from the early post-Soviet opening (1991–1999) to the Karimov-era securitization (2000–2016) and the cautious liberalization under Mirziyoyev (2016–present). In Indonesia, it traces the transition from New Order bureaucracy (pre-1998) to Reformasi expansion (1998–2010) and contemporary diversification (2010s onward). Within these temporal arcs, thematic analysis identifies recurring patterns across three dimensions: (1) Institutional Design, how Islamic schools, universities, and muftiates were restructured. (2) Epistemological Orientation, how “authentic Islam” and “modern knowledge” were defined and related. (3) Political Function, how education reform served national projects of legitimacy, stability, or democratization.

Comparing across these themes allows us to map the two countries not as mirror images, but as distinct articulations of the same impulse: to reclaim Islam through education under the constraints of modern governance. The methodological stance is interpretive rather than positivist. It assumes that policies and institutions are texts, written by history, edited by politics, and interpreted by communities. By reading these texts side by side, this study seeks not universal laws but *patterned understanding*: why certain forms of reform emerge, endure, or falter when faith tries to reclaim its public and pedagogical voice.

Results and Discussion

Uzbekistan: State-Managed Revival and Restriction

When the Soviet Union fell in 1991, Uzbekistan awoke to a paradoxical freedom. For the first time in seven decades, Islam could breathe openly, but in an atmosphere so thin with experience that even breathing felt strange (Khalid, 2014). The mosques were empty of imams, the libraries hollowed of books, and a generation had grown up for whom religion meant folklore rather than scholarship (Turnunova, 2014). What followed was a burst of spiritual rediscovery followed almost immediately by a wave of political control. The pattern that would define Uzbek Islamic education reform for the next three decades was set early: revival, regulation, restraint.

1. The Pre-1991 Legacy: Soviet Atheism and the Near-Total Erasure of Formal Islamic Education

Few regimes in modern history pursued secularization as methodically as the Soviet state. Islam in Central Asia was not only marginalized; it was *bureaucratized out of existence* (Peshkova, 2013). After Stalin’s purges in the 1930s, only four official madrasas were allowed to operate across the entire Soviet Union, all tightly supervised by the state-created Spiritual Board of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM). Imams were required to register with local authorities, Islamic publications were banned, and religious instruction was confined to the domestic sphere, transmitted quietly by elders or clandestine teachers (Ikhamov, 2013).

By the late 1980s, when perestroika began to loosen ideological restrictions, Uzbekistan had only a handful of religious institutions and perhaps a few dozen officially recognized scholars (Hanks, 2012). The intellectual infrastructure of Islam, its jurists,

grammarians, theologians, had been replaced by bureaucrats fluent in the language of loyalty rather than law. When independence arrived, the state inherited not a robust religious tradition but an empty shell: a population culturally Muslim but institutionally amnesiac.

2. The Early Post-Soviet Boom and Subsequent Crackdown (1990s–2016)

The first years of independence were an explosion. Mosques multiplied from a few dozen to thousands; private Qur'an schools appeared in every province; foreign aid and missionary organizations from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Egypt poured in with books, teachers, and funds. For a brief moment, it seemed that Uzbekistan might witness a genuine renaissance of Islamic learning (Laumulin, 2010). But euphoria quickly collided with the state's fear of fragmentation. President Islam Karimov, faced with regional instability and the rise of Islamist movements in neighboring Tajikistan and Afghanistan, began to equate religious autonomy with political danger. The Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (the successor to SADUM) was revived not as a community body but as an extension of the presidential administration. It became both the official voice of Islam and the mechanism for silencing unapproved ones (Hanks, 2012).

By the late 1990s, the government had imposed licensing requirements for all religious schools, centralized the approval of curricula, and banned foreign Islamic organizations deemed "politically suspicious" (Zanca, 2008). The number of madrasas was drastically reduced, and the teaching of Arabic or advanced theology was restricted to select state-approved academies in Tashkent, Bukhara, and Samarkand (Louw, 2007). This era, sometimes described by scholars as "controlled revival," institutionalized the state's monopoly on religious authority.

3. The "New Uzbekistan" Era and Cautious Reforms (2016–Present)

When Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed the presidency in 2016, he promised a "New Uzbekistan", more open, pragmatic, and internationally engaged (Bowers et al., 2006). Religious education became one of the most visible beneficiaries of this cautious thaw. The government established several high-profile institutions, including the Imam Bukhari International Research Center in Samarkand, the Tashkent Islamic Academy, and the Center for Islamic Civilization (March, 2003). These institutions were framed as bridges between tradition and modernity, combining classical Hanafi scholarship with modern research standards and international collaboration.

Mirziyoyev's rhetoric reframed Islam from a potential threat to a moral resource. Official speeches emphasized "*enlightened Islam*" and "*national spirituality*." Yet the boundaries of permissible religion remained narrow. Curriculum across Islamic institutions continued to be vetted by the state; research agendas avoided controversial theology or politics. The emphasis was placed on Hanafi jurisprudence and Maturidi theology, representing what the government calls "traditional Uzbek Islam", a depoliticized, moderate interpretation compatible with national identity and counter-extremism objectives.

Foreign cooperation, especially with Turkey, Egypt, and the Gulf states, has been encouraged, but under tight supervision. Exchange programs and visiting scholars are approved only through official channels, ensuring that the state remains the arbiter of all intellectual inflows.

4. Key Actors and Drivers

The architecture of Uzbekistan's Islamic education reform revolves around three institutional pillars:

a. The Presidential Administration

The presidency sets the ideological tone, defining the acceptable limits of religious discourse. Under Karimov, the tone was suspicion; under Mirziyoyev, it is paternalistic encouragement (Horsman, 2006). Both rely on a rhetoric of moral renewal tethered to political loyalty.

b. The Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (Muftiate)

Officially autonomous, the Muftiate functions as a bridge, and a filter, between the state and religious communities. It controls the appointment of teachers, the approval of sermons, and the licensing of madrasas. While it preserves continuity with Central Asian religious traditions, it also enforces conformity.

c. The National Security Service

The invisible actor in nearly every religious policy. Its surveillance apparatus ensures that revival does not slip into dissent. In effect, theology and security remain intertwined: to study religion is to be watched. Uzbekistan's post-Soviet trajectory reveals what we might call state-managed reclamation: a revival tightly scripted by bureaucratic and political imperatives (Mann, 2002). The state resurrected Islamic education as a symbol of national pride and moral rejuvenation, yet only under conditions of obedience. The madrasa is allowed to reopen its gates, but the keys remain in the government's hands. Faith has returned to the classroom, but it must wear the uniform of the state.

Indonesia: Societal-Driven Integration and Diversification

Where Uzbekistan's story begins in silence and surveillance, Indonesia's begins in conversation. Islam was never erased here, only choreographed, managed under Suharto's *New Order* to remain pious yet politically docile. When that choreography collapsed in 1998, the stage suddenly filled with voices: reformists, traditionalists, feminists, populists, bureaucrats, intellectuals, all competing to redefine what it meant to educate a new Muslim generation. If Uzbekistan's Islamic revival was a state-led reconstruction, Indonesia's was a plural, self-organizing bloom.

1. The Pre-1998 Legacy: New Order Depoliticization and Bureaucratization of Islam

Suharto's *New Order* regime (1966–1998) maintained a peculiar relationship with Islam: it embraced faith as morality but feared it as politics. Islamic organizations were tolerated, sometimes co-opted, so long as they did not challenge state ideology (*Pancasila*) or mobilize politically. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) became the state's instrument for both recognition and containment, overseeing madrasas, certifying teachers, and integrating Islamic education into the national system while discouraging any overt critique of authority (Putri et al., 2022).

Under this arrangement, Islamic education flourished institutionally but narrowed intellectually. Madrasas and State Institutes of Islamic Studies (*IAINs*) expanded rapidly, yet their curricula leaned toward the safe and the apolitical. Religious subjects were taught as moral foundations, while theology and jurisprudence avoided controversial debates (Alrudiyansah, 2016). The result was an educated, bureaucratic Islam, disciplined, domesticated, and socially embedded but epistemologically cautious.

By the 1990s, however, cracks began to appear. Economic liberalization created new Muslim middle classes seeking more relevant and cosmopolitan forms of Islamic learning. The tension between bureaucratic Islam and civil piety grew. When the *New Order* fell in 1998, these latent energies burst forth.

2. The Reformasi Explosion: Democratization and Decentralization (Post-1998)

With the fall of Suharto, Indonesia entered what many scholars have called an *Islamic civil renaissance*. Freed from decades of state surveillance, Muslim organizations, especially Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, moved swiftly to reclaim public and educational space. Thousands of new private Islamic schools, pesantren, and Islamic universities emerged. These were not merely religious institutions but laboratories of civic participation.

The democratization of education coincided with decentralization, the devolution of power to local governments after 2001. This combination gave regions greater autonomy in managing educational policy, allowing local Islamic cultures to flourish. Islamic schools diversified: some aligned with conservative or traditional networks, others adopted bilingual curricula, international partnerships, or modern scientific emphases (Niazi, 2019).

This plural expansion was accompanied by a political resurgence of Islam. Muslim-based parties entered parliament; Islamic universities gained international recognition; and public discourse embraced Islamic idioms as part of national identity rather than opposition to it. The madrasa, once a symbol of marginality, became a site of innovation and civic engagement.

3. Systemic Integration and Innovation

If the early years of *Reformasi* were about proliferation, the 2000s and 2010s were about integration, making sense of diversity within a coherent educational framework. The transformation of the State Institutes of Islamic Studies (IAIN) into State Islamic Universities (UIN) marked a turning point. It was not merely an administrative rebranding, but an epistemological reform. Under the intellectual leadership of figures like Azyumardi Azra, Amin Abdullah, and Komaruddin Hidayat, the *Integration of Knowledge (Integrasi Keilmuan)* paradigm emerged (Abdullah & Abdullah, 2006), (Azra, 1999). It sought to dissolve the rigid division between religious and secular sciences, creating a more dialogical model of learning. The UIN system incorporated faculties of science, technology, medicine, and social sciences alongside theology, tafsir, and jurisprudence.

This reform was driven by a conviction that Islam must engage the modern world not defensively, but constructively. The Integration-Interconnection (I-I) model at UIN Sunan Kalijaga, for example, reimagined knowledge as a web rather than a hierarchy, every discipline connected by ethical and theological threads. Other UINs developed variations: UIN Malang's *Tree of Knowledge* model, UIN Jakarta's *Integration of Revelation and Empirical Reason*.

Simultaneously, Indonesia witnessed the rise of modern pesantren, Islamic boarding schools that blended classical texts (*kitab kuning*) with English instruction, technology training, and entrepreneurship. Many formed partnerships with foreign universities, particularly in Malaysia, Turkey, and the Middle East. This diversification created an ecosystem where Islam was not retreating from modernity but reformulating it on its own terms.

4. Key Actors and Drivers

Four clusters of actors shaped the trajectory of Islamic education reform in post-1998 Indonesia:

a. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA)

As both regulator and facilitator, MORA provided the structural continuity that allowed Islamic education to expand without fragmenting. It standardized curricula, accredited institutions, and managed the delicate balance between autonomy and accountability.

b. Mass Muslim Organizations (NU and Muhammadiyah)

These organizations, with their vast educational networks, functioned as engines of innovation. NU emphasized inclusivity and moral authenticity, while Muhammadiyah pursued professionalism and modern pedagogy. Together, they kept the Islamic education sector grounded in civil society rather than state ideology.

c. Intellectual Leadership

Thinkers and educators, many trained abroad, became epistemological architects. They reframed Islamic education as a project of civilization-building rather than mere religious instruction, promoting dialogue between *ulum al-din* and modern sciences.

d. Market and Global Forces

Globalization brought new pressures, English-medium instruction, rankings, digitalization, but also opportunities for cross-cultural exchange. Islamic schools began marketing themselves to middle-class families as modern, globally aware, yet morally rooted alternatives to secular education.

Indonesia's path of Islamic education reform exemplifies a societal-driven reclamation: dynamic, decentralized, and intellectually plural. It thrives on negotiation rather than control, improvisation rather than central planning. The result is an educational ecosystem where multiple Islams coexist, traditionalist, reformist, cosmopolitan, bound together by a shared faith in education as the means to reconcile revelation with reason, and devotion with democracy.

If Uzbekistan rebuilt faith under the watch of the state, Indonesia reimagined it through society. Both reclaimed Islam, but one did so by narrowing its channels; the other, by multiplying them.

Comparative Analysis: Divergent Paths of Reclamation

Juxtaposing Uzbekistan and Indonesia is like watching two mirrors reflect the same light through different glass. Both societies emerged from authoritarian regimes that sought to discipline Islam, one through erasure, the other through domestication, and both have since attempted to reclaim faith through education. Yet, the forms that reclamation has taken are strikingly dissimilar. Where Uzbekistan rebuilt Islam as a state-managed heritage project, Indonesia reanimated it as a plural, self-organizing social movement.

1. The Role of the State

In Uzbekistan, the state is the architect, supervisor, and gatekeeper of Islamic education. Religion is permitted to flourish, but only within clearly marked ideological boundaries. The *Muftiate* operates as the custodian of state-sanctioned Islam, filtering curricula, approving teachers, and ensuring that theological instruction remains loyal to the national narrative of "traditional, Hanafi-Maturidi Islam." In this sense, the state plays the role of both gardener and warden, cultivating moral order while fencing off unwanted weeds.

The Uzbek model thus demonstrates what might be called bureaucratic piety: the state presents itself as protector of Islam, yet in protecting it, keeps it under surveillance. Education becomes a domain of moral engineering, where faith is taught as heritage and national security rather than as a field of open inquiry.

In Indonesia, by contrast, the state is a facilitator, an arbiter of pluralism rather than its author. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) coordinates Islamic education through accreditation, funding, and quality assurance, but it rarely dictates theology. Authority is distributed across universities, pesantren networks, and mass Muslim organizations like *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*. The Indonesian state maintains a “soft shadow” over religious education, visible but porous, guiding rather than commanding.

This divergence reveals a key difference in political theology: Uzbekistan’s state seeks legitimacy by controlling religion, while Indonesia’s gains legitimacy by accommodating it. One defines Islam as national culture; the other as a plural public resource.

2. The Nature of “Reclamation”

The term “reclaiming the faith” unfolds differently in each context. For Uzbekistan, reclamation has meant a *restoration* of heritage, a project to re-anchor national identity in Islam after decades of Soviet atheism. Yet this restoration is not organic; it is curated. The government has resurrected religious institutions, but under the logic of state-building. Islam is framed as moral capital for modernization, not as a space for critical reflection. The establishment of state-controlled academies, such as the *Imam Bukhari International Research Center*, symbolizes both revival and restriction: religion is officially celebrated, yet domesticated.

In Indonesia, reclamation has meant a *reformation* of purpose. It is less about recovering what was lost than about transforming what survived. The reformasi era opened Islamic education to intellectual experimentation, blending revelation with reason, tradition with science. The transformation of IAINs into UINs represents a paradigmatic shift from protection to participation: Islam no longer stands apart from modern knowledge but dialogues with it.

Thus, Uzbekistan’s reclamation is vertical, descending from the state’s vision of order, while Indonesia’s is horizontal, negotiated among communities, universities, and civil actors. Both reclaim, but one restores a museum; the other builds a marketplace of ideas.

3. Primary Challenges

The contrasts between the two systems also define their persistent dilemmas. In Uzbekistan, the greatest challenge is overcoming the epistemic vacuum left by the Soviet past without reproducing authoritarian habits. The country faces a shortage of qualified scholars capable of teaching classical Islamic disciplines at a high academic level. The state’s fear of extremism, understandable given its geopolitical neighborhood, has produced an atmosphere of caution that stifles innovation. Religion is safe, but it is also stagnant. The risk is that Islamic education becomes ceremonial: pious on paper, politically useful, but intellectually shallow.

In Indonesia, the problem is the reverse: vitality without coherence. The proliferation of Islamic schools and universities has generated remarkable creativity, yet also uneven quality. Decentralization allows flexibility but weakens oversight. The “integration of knowledge” paradigm, while visionary, often struggles in implementation, reduced in some campuses to slogans rather than epistemic synthesis. Meanwhile, the

rise of identity politics since the 2010s threatens to re-politicize religion in ways that risk reversing the pluralist gains of reformasi.

Both systems, in their own way, wrestle with the same paradox: how to modernize Islamic education without hollowing out its soul. Uzbekistan's dilemma is *overregulation*; Indonesia's is *overpluralism*.

4. The Underlying Logic: Security vs. Synergy

At a deeper level, the two trajectories illustrate different logics of governance. Uzbekistan's approach is guided by security rationality, religion as something to be managed lest it become a threat. Indonesia's is guided by synergy rationality, religion as something to be cultivated to enrich democratic life.

These logics shape everything from curriculum design to institutional ethos. Uzbek madrasas focus on moral discipline and doctrinal stability; Indonesian UINs experiment with scientific inquiry and civic ethics. Both aspire to produce the ideal Muslim citizen, yet they imagine that citizen differently: in Tashkent, as loyal and orderly; in Jakarta, as reflective and engaged. The contrast is not moral but structural. It shows that reclamation is never a neutral act, it is a mirror reflecting each state's broader political philosophy.

If we look beyond the details, both projects share a faint symmetry: a belief that Islam, long repressed, can become the moral backbone of national renewal. Yet the shadows of their pasts linger. Uzbekistan's post-Soviet state still hears echoes of the atheist commissar in its cautious tone. Indonesia's post-Suharto democracy still carries the bureaucratic reflex of the *New Order*. In each, reclaiming the faith remains an unfinished conversation between memory and modernity.

Conclusion

Reclaiming the faith, as these two case studies show, is never a clean act of recovery. It is a reweaving, of memory, authority, and imagination, across the torn fabric of history. Both Uzbekistan and Indonesia have sought, in their own idioms, to bring Islam back to the center of education after decades of constraint. Yet they have done so while carrying the residues of the regimes that once silenced or scripted it. In this sense, the *shadow of the past* still stretches long across the classroom floor.

Uzbekistan's state-managed revival demonstrates how an authoritarian state can reinvent itself as a moral custodian without relinquishing control. Its educational reforms, the reopening of madrasas, the creation of Islamic academies, and the official endorsement of "traditional Hanafi Islam", have restored religious infrastructure but not intellectual independence. Faith has been reclaimed, yet only as heritage, as moral capital for the nation.

Indonesia's societal-driven integration, by contrast, illustrates how democratization and civil society can transform Islamic education into a living laboratory of pluralism. The transformation of IAINs into UINs, the growth of modern pesantren, and the intellectual movement for integrating knowledge have made Islamic learning not only relevant but dialogical. Still, its vitality carries its own fragilities: uneven quality, creeping politicization, and the persistent gap between institutional innovation and epistemological depth. Both projects are thus incomplete and deeply human. Each is driven by hope, the hope that education can redeem the damage of history, but also haunted by inherited fears: of extremism in Uzbekistan, of fragmentation in Indonesia.

This comparative inquiry suggests that reclamation is not a single event but a process shaped by political memory. The structure of the preceding authoritarian regime

largely determines the grammar of reform that follows. In Uzbekistan, the Soviet legacy of surveillance and centralization predisposed the state to reassert control even as it permitted revival. In Indonesia, the New Order's bureaucratic pluralism left behind institutions sturdy enough to democratize from within. Theoretically, this study advances the notion that religious reform after authoritarianism functions as a *negotiated reclamation*: neither full liberation nor mere continuity. Education becomes a site where history is contested, rewritten, and re-taught, a quiet but persistent form of resistance and renewal.

The two trajectories also complicate the binary between "secular modernization" and "Islamization." Uzbekistan's top-down approach shows that modernization can coexist with state-sanctioned piety, while Indonesia's plural model shows that Islamization can coexist with democracy. Both are hybrid projects, where faith and modernity are not opposites but uneasy partners.

For Uzbekistan, the future depends on whether the state can transition from control to confidence, allowing Islamic scholarship to mature beyond the rhetoric of moderation and national pride. The potential is immense: its rich Central Asian heritage, the revival of classical texts, and the slow emergence of international cooperation could all nurture a more open intellectual Islam. But this requires trust, the hardest lesson for any post-authoritarian regime to learn.

For Indonesia, the task is almost the opposite: to move from expansion to coherence. Its Islamic education system is vast, diverse, and globally connected, yet its epistemological synthesis remains fragile. Deepening the *integration of knowledge* paradigm, ensuring that theology, ethics, and science genuinely inform each other, may determine whether Indonesia becomes a model of plural Islamic modernity or fragments under its own diversity. In both contexts, the question is not whether faith has been reclaimed, but *what kind* of faith is being built, one disciplined by the state, or one disciplined by thought.

Future scholarship might move beyond institutional and policy levels to examine the micro-worlds of classrooms, how teachers, students, and communities actually live this reclamation. Ethnographic studies could reveal the subtle negotiations that occur daily: how a young Uzbek teacher reconciles state-approved Hanafi curricula with curiosity about global Islam, or how an Indonesian student bridges Qur'anic ethics with biomedical research in a UIN laboratory.

Another promising avenue is to analyze the transnational dimension, how ideas, funding, and networks from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or Malaysia influence local patterns of reform. Such studies would help illuminate whether post-authoritarian reclamation remains nationally bounded or increasingly global in its intellectual circulation.

Both Uzbekistan and Indonesia remind us that reclaiming faith through education is not about returning to a lost purity but about constructing a new moral imagination. History leaves scars, but also lessons. And perhaps, somewhere between Tashkent's controlled revival and Jakarta's chaotic pluralism, lies the quiet truth of post-authoritarian Islam: that faith, once reclaimed, must learn again not only how to obey or resist, but how to *think*.

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