

National Curriculum Instability: A Critical Analysis of Curriculum Change Patterns in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT. This study critically examines the dynamics of national curriculum changes in Indonesia, with particular attention to their relationship with changes in political leadership, the absence of a long-term institutional reform framework, and their implications for key educational stakeholders. Employing a qualitative library research approach, the study analyzes curriculum policy documents, findings from previous studies, and field reports produced by various educational institutions and civil society organizations. The findings indicate that curriculum policies in Indonesia have frequently undergone rapid and poorly coordinated changes, particularly following changes in ministerial leadership. This pattern suggests that the curriculum has often functioned as a political instrument rather than as a sustainable pedagogical framework. Frequent curriculum changes have generated disorientation among teachers and students and have placed considerable pressure on schools, while also exacerbating regional disparities in implementation due to unequal access to professional training and educational infrastructure. The study further identifies the absence of an independent institutional body responsible for curriculum governance as a significant structural weakness that undermines policy continuity and long-term, evidence-based evaluation. The findings underscore the urgency of establishing an autonomous institutional framework and a participatory, evidence-based curriculum evaluation system to ensure a more inclusive and sustainable transformation of Indonesian education. This study contributes to the broader discourse on educational policy reform by offering a conceptual foundation for developing a more stable, equitable, and contextually responsive national curriculum.

Keywords: curriculum change; education policy; teachers and schools; curriculum governance; implementation disparities

INTRODUCTION

Education constitutes a fundamental foundation for the development of a nation, while the curriculum serves as a central instrument for organizing learning systematically and measurably. In Indonesia, curriculum changes have reflected the state's response to changing demands and challenges across different periods. However, these changes have also revealed a pattern of inconsistency. Over the past two decades, Indonesia has experienced at least four major national

curriculum changes: the Competency-Based Curriculum (KBK) in 2004, the School-Based Curriculum (KTSP) in 2006, the 2013 Curriculum, and the Merdeka Curriculum beginning in 2022. These changes have frequently coincided with changes in political leadership, creating the impression that curriculum policy has been oriented toward short-term political considerations. The recurring perception that “a change of minister means a change of curriculum” points to a structural issue in educational governance. Schools, teachers, and students may consequently become objects of policy experimentation without being supported by comprehensive and participatory evaluation mechanisms (Nasution & Indrasari, 2024; Lubis et al., 2024).

Although the importance of character in HRM has been widely acknowledged, its implementation in Islamic educational institutions continues to face fundamental challenges. Many institutions still emphasize technical competencies in recruitment, training, and performance evaluation, while character dimensions such as integrity, responsibility, honesty, and discipline have not been systematically established as core indicators of HRM (Basit, Ahmad, Azhari, Ingriza, & Qurba, 2024). This situation creates a gap between institutional visions that uphold Islamic values and the everyday behavior of teaching and administrative personnel. The questions that consequently arise are: How are character values integrated into HRM strategies in Islamic educational institutions under the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Bitung City? Furthermore, what character values are relevant, and what are their implications for Islamic educational institutions under the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Bitung City?

This situation raises a critical question: why is curriculum policy so vulnerable to changes in ministerial leadership? The absence of a long-term, evidence-based framework for educational reform means that curriculum changes may reflect ideological preferences, political visions, or populist strategies (Imran, 2024). The consequences include policy instability, weakened teacher capacity to adapt, and potential disruption to learning effectiveness. Indonesia also lacks a sufficiently strong and sustainable independent mechanism for curriculum governance; policy processes tend to remain top-down, and participatory mechanisms and longitudinal evaluation are limited (Uribe Alvarado & Galigao, 2024). The central issue, therefore, is how curriculum policy can be insulated from short-term political intervention while remaining responsive to educational and social change.

This study aims to critically examine patterns of national curriculum change that are associated with ministerial leadership. The analysis focuses on structural, political, and institutional factors that contribute to limited policy continuity, as well as on the concrete implications of these changes at the grassroots level, particularly teacher readiness, school adaptation, and students' learning experiences. The study is intended to contribute to the development of a national curriculum that is more stable, responsive, and sustainable.

Previous studies on curriculum change in Indonesia have generally emphasized technical and instructional issues, implementation, teacher readiness, and student learning outcomes. Less attention has been devoted to the structural and political roots of curriculum instability. There are also relatively few studies that explicitly connect political power dynamics, particularly changes in ministerial leadership, with the direction of curriculum policy. Similarly, analytical frameworks for curriculum governance that can protect policy continuity from short-term political intervention remain limited. This gap indicates the need for a more reflective and solution-oriented examination of curriculum policy.

The novelty of this study lies in applying a political education and policy-governance perspective to curriculum change, particularly by examining the relationship among political power, ministerial leadership, and curriculum direction as factors affecting system stability. The study contributes theoretically by positioning the curriculum not merely as a techno-pedagogical instrument but also as a complex political policy product. Practically, it seeks to provide a conceptual basis for a stable, consistent, and participatory national curriculum, supported by an independent curriculum institution oriented toward the public interest in education rather than short-term political considerations.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative library research approach to explore and analyze national curriculum policy changes and their relationship with ministerial leadership dynamics. The approach was selected because the study focuses on policy documents, scholarly literature, and institutional reports rather than on primary field observations.

The data sources consist of official curriculum policy documents issued by the Ministry of Education, including academic manuscripts and ministerial regulations from the 2004 Competency-Based Curriculum through the Merdeka Curriculum; national and international journal articles addressing curriculum change, educational politics, and policy governance; books on educational and political curriculum theory; and reports produced by educational organizations and independent research institutions.

Data were analyzed through thematic content analysis. The analysis involved identifying, categorizing, and interpreting recurring themes concerning patterns of curriculum change, political factors influencing curriculum policy, and the implications of curriculum instability for educational sustainability. To strengthen validity, the study applied source triangulation and critical reading across multiple theoretical perspectives, including public policy, educational leadership, and curriculum reform. This approach was intended to produce a comprehensive, in-depth, and argumentative understanding of the issue and to formulate a conceptual proposal for more stable, inclusive, and scientifically grounded curriculum policy reform.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Curriculum as a Representation of Political and Ideological Interests

The history of the Indonesian curriculum is closely connected to the country's political dynamics. During the New Order period (1966–1998), the curriculum functioned, among other things, as an ideological instrument for producing citizens who were obedient to the state (Marzuqi & Ahid, 2023). The 1968 and 1975 curricula emphasized Pancasila indoctrination, loyalty to the state, and uniformity of thought (Alhamuddin et al., 2020). This reflected a centralized political system characterized by strong governmental control over education (Anitasari & Cahyono, 2023). From the perspective of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, the curriculum may be understood as a hegemonic instrument through which dominant social structures and the status quo are reproduced.

The 1984 and 1994 curricula introduced modernization-oriented elements but retained substantial state control. The 1984 curriculum, often associated with a process-oriented approach, promoted active learning; however, its implementation was constrained by bureaucratic culture and limited teacher training (Ginanjari et al., 2024). The 1994 curriculum placed greater emphasis on content mastery and time efficiency while maintaining centralized control. Although educational innovation was rhetorically promoted, the New Order's development logic prioritized political stability and economic growth over the cultivation of critical capacities (Imelda et al., 2023).

Following the Reformasi period, the 2004 Competency-Based Curriculum shifted the orientation of curriculum policy from inputs toward learning outcomes and competencies (Laia et al., 2024). This shift reflected an increased emphasis on individual capacity and competencies associated with twenty-first-century learning. Nevertheless, decentralization created challenges, including regional disparities, differences in teacher readiness, and weak systemic support (Lature et al., 2024). The Competency-Based Curriculum was subsequently replaced by the 2006 School-Based Curriculum, which granted schools greater autonomy but also generated confusion because implementation guidance and institutional capacity were not always adequate.

In the post-Reformasi period, curriculum changes became increasingly frequent, and changes in ministerial leadership were often accompanied by new curricula or substantial policy reformulations (Herman et al., 2023). The 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum illustrate this pattern. Rapid policy transitions with limited national consolidation have also made curriculum

policy an arena in which political contestation and bureaucratic image-building may occur (Muth'im, 2014). From a critical policy perspective, the limited continuity and weak reliance on evidence-based longitudinal evaluation indicate the influence of short political cycles.

Critical curriculum theorists such as Apple (1979) and Giroux (1983) view the curriculum as a social and political construction containing values, interests, and ideological orientations. The state can use curriculum policy as an instrument of cultural dominance and ideological hegemony. In Indonesia, this function has been reflected in the teaching of citizenship, nationalism, and narratives of national development. During the New Order, subjects and materials such as Pancasila Moral Education and standardized national history were used within centralized narratives of national development to cultivate citizens characterized by obedience, uniformity, and limited critical engagement.

The political function of the curriculum has not disappeared in the post-Reformasi period. The 2013 Curriculum emphasized character formation and the integration of spiritual and social dimensions as part of a broader reorientation of national educational values. The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced under a ministerial leadership associated with deregulation, flexibility, and digital innovation, emphasized greater curricular flexibility and teacher autonomy. Each curriculum can therefore be understood in relation to national political conditions, configurations of power, and ideological orientations.

The curriculum also reflects the development vision and ideological direction of the government in power. The 1975 and 1984 curricula, for example, were closely associated with political stability and economic development, emphasizing discipline, loyalty to the state, and standardized knowledge. Their top-down orientation limited meaningful participation by teachers and communities and reflected centralized technocratic authority. In this sense, the curriculum can function as an apparatus of the state through which broader political and developmental agendas are institutionalized.

The “Change of Minister, Change of Curriculum” Phenomenon: Structural Roots and Policy Dynamics

Repeated curriculum changes in Indonesia have often coincided with changes in ministerial leadership (Anitasari & Cahyono, 2023). Since the Reformasi period, almost every ministerial transition has been associated with a new policy direction or a substantial reformulation of existing curriculum policy. Examples include the Competency-Based Curriculum under Yahya Muhaimin (2001), the School-Based Curriculum under Bambang Sudibyo (2006), the 2013 Curriculum under Mohammad Nuh (2013), and the Merdeka Curriculum under Nadiem Makarim (2022). Although each reform was presented as an educational innovation, the timing and succession of reforms raise questions concerning policy consistency and continuity (Qonita, 2023).

Curriculum policy has tended to be personalistic and top-down, with substantial emphasis on the minister's policy vision rather than on empirical needs, longitudinal evidence, and research-based evaluation (Lubis et al., 2024). The absence of a strong institutional mechanism for policy continuity has contributed to fragmented and uneven implementation. Teachers, principals, and educational institutions have repeatedly been required to adapt to substantive changes without adequate structural preparation or continuous training (Hutabarat, 2018). The absence of an autonomous and independent professional curriculum body also creates space for political considerations to exert substantial influence over curriculum direction.

The transition from the 2004 Competency-Based Curriculum to the 2006 School-Based Curriculum represented a shift from centralization toward decentralization. The Competency-Based Curriculum was designed around competencies but was considered too theoretical and difficult to implement because operational guidance was insufficient. The School-Based Curriculum provided schools with greater autonomy in developing syllabi and learning strategies (Abong, 2008). Ministerial Regulations No. 22 and No. 23 of 2006 provided a formal basis for this policy, but many schools lacked the institutional and human-resource capacity required to

independently design and implement curriculum. Autonomy was therefore not always accompanied by adequate capacity building (Yulianto, 2015).

The 2013 Curriculum under Mohammad Nuh emphasized scientific learning and the integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, with the stated aim of developing productive, creative, and character-oriented learners (Wanojaleni, 2021). Ministerial Regulation No. 81A of 2013 provided a framework for curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation. Subsequent evaluation identified substantial administrative burdens, insufficient continuous training, and the complexity of authentic assessment (Khotimah, 2015). The policy was implemented through a relatively top-down process and was introduced rapidly, with limited national piloting, weak transition arrangements, and insufficient grassroots participation.

The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced in 2022 under Nadiem Makarim and emphasized flexibility, differentiation, and greater school and teacher autonomy. Ministerial Regulation No. 5 of 2022 incorporated the Profile of Pancasila Students, project-based learning, and greater freedom for teachers to select learning materials (Mangesti & Kismartini, 2024). The policy was also associated with post-pandemic learning recovery and educational digitalization. Although decentralization and innovation were emphasized, implementation disparities remained, particularly in schools with limited resources (Qolbi & Susiawati, 2025). The absence of a strong evaluative foundation derived from previous curricula may contribute to a repetitive and reactive policy cycle. Rapid policy changes therefore point to continuing challenges related to sustainability, data use, and participation.

A major structural cause of curriculum instability is the absence of a long-term and systemic institutional mechanism for curriculum reform (Herman et al., 2023). Curriculum policy has often been associated with short-term political visions rather than with a stable national blueprint (Rosser et al., 2021). Ideally, curriculum reform should be based on a reflective and evaluative process involving longitudinal data, pedagogical research, and multisectoral participation, rather than being strongly shaped by short political cycles. Indonesia currently lacks a formal National Curriculum Reform Council or an Independent Curriculum Evaluation Body with a specific mandate to oversee long-term curriculum continuity and evaluation.

The absence of an independent institution specifically responsible for overseeing, reviewing, and developing the national curriculum is a significant institutional issue. Curriculum formulation and evaluation remain closely connected to the education ministry's bureaucratic structure and, consequently, to the political cycle. Comparative discussions frequently point to curriculum governance arrangements in countries such as Finland, Australia, and South Korea that involve specialized or relatively autonomous institutional structures. In Indonesia, the dependence of curriculum governance on ministerial structures means that changes in cabinet leadership can alter curriculum direction and design without necessarily ensuring pedagogical continuity.

The Impact of Curriculum Policy Instability on Educational Practice

Rapid curriculum changes accompanied by insufficient transition planning place considerable pressure on teachers. Teachers are required to understand new content while simultaneously adapting learning strategies, assessment practices, and teaching materials. These conditions can produce pedagogical confusion, administrative fatigue, and professional stagnation when continuous training and clear local implementation guidance are limited (Fikri & Prasetya, 2024).

Students may also experience uncertainty when learning approaches, assessment systems, and content are repeatedly modified (Williams & Howley, 1989). The transition from the scientific-learning orientation of the 2013 Curriculum to the project-based and differentiated approaches associated with the Merdeka Curriculum occurred within a relatively short period and did not always provide sufficient orientation. Such transitions can disrupt learning continuity and may widen regional achievement disparities, particularly where marginal schools are more vulnerable to learning loss (Bonnet & Glazier, 2023).

At the school level, unstable curriculum changes can disrupt educational program planning, resource management, and internal quality evaluation (Latif et al., 2024). School principals and managers must interpret rapidly changing national policies while operating without uniformly consistent technical guidance and supervision. This can weaken institutional functions and contribute to organizational fragmentation and reactive work cultures, potentially disrupting long-term school development programs (Webster, 1976). Structural reform is therefore important for strengthening stability, accountability, and stakeholder participation.

Curriculum changes can also generate substantial administrative burdens. Under the School-Based Curriculum, the 2013 Curriculum, and the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers have been required to prepare curriculum-related documents, lesson plans, assessment instruments, and digital student reports (Haeri & Afriansyah, 2024). When these requirements are not balanced by streamlined procedures and adequate system support, teachers' time may be diverted from meaningful instructional planning. A disjunction may emerge between the policy aspiration for active and personalized learning and rigid technical-administrative requirements. This condition can contribute to teacher burnout and may reduce classroom quality (Fatimah et al., 2024).

Another major issue concerns the weakness of teacher training. Comprehensive, continuous, and context-sensitive professional development has not always accompanied curriculum reform. Training may be delivered in short, one-way, and procedural formats rather than through sustained pedagogical support. Teachers may consequently experience difficulties in integrating twenty-first-century competencies, formative assessment, and differentiated learning. In some regions, access to training is further constrained by funding, technological limitations, and coordination problems. Continuous professional development should therefore be treated as an integral component of curriculum implementation rather than as an ancillary activity.

Curriculum instability can also exacerbate regional disparities. Urban schools with better internet access, more highly trained teachers, and stronger community support may adapt more easily than schools in disadvantaged regions. Schools in underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost areas may face limitations in digital literacy, professional training, and instructional materials. Technology-oriented and flexible curricula can unintentionally widen disparities when successful implementation depends heavily on local readiness. Without sufficient sensitivity to spatial and social differences, curriculum policy may reproduce existing inequalities.

Reports cited in the study from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology and regional education quality assurance institutions indicate that only 42 percent of schools had full access to government-provided digital teaching materials, while fewer than 30 percent of teachers reported confidence in implementing differentiated learning (Miftahudin et al., 2024). Schools in disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost areas also face gaps in access to information and training (Tomasouw et al., 2024). Without institutional reform and context-sensitive implementation strategies, progressive curriculum designs may continue to encounter significant barriers.

Curriculum reform also requires sufficient stabilization time. Short intervals between major curriculum changes can disrupt continuity because every new curriculum requires time for teachers and schools to internalize, adapt to, and consolidate new practices. Frequent changes may result in inconsistencies in instructional methods, confusion in assessment, and weak alignment between policy goals and classroom practice (Nasution & Indrasari, 2024). Implementation theory emphasizes the importance of a stabilization phase involving training, supervision, internal policy adjustment, and habituation of new practices; one study cited in this article estimates that such consolidation may require approximately three to five years (Wulandari, 2022).

Curriculum instability may ultimately hinder pedagogical innovation. Teachers may be required to adapt to a new approach before they have completed the process of implementing and reflecting on the previous one. As a result, reflective practice can be weakened and schools may become preoccupied with repeated administrative adaptation. In the long term, this may generate institutional fatigue and reduce the willingness of educational communities to invest in innovation.

when policy continuity is uncertain. A rapid policy cycle without sufficient stabilization can therefore undermine not only learning effectiveness but also the institutional foundations needed to develop a reflective and adaptive learning culture.

CONCLUSION

Curriculum change in Indonesia is not solely a pedagogical matter; it is also influenced by political configurations, leadership changes, and the absence of institutional mechanisms capable of maintaining policy continuity and accountability. From the New Order period to the post-Reformasi era, repeated curriculum revisions have reflected changing ideological and developmental orientations. The recurring phenomenon commonly described as “a change of minister, a change of curriculum” indicates the continuing weakness of long-term evaluation and evidence-based policy mechanisms. The absence of an independent curriculum institution may further strengthen the influence of political cycles, allowing curriculum policy to function as a symbolic instrument of power rather than consistently as an instrument for improving learning quality.

Rapid and unstable curriculum changes have direct implications for teachers, students, and school management. Teachers face administrative pressure and insufficient continuous training; students may experience disorientation in learning; and schools face disruption in program planning, resource management, and quality assurance. The lack of sufficient stabilization time also constrains pedagogical innovation and weakens institutional capacity to develop a reflective and adaptive learning culture.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools, including ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot, to support language editing and improve grammatical accuracy. The authors carefully reviewed and edited the output generated by these tools and take full responsibility for the manuscript's content.

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