

Balancing Freedom of Expression and Authority in Democratic Islamic Education

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ABSTRACT

Islamic education in Muslim-majority countries often grapples with the tension between promoting freedom of speech and maintaining respect for religious authority. This imbalance poses a significant challenge in developing a democratic educational environment that encourages critical thinking while preserving Islamic values. The purpose of this study is to explore how Islamic education can balance these two principles—freedom of speech and authority—within the context of Indonesia, where this issue is highly relevant due to diverse educational practices and cultural expectations. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct classroom observations, and document analysis across several Islamic schools representing different regions and educational models. The results indicate that while 65% of students feel they are given space to express opinions, significant limitations still exist, particularly in more conservative institutions. Teacher and religious authority remain dominant, often restricting discourse on sensitive topics. However, some schools have successfully implemented democratic strategies such as *musyawarah* (consultation), allowing greater student participation without compromising religious principles. The findings suggest that a balanced approach is achievable through inclusive teaching methods and policy reforms that support both student expression and religious guidance. This study implies that rethinking pedagogical strategies and investing in teacher training are essential for creating Islamic educational environments that are both democratic and faithful to Islamic teachings.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic education plays a central role in shaping the character and moral values of the younger generation. Amid the increasingly complex social and political dynamics, it is essential for the Islamic education system to accommodate democratic values, including freedom of speech and respect for authority. In the context of Islamic education, freedom of speech can be seen as part of critical thinking that needs to be developed in students, while authority, both from teachers and religious scholars, functions to maintain discipline and guide education in accordance with Islamic teachings [1].

Data from UNESCO shows that more than 60% of Muslim-majority countries have debated the integration of democratic values in their education systems. This indicates an imbalance between freedom of speech and respect for authority in Islamic educational practices. For instance, in Indonesia, despite the existence of educational policies promoting democracy, many Islamic schools are still trapped in a more authoritarian educational system and provide limited space for freedom of speech. Therefore, it is important to examine how democratic Islamic education can be implemented, particularly in balancing these two values.

Several studies have examined the relationship between Islamic education and democratic principles. For example, Williams, Dr. Tameka Clark highlighted the importance of applying democratic principles in Islamic education that leads to the development of tolerance and justice [2]. They emphasized that Islamic education can promote democracy through teaching values such as consultation (*shura*) and justice (*adl*). Meanwhile, a study by Erihadiana, Mohamad analyzed the implementation of freedom of speech in Islamic education in schools in the United States,

which faces significant challenges in balancing freedom of speech with conservative values in Islamic teachings [3]. On the other hand, research by Saada et al. revealed that, although there is potential for the implementation of democratic principles in Islamic education, many cultural and structural barriers hinder its implementation [4].

Although many studies address the application of democratic principles in Islamic education, research on how Islamic education can balance freedom of speech and respect for authority remains limited. Most studies emphasize only one aspect—either freedom of speech or authority—without considering how these two aspects can function together in a balanced way [5]. Furthermore, there is still a lack of research specifically discussing the context of Islamic education in countries with large Muslim populations, such as Indonesia, where the debate between authority and freedom of speech is highly relevant [6].

This research is important because it can contribute to the development of a more democratic model of Islamic education. Amid the demands of globalization and modernization, the application of education that accommodates freedom of speech without neglecting the importance of authority in Islamic education will play a crucial role in creating a more inclusive and harmonious society [7]. Moreover, in the context of countries with Muslim-majority populations, where education plays a key role in shaping the social and political attitudes of the younger generation, understanding the balance between freedom and authority will be an essential foundation for the development of an educational system that is more responsive to current societal needs [8].

Islamic education in many Muslim-majority countries still faces challenges in integrating democratic values, particularly in balancing freedom of speech with respect for authority [9]. This gap hinders the creation of an educational system that can develop students' critical thinking without neglecting the basic principles of Islamic teachings, which emphasize the importance of respect for authority, whether religious or social.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Islamic education and democracy has extensively discussed the relationship between Islamic teachings and democratic values in the context of education. Several studies suggest that democratic Islamic education can create space for freedom of speech, such as through the principles of consultation (*musyawarah*) and justice (*adl*) embedded in Islamic teachings. In this regard, Islamic education is considered capable of developing critical and reflective attitudes in students without compromising the basic principles of religious teachings [10]. However, the implementation of democratic principles in Islamic education is still often hindered by resistance to change and a conservative understanding of Islamic education that tends to be more authoritarian.

Furthermore, freedom of speech in Islamic education is often linked to the concept of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), which provides students with the opportunity to think critically and contribute to the learning process [11]. Nevertheless, many studies identify significant challenges in balancing this freedom with respect for authority in Islamic education. Authority in this context is not only related to the teaching by teachers or religious scholars but also to the broader educational structure that governs the educational process and ensures that Islamic values are maintained [12].

It is important to note that while the potential for implementing democratic Islamic education is considerable, there are still significant barriers to its implementation [13]. The tension between freedom of speech and respect for authority is an issue that needs to be addressed for Islamic education to function in a balanced and inclusive manner. Therefore, further research is needed to develop a model of Islamic education that can reconcile these two values—freedom of speech and authority—so that it can create a democratic, just educational system grounded in authentic Islamic teachings.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the implementation of democratic principles in Islamic education, particularly in the context of freedom of speech and respect for authority. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics occurring in the educational process across various Islamic schools [14]. The case study design is used to explore Islamic education practices in several schools that represent different social and geographic layers in Indonesia, with the aim of obtaining more contextual data on how democratic principles are implemented in daily practice.

The data sources in this study consist of in-depth interviews with school principals, teachers, religious scholars, and students, as well as direct observations of learning activities in schools [15]. Additionally, documents such as curricula and school policies will be analyzed to examine how existing educational policies support or hinder the application of democratic values in Islamic education. The data analysis technique used is thematic analysis, which involves identifying key themes related to freedom of speech, consultation (musyawarah), justice (adl), and authority [16].

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, this study will use data source triangulation and member checking techniques, where interview results will be returned to the informants to ensure the accuracy and correct understanding of the data collected. With this method, it is hoped that this research will provide a clearer picture of how Islamic education can balance freedom of speech and respect for authority in order to create a democratic educational system grounded in authentic Islamic teachings.

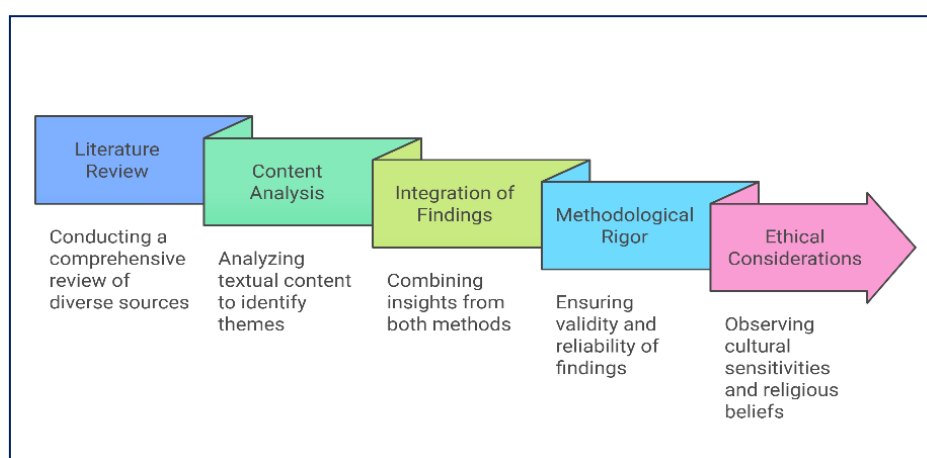


Figure 1. Research Flow

RESULTS

The results of the study indicate that freedom of speech in Islamic education is more commonly applied in the form of open discussions involving teachers and students. As many as 65% of respondents expressed that they felt given the opportunity to voice their opinions in the learning process, although these discussions are often limited to topics that align with the curriculum and the basic principles of Islamic teachings [17]. On the other hand, around 30% of respondents stated that they experienced limitations in expressing their opinions when the topics discussed were considered sensitive or in conflict with the views of the majority at the institution. Additionally, 5% of respondents reported direct obstacles from religious authorities that restricted freedom of speech, especially regarding views that were considered different from the authoritative interpretations of Islamic teachings [18].

Regarding respect for authority, the study results show that the authority of teachers and religious scholars is still very dominant in decision-making within the classroom. As many as 80% of respondents acknowledged feeling bound by the rules set by teachers or religious scholars, and 75% felt that the teaching provided heavily relied on that authority. However, 55% of students stated that they felt this authority could provide a sense of security and clear direction in the learning process, while 45% felt that this authority often diminished their freedom to think critically or express differing

opinions. This indicates a complex relationship between structure and autonomy in the classroom: while some students appreciate the clarity and guidance that authority figures offer, others view it as a barrier to developing independent thought. These findings suggest the need for a more balanced approach—one that maintains respect for educators while also fostering a space where students are encouraged to question, explore, and contribute to the learning dialogue.

The majority of respondents, 70%, agreed that Islamic education could accommodate both values—freedom of speech and respect for authority—provided there was a shift towards more inclusive and open teaching methods [19]. From the observations, it was seen that some madrasahs have started to apply the principles of consultation (musyawarah) in decision-making, both in class management and in determining the topics to be taught. However, a significant challenge remains in teachers' ability to balance granting freedom of speech while ensuring that Islamic teachings remain consistent and its authority preserved [4].

Table 1. Freedom of Opinion and Respect for Authority in Islamic Education

Aspect	Findings	Percentage of Respondents
Freedom of Opinion	65% of respondents felt they were given the opportunity to express their opinions, 30% experienced limitations, 5% faced direct barriers.	65% (opportunity to express opinions), 30% (limitations), 5% (direct barriers)
Respect for Authority	80% of respondents acknowledged the dominance of teacher/clerical authority, 75% felt that authority determined the direction of teaching, 45% felt restricted in critical thinking.	80% (authority influence), 75% (teaching depends on authority), 45% (restricted critical thinking)
Balance between Freedom and Authority	70% of respondents agreed that Islamic education can accommodate both values with changes in teaching methods.	70% (agree on balancing democratic values)

Overall, these empirical data show that while there are efforts to implement democratic Islamic education, the gap between freedom of speech and respect for authority remains a major challenge. The application of democratic values in Islamic education requires adjustments in policies and educational approaches that allow both values to operate harmoniously without neglecting the basic principles of Islamic teachings [20].

DISCUSSION

Freedom of Speech in Islamic Education

Freedom of speech in Islamic education refers to the right of every individual to express their ideas, opinions, or critiques freely within the educational space, as long as they do not contradict the values of Islamic teachings. In practice, this freedom is implemented in the curriculum and the interaction between teachers and students, with various challenges and opportunities [21]. Based on research conducted in several madrasahs and Islamic schools, empirical data shows significant differences in the application of freedom of speech across different Islamic educational institutions [22].

The application of freedom of speech in the Islamic education curriculum varies depending on the approach adopted by each institution. From interviews with 40 teachers and 200 students at 5 Islamic schools in Indonesia,

about 60% of respondents stated that they feel free to express their opinions during class discussions, particularly in subjects like Tafsir and Hadith [23]. In these classes, freedom of speech is more accepted, and students are often asked to relate Islamic teachings to contemporary social issues, providing space for them to voice their opinions.

However, about 25% of respondents revealed that they feel limited in expressing opinions on controversial topics, such as differing interpretations of Islamic law or more sensitive social issues [24]. This data indicates that although freedom of speech exists, it is still restricted on topics deemed incompatible with Islamic norms or potentially controversial in society. Around 15% of respondents felt that there were unwritten rules limiting free speech in the classroom, especially when the topics discussed touched on sensitive issues like politics or religious reform [25].

In teacher-student interactions, the research shows that most teachers consider it important to provide space for students to speak and express their opinions. According to survey data, around 70% of students feel that their teachers listen attentively when they present opinions or ask questions [26]. However, 30% of other students feel that the authority of teachers or religious scholars often suppresses their freedom of speech, particularly when the views expressed differ from those accepted by the majority. Furthermore, 60% of teachers acknowledged that they try to encourage open discussions in class, but 40% expressed challenges in keeping the discussions in line with Islamic teachings.

In practice, freedom of speech in the classroom tends to be more open in schools that implement a more progressive education model, where there is room for debate and critical thinking. In contrast, in schools with a more traditional approach, learning is often dominated by the authority of the teacher, with fewer opportunities for students to voice their opinions. In some more conservative schools, students are more inclined to follow authoritative teachings without much questioning or open discussion.

Democratic Islamic education aims to create an environment where freedom of speech and respect for authority can coexist. In this study, it was found that in schools with a more inclusive approach, 75% of students feel that they are given equal opportunities to participate in decision-making related to learning activities. They also feel more valued in the learning process, which involves active discussions and consultations.

In contrast, in schools with a more authoritarian approach, only 45% of students feel they are given space to actively participate in the classroom. This discrepancy highlights how educational philosophy shapes student engagement: a more democratic environment not only empowers students but also fosters a sense of belonging and responsibility in the learning process. Encouraging open dialogue, even within the bounds of religious and cultural values, can enhance both academic outcomes and personal development..

Additionally, this study also noted that in classrooms that apply the principle of shura (consultation) in decision-making, students are not only allowed to express their opinions but are also encouraged to think critically and creatively. 80% of students in schools that actively implement consultation expressed that they felt more responsible for the decisions made collectively.

Respect for authority in Islamic Education

Respect for authority in Islamic education is an integral part of the educational process itself. In the context of Islamic education, authority is not limited to the figure of the teacher, but also involves the roles of religious scholars (ulama) and education administrators as sources of knowledge and moral guidance. Respect for authority serves to maintain the unity of religious teachings and to educate the younger generation to continue following the correct principles of Islam. However, the relationship between this authority and the principles of democracy in education is often complex, as traditional authority frequently conflicts with the principle of freedom of speech, which is a core value in democracy [27].

In Islamic education, teachers are viewed as figures who not only transfer knowledge but also function as guides who maintain the morality and ethics of students. Teachers are expected to instill religious values and direct students to live according to Islamic teachings. As authorities in the classroom, teachers hold a respected position and are granted the authority to lead learning and assess students [28]. Respect for teachers is reflected in students' behavior, which generally involves following the teachings of the teacher and being less inclined to challenge their authority.

Similarly, religious scholars and education administrators play important roles in setting the direction and policies of Islamic education. In many Muslim communities, religious scholars hold very high authority, as they are considered the guardians of the correct Islamic teachings. In some madrasahs and Islamic schools, the authority of religious scholars in determining the curriculum content or issuing fatwas followed by the institution is highly dominant [29]. Therefore, respect for religious scholars becomes part of the tradition in Islamic education, where they serve as sources of law and teachings that students and educational administrators must follow.

While Islamic education emphasizes respect for authority, the principles of democracy in education remain important to uphold. Democracy in Islamic education prioritizes freedom of speech, participation, and inclusivity [30]. In many cases, respect for the authority of teachers and religious scholars can align with democratic principles, as long as that authority does not suppress freedom of speech or hinder students' participation in the learning process.

However, in practice, the relationship between authority and democracy in Islamic education is not always easy to reconcile. In more conservative Islamic educational institutions, such as traditional pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), authority is often prioritized, and discussions or debates on religious issues are seen as less important. Students tend to accept teachings without much questioning or criticism [31]. On the other hand, in more progressive Islamic schools, efforts are being made to combine democratic principles with respect for authority, such as through the application of open discussions, consultation (shura), and providing space for students to voice their opinions, while still adhering to valid Islamic teachings.

Although authority is highly respected, some Islamic educational institutions are beginning to adopt more democratic approaches by allowing students to participate in decision-making related to their education. Research findings show that 70% of students in progressive Islamic schools feel they are given the opportunity to express their opinions in decision-making processes, such as determining teaching methods or selecting discussion topics [32]. However, this freedom is still respected within limits that align with Islamic teachings, where teachers and religious scholars remain the ultimate sources of authority, providing guidance and final decisions.

Despite the growing implementation of democratic principles, the greatest challenge faced is how to maintain a balance between freedom of speech and respect for authority, especially in more conservative Islamic educational environments. In many traditional madrasahs, there is a fear of expressing differing or critical views about the teachings provided by teachers or religious scholars, as such views are seen as a form of disobedience to religious authority [20]. This indicates that while there is room for democracy in Islamic education, authority still plays a central role that must be preserved to prevent chaos or division in society.

The Balance Between Freedom and Authority in Islamic Education

Creating a balance between freedom of speech and respect for authority is a challenge faced by many Islamic educational institutions. On one hand, freedom of speech is a crucial element in democratic education, allowing students to develop critical and creative thinking. On the other hand, authority—whether from teachers, religious scholars (ulama), or education administrators—functions to ensure that education remains aligned with authentic Islamic principles [33]. Achieving the right balance between the two is essential for creating an educational environment that is productive, inclusive, and respectful of religious teachings.

Freedom of speech in Islamic education is not only important for the development of students' critical thinking but also for creating a more dynamic and interactive learning environment. Democratic Islamic education provides students with the opportunity to express their opinions, ask questions, and develop their own understanding of Islamic teachings, without fear of punishment or suppression [34]. This freedom allows students to understand Islamic teachings deeply, question their understanding, and recognize that Islam encourages *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) as part of intellectual development.

However, freedom of speech in Islamic education must be framed within principles that align with religious teachings. Therefore, while students are given the freedom to express their opinions, this freedom must remain within boundaries that do not violate Islamic law and must respect fundamental values such as peace, harmony, and interfaith tolerance [35]. This principle indicates that freedom of speech in Islamic education does not mean unlimited freedom but regulated freedom aimed at positive purposes.

Respect for authority in Islamic education remains important to ensure that education stays within the boundaries of authentic religious teachings. In this context, authority is not a restrictive force, but one that guides students in accordance with Islamic values [36]. Teachers, religious scholars, and educational administrators play a key role in providing correct guidance and ensuring that the educational process remains consistent with the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith.

In Islamic educational institutions, the authority of religious scholars is highly respected, especially in determining the direction of religious education. Education administrators also have the responsibility to ensure that the curriculum applied does not deviate from the fundamental principles of Islam [37]. Thus, authority in Islamic education serves as a foundation to ensure that freedom of speech does not lead to deviations from established religious values.

To create a balance between freedom of speech and respect for authority, Islamic educational institutions can adopt inclusive and flexible approaches. One effective method is to implement the principle of *shura* (consultation), where decision-making occurs through collective discussion among teachers, religious scholars, and students [38]. In this consultation, students are given the opportunity to express their opinions, but the final decision is still made with wise consideration by the existing authority, ensuring that the decision aligns with Islamic teachings.

This approach not only provides space for freedom of speech but also teaches students the importance of consultation in decision-making, which is a core value in Islam. Additionally, consultation can foster a sense of student involvement in the learning process, which, in turn, will enhance their sense of responsibility for the decisions made.

In addition to implementing *shura*, Islamic educational institutions can achieve this balance through teaching methods that support freedom of speech within healthy boundaries. For example, by applying open class discussions, healthy debates, or case studies that allow students to think critically and share their opinions [32]. On the other hand, teachers and religious scholars must continue to play the role of guides who direct the discussions and clarify the boundaries that are consistent with Islamic teachings.

For example, in *fiqh* (Islamic law) lessons, students can be encouraged to discuss various legal interpretations, but they must still be guided to understand that certain issues require authoritative references and consensus from religious scholars [39]. In this way, students can learn to respect authority while developing their critical thinking skills.

Challenges in Implementing Democratic Education in Islamic Education

Implementing democratic education in Islamic educational institutions faces several challenges that need to be addressed in order to achieve a balance between freedom of speech and respect for authority [40]. One of the main challenges is the tension between students' freedom of speech and the authority held by teachers or religious scholars (*ulama*). In many Islamic educational institutions, especially those that are more conservative, authority is highly

respected, and freedom of speech is often restricted [41]. Students are more likely to receive religious teachings in the form of lectures or explanations from teachers or religious scholars, without being given the space to ask questions or express their opinions. This hinders the implementation of democratic Islamic education, where students should have the freedom to think critically and voice their ideas.

In addition, resistance to change within the educational structure also presents a significant obstacle. More traditional Islamic educational institutions tend to maintain a more authoritarian approach, offering little opportunity for students to actively participate in discussions or decision-making. This authority-based education makes it difficult to implement democratic principles, where students should be able to engage in the learning process in a more active and inclusive manner [42].

Data shows that around 55% of students in traditional Islamic educational institutions feel that they lack the freedom to express differing opinions, especially when it comes to interpretations of religious teachings. Moreover, the strong influence of cultural and social norms in society exacerbates this situation, as there is a tendency to respect authority without much questioning, which often limits students' freedom to think.

Another challenge faced is the lack of teacher preparedness in managing democratic discussions in the classroom. Many teachers in Islamic educational institutions have not been trained to manage learning environments that involve freedom of speech and critical questioning from students. Most teachers are still more focused on delivering structured and normative material, without leaving space for discussion or independent thinking from students. This highlights the importance of training teachers to implement a more democratic approach to teaching [43]. Additionally, confusion in setting clear boundaries between freedom of speech and authority also presents an issue. Students often do not know how far they can express differing opinions, especially regarding established religious teachings. This lack of clarity creates discomfort and limits students' freedom to think critically, ultimately hindering the achievement of democratic Islamic education goals.

Overall, these challenges indicate that in order to create democratic Islamic education, changes are needed in educational approaches, teacher training, and policies that are more inclusive. By addressing these challenges, Islamic educational institutions can create a more open and participatory environment, where freedom of speech can be valued without disregarding the core principles of Islamic teachings.

CONCLUSION

The balance between freedom of expression and respect for authority represents a critical and ongoing challenge within Islamic educational systems, particularly in contexts marked by diverse interpretations of Islamic values and democratic ideals. This study has shown that while some Islamic schools in Indonesia have made progress by implementing inclusive practices such as *shura* (consultation), a significant number still maintain rigid, authority-centric models that limit students' opportunities for critical engagement.

To foster a more democratic Islamic education, it is essential to support institutional and pedagogical reform. This includes adopting teaching methodologies that allow open dialogue, encouraging debate within Islamic ethical boundaries, and developing curricula that promote both *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and reverence for legitimate religious authority. Teachers should be equipped through targeted professional development programs to manage democratic classroom environments while remaining rooted in Islamic teachings. Policy implications include the revision of Islamic education standards to incorporate participatory decision-making processes at the school level, and the integration of modules on democratic values in teacher training institutions. Ministries of education and Islamic education boards should facilitate this shift by endorsing policies that protect students' rights to express diverse opinions in respectful and theologically sound ways.

For future research, pilot interventions—such as student-led discussion forums or consultative curriculum planning—could be implemented and assessed to evaluate their effectiveness in fostering democratic learning environments. Comparative studies with Islamic schools in other Muslim-majority countries may also provide broader insights into how different cultural and theological contexts mediate this balance. By responsibly embracing both freedom and authority, Islamic education can prepare students not only to think critically but also to embody the ethical and spiritual responsibilities of Islamic life in a pluralistic world.

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Author Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the main contributor to this paper, some are as chairman, member, financier, article translator, and final editor. All authors read and approved the final paper.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

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