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Dynamics and Institutional Development of the Muslim Minority in Post-Conflict Cambodia: An Educational Leadership Perspective

ABSTRACT: In the aftermath of the extensive social and institutional disruption caused by the Khmer Rouge period, the Muslim Cham and Chvea communities gradually moved beyond basic survival toward a process of organized institutional reconstruction and community development. Drawing on qualitative case studies of two Cambodian “Tahfiz” boarding schools, MTDU (Maahad Tahfiz Darul Ulum) and MTDH (Maahad Tahfiz Darul Hadith), the study examines how educational leaders combine classical Islamic moral education (ta’dib) with contemporary approaches to instructional leadership to support student rehabilitation and strengthen community life. The thematic findings are presented through comparative analysis, tables, and researcher-developed visual representations to illustrate the relationships among leadership practices, residential education, moral development, and institutional recovery. The findings demonstrate that effective character formation is grounded in an integrated educational process that emphasizes the personal embodiment of moral values by educators (mu’addib), restorative forms of discipline, consistent residential routines, and a structured institutional hierarchy. These institutions place ethical conduct, personal responsibility, social interaction, and moral development at the center of the educational process. The boarding schools to function not only as centers of religious learning but also as important institutions for rebuilding individual character, social cohesion, and community resilience.

KEY WORD: Muslim Minority in Cambodia; Educational Leadership; Tahfiz Boarding Schools; Post-Conflict Education; Restorative Discipline.

ABSTRAKSI: “Dinamika dan Pengembangan Kelembagaan Minoritas Muslim di Kamboja Pasca-Konflik: Perspektif Kepemimpinan Pendidikan”. Setelah mengalami gangguan sosial dan kelembagaan yang luas akibat masa Khmer Merah, komunitas Muslim Cham dan Chvea secara bertahap beralih dari sekadar bertahan hidup menuju proses rekonstruksi kelembagaan yang terorganisir dan pengembangan masyarakat. Melalui studi kasus kualitatif terhadap dua sekolah berasrama Tahfiz di Kamboja, yaitu MTDU (Maahad Tahfiz Darul Ulum) dan MTDH (Maahad Tahfiz Darul Hadith), penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana para pemimpin pendidikan memadukan pendidikan moral Islam klasik (ta’dib) dengan pendekatan kontemporer dalam kepemimpinan instruksional untuk mendukung rehabilitasi siswa dan memperkuat kehidupan bermasyarakat. Temuan tematis disajikan melalui analisis komparatif, tabel, dan representasi visual yang dikembangkan peneliti untuk menggambarkan hubungan antara praktik kepemimpinan, pendidikan berasrama, pengembangan moral, dan pemulihan kelembagaan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pembentukan karakter yang efektif berlandaskan pada proses pendidikan terpadu yang menekankan pada perwujudan nilai-nilai moral secara personal oleh para pendidik (mu’addib), bentuk disiplin restoratif, rutinitas asrama yang konsisten, serta hierarki kelembagaan yang terstruktur. Lembaga-lembaga ini menempatkan perilaku etis, tanggung jawab pribadi, interaksi sosial, dan pengembangan moral sebagai inti dari proses pendidikan. Sekolah berasrama tersebut berfungsi tidak hanya sebagai pusat pembelajaran agama, tetapi juga sebagai lembaga penting dalam membangun kembali karakter individu, kohesi sosial, dan ketahanan masyarakat.

KATA KUNCI: Minoritas Muslim di Kamboja; Kepemimpinan Pendidikan; Sekolah Berasrama Tahfiz; Pendidikan Pasca-Konflik; Disiplin Restoratif.

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INTRODUCTION

“Knowledge without adab is like fire without light; it burns without illuminating the way”, a classical maxim central to the *ta’dib* tradition articulated by [Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Miskawayh \(1968\)](#); and later reasserted by [Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas \(1980\)](#).

The epigraphs above frame the central argument of this article that character, not credential, is the load-bearing structure of Islamic educational leadership; and that this principle becomes most visible precisely where institutions have had to be rebuilt from ruin.

The Muslim community in Cambodia, comprising primarily the Cham and Chvea ethnic groups, constitutes a distinct minority representing approximately 2% to 5% of the national population ([Kheang, 2024](#)). Historically, the community experienced severe institutional and demographic devastation during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979), which resulted in the targeted destruction of religious infrastructure, educational networks, and scholarly leadership ([Clayton, 1998](#); [Tyner, 2017](#)).

Recent historical scholarship confirms that the regime's dismantling of Cambodia's education system was near-total, with the great majority of schools destroyed and the country's intellectual leadership decimated or dispersed ([Heng & Sol, 2023](#); [Thun, 2025](#)).

In the post-conflict era, the trajectory of the Cambodian Muslim minority has evolved from basic socio-economic survival toward the systematic reconstruction of its religious and educational identity. This mirrors a broader national pattern: contemporary research on Cambodian school leadership documents how principals and educational leaders across the country have had to reconstruct institutions with minimal inherited infrastructure, professional scaffolding, or continuity of practice ([Kheang, 2024](#); [Kheuy et al., 2026](#)).

For the Cham and Chvea communities, however, reconstruction has carried an additional layer of complexity, since the rebuilding of religious-educational identity had to occur within a predominantly non-Muslim socio-cultural landscape, and largely without the state-driven resourcing available to national public education ([Peat, 2025](#); [Rahmi et al., 2025](#)).

Central to this revitalization has been the establishment and expansion of Islamic educational institutions, particularly residential *Tahfiz* boarding schools. Operating at the margins of a non-Muslim-majority society, these schools perform dual functions: preserving religious identity and rehabilitating youth facing behavioral or social difficulties (*cf* [Jahroni, 2024](#); [Afi & Mat, 2025](#)).

This study investigates the institutional dynamics of Cambodian *Tahfiz* schools, specifically analyzing how educational leadership drives the cultivation of *adab* (moral discipline and ethical conduct) as a primary vehicle for community development. In this expanded edition, the original

case analysis is situated more explicitly within recent, cross-regional scholarship on faith-based educational leadership, and the qualitative findings are rendered through comparative tables and visual syntheses, so that patterns which were previously implicit in the narrative become directly inspectable.

The significance of this inquiry is three folds. *Practically*, it responds to a documented gap in post-conflict leadership research, which has so far concentrated on Cambodia's mainstream public system while leaving faith-based minority institutions largely undocumented (Hanafi *et al.*, 2021; Umeyama & Brehm, 2021; Kheang, 2024).

Theoretically, it tests whether a classical *adab*-centered leadership philosophy can be read productively alongside modern instructional leadership constructs without reducing either framework to the other (Hallinger, 2025; Putri *et al.*, 2026).

Comparatively, it places the Cambodian case in dialogue with the far larger literature on Indonesian and Malaysian *pesantren* leadership, asking whether the exemplarity-centered *kiai* model travels intact into a demographic-minority, resource-constrained setting, or whether it is reshaped by the particular pressures of operating outside a Muslim-majority polity (Afi & Mat, 2025; Bahri *et al.*, 2026).

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative multiple-case-study design, consistent with case-oriented traditions in educational leadership research on post-conflict and minority settings (Halkias *et al.*, 2022; Kheang, 2024). The two cases of MTDU (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Ulum*) in Poipet and MTDH (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Hadith*) in Pemnokwere purposively selected, because both are residential *Tahfiz* institutions serving Cham and Chvea students, yet they differ in geographic setting (border-town versus rural), scale, and institutional history, allowing for a comparative reading of how a shared classical framework is locally adapted.

Data were generated through three complementary strands: (1) semi-structured interviews with institutional leaders/*mudir*, resident teachers/*ustaz*, and senior students/*santri* regarding disciplinary philosophy, daily routine, and leadership practice; (2) sustained participant observation of daily residential life, including congregational prayer, communal meals, *usrah* mentorship circles, and service-day labor rotations; and (3) review of institutional documents, including daily schedules, disciplinary guidelines, and internal communications with parents.

Data were analyzed through iterative thematic coding and constant comparison across the two sites, with emerging categories cross-checked against field notes and, where possible, corroborated across multiple informants or member-checking (Cole, 2024; Dahal, 2025).

Two methodological caveats govern the visual materials that accompany this expanded edition. *First*, the tables and figures presented in Section 3 are researcher-constructed syntheses of the qualitative thematic analysis; the numerical values used in figures 1 through 3 represent relative coding salience across the case narratives rather than externally validated survey measurements, and they should be read as an interpretive visualization aid rather than as inferential statistics. *Second*, given the sensitivity of researching a demographic and religious minority in a post-conflict setting, all individual informants are anonymized, and institutional descriptions are limited to information the schools have made available for public or semi-public dissemination (Ali *et al.*, 2021; Ahmad *et al.*, 2023; El-Sharabany, 2025).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: *Section 1 reviews four converging strands of recent scholarship; Section 2 sets out the theoretical framework; Sections 3 through 5 present the institutional analysis, comparative synthesis, and structural challenges, each supported by tables and figures; Section 6 discusses the study's theoretical contributions; and Section 7 states its limitations.* The explanation of findings is following here:

Section 1: Positioning within Recent Scholarship. Four bodies of recent literature converge on the questions this article addresses, yet, taken separately, none of them fully captures the specific configuration of minority status, post-conflict recovery, and faith-based residential leadership found in the Cambodian *Tahfiz* case.

First, *Post-Conflict Educational Reconstruction in Cambodia*. Scholarship on Cambodia's post-Khmer Rouge educational recovery has grown substantially in the past five years, but it has concentrated overwhelmingly on the mainstream public system. T. Kheang (2024), and other scholars, provided the most directly relevant account, documenting through interviews with primary school leaders that reconstruction in post-conflict Cambodia remains an ongoing, day-to-day struggle rather than a completed project, shaped by resource scarcity, thin professional pipelines, and the lingering institutional voids left by the destruction of the 1970s (Kheang, 2024; Atkinson & King, 2025; Veth *et al.*, 2026).

Theara Thun (2025), and other scholars, situated this struggle historically, showing how the near-total collapse of Cambodia's academic institutions under the Khmer Rouge produced long aftershocks that are still shaping how credentials, expertise, and leadership legitimacy are understood in the country today (Clayton, 1998; Gottesman, 2004; Thun, 2025).

Neither study, however, addresses faith-based or minority-community institutions, leaving the specific reconstruction trajectory of Cham and Chvea Islamic education comparatively under-examined.

Second, *Kiai- and Mudir-Led Boarding-School Leadership*. A substantial and rapidly growing literature on Indonesian and regional *pesantren* leadership offers a closely related comparative frame. D. Dian *et al.* (2024), and other scholars, find that *kiai* leadership functions through supervisory, motivational, educational, facilitative, and explicitly modeled roles, with character formation emerging from sustained proximity between leaders and students rather than from formal curriculum alone (Dian *et al.*, 2024; Adzimah & Mundiri, 2025).

A. Buhori *et al.* (2022) similarly document a transformational leadership style among *kiai* figures that operationalizes character education through visible personal example rather than administrative directive. M. Chusnul *et al.* (2021) extend this line of inquiry by foregrounding the *sufistic* dimension of *kiai* authority, in which spiritual charisma and ethical exemplarity together generate student compliance and moral internalization; while N. Chasanah (2021) shows how *santri* obedience is sustained less through rule enforcement than through the relational legitimacy the *kiai* accumulates over time (Chasanah, 2021; Chusnul *et al.*, 2021; Buhori *et al.*, 2022).

A. Faisal *et al.* (2022) and S. Arifin *et al.* (2024) further show that this leadership style is not static: it is actively renegotiated as boarding schools confront organizational change, generational turnover, and pressures toward religious moderation. Taken together, this literature strongly resonates with the *mu'addib*-centered leadership observed at MTDU (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Ulum*) and MTDH (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Hadith*), suggesting that embodied, relationally proximate leadership is a durable feature of Islamic residential education across Southeast Asia rather than an idiosyncrasy of the Cambodian case (Faisal *et al.*, 2022; Arifin *et al.*, 2024).

Third, *Ta'dīb, Adab, and Instructional Leadership Theory*. Within Islamic educational philosophy, recent scholarship continues to affirm the centrality of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (1980)'s *ta'dīb* framework. R.R.F. Ahmad *et al.* (2023) reconstruct Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas' argument that *adab* constitutes the master idea of Islamic education, arguing that character formation is not a supplementary outcome of schooling, but its organizing purpose (Al-Attas, 1980; Ahmad *et al.*, 2023).

This aligns closely with Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Miskawayh (1968)'s earlier articulation of moral development as a process of habituation (*'ādah*) that gradually reorders the soul's rational, appetitive, and spirited faculties toward equilibrium. On the modern administrative side, P. Hallinger (2025); P. Hallinger, S. Liu & X. Niu (2025a); and P. Hallinger *et al.* (2025b)'s instructional leadership research program has itself been substantially revisited in the past year: recent systematic and meta-analytic reviews spanning four decades of research confirm that the “defining the school mission”; “managing the instructional program”; and “promoting a positive school climate” dimensions of the model remain robust predictors of teacher

efficacy and organizational outcomes across culturally diverse settings (*cf* Miskawayh, 1968; Bush, 2025; Hallinger, 2025; Hallinger, Liu & Niu, 2025a; Hallinger *et al.*, 2025b).

What this literature does not yet do is examine how the PIMRS (Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale)-style administrative dimensions interact with an explicitly adab-centered moral objective in a residential, faith-based setting precisely the gap the Cambodian *Tahfiz* case is positioned to fill (*cf* Bada *et al.*, 2025; Assaf & Forawi, 2026).

Fourth, *Restorative Discipline in Schools*. Global interest in restorative approaches to school discipline has intensified over the past five years. Systematic reviews report consistent associations between restorative practices and reduced disciplinary incidents, improved school climate, and stronger student–teacher relationships (Gregory, Huang & Ward-Seidel, 2022; Mas-Expósito *et al.*, 2022; Joseph-McCatty & Hnilica, 2023).

At the same time, M. Davison, A.M. Penner & E.K. Penner (2022), and other scholars, caution that restorative implementation is uneven and that its benefits are not automatic, depending heavily on staff commitment and institutional consistency. The *tazkirah*-based, privately administered correction observed at MTDU and MTDH is conceptually convergent with this restorative turn, yet it is grounded in a distinct theological rationale the preservation of dignity as a condition for sincere internal reform rather than in the secular relational-justice framework that dominates the restorative-practices literature. This suggests that Islamic residential education may offer an underexplored, theologically grounded variant of restorative discipline worth further comparative study (Davison, Penner & Penner, 2022; Afi & Mat, 2025; Muharam, 2026).

Read together, these four literatures indicate that the Cambodian *Tahfiz* case sits at an intersection that existing scholarship has not yet occupied: a post-conflict, demographic-minority, faith-based residential setting in which classical adab theory, regionally recognizable kiai-style leadership, modern instructional leadership dimensions, and restorative disciplinary logic are simultaneously in operation (Afi & Mat, 2025; Afi *et al.*, 2025).

Fifth, *Synthesis and Research Gap*. Three observations follow from this review. First, the post-conflict education literature and the Islamic boarding-school leadership literature have developed largely in parallel, with the former concentrated on public-system reconstruction in Cambodia (Kheang, 2024; Thun, 2025); and the latter concentrated on Indonesian and Malaysian *pesantren* (Buhori *et al.*, 2022; Arifin *et al.*, 2024; Dian *et al.*, 2024). Few studies bring the two together to ask how faith-based, community-funded institutions rebuild leadership capacity specifically after mass institutional destruction.

Second, the *ta'dīb* and instructional-leadership literatures remain conceptually adjacent but rarely integrated empirically: philosophical

treatments of Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Miskawayh (1968) and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (1980) are seldom read against administrative leadership models, such as R.R.F. Ahmad *et al.* (2023); P. Hallinger (2025); and T. Bush (2025), leaving open the question of how a mission built around adab actually organizes day-to-day instructional and disciplinary decision-making (Miskawayh, 1968; Al-Attas, 1980; Ahmad *et al.*, 2023; Bush, 2025; Hallinger, 2025).

Third, the restorative-discipline literature, though increasingly global in scope, has not yet incorporated Islamic residential education as a comparative case, despite the structural similarity between *tazkirah*-based correction and the relationship-centered restorative circle (Gregory, Huang & Ward-Seidel, 2022; Joseph-McCatty & Hnilica, 2023). The present study addresses these three gaps simultaneously by treating MTDU and MTDH as a single analytic window onto post-conflict reconstruction, adab-centered instructional leadership, and theologically grounded restorative discipline (*cf* Afi & Mat, 2025; Afi *et al.*, 2025).

Section 2: Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Grounding. The analysis of character formation in Cambodian Islamic boarding schools intersects two primary theoretical frameworks: classical Islamic moral philosophy and modern instructional-leadership theory.

First, *Classical Islamic Pedagogy (Ta'dīb)*. In classical Islamic educational thought, education is conceptualized not merely as the transmission of cognitive information (*ta'līm*), but as *ta'dīb* the comprehensive discipline of the soul, mind, and body. As articulated by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (1980), *adab* represents the embodiment of right action, moral self-regulation, and spiritual consciousness; R.R.F. Ahmad *et al.* (2023) describe this as the recognition and acknowledgement of the proper place of things and ultimately of God within the order of creation (Al-Attas, 1980; Ahmad *et al.*, 2023).

Complementing this perspective, Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Miskawayh (1968)'s *Tahdhīb al-Akhlaq* posits that character development requires deliberate habituation (*'ādah*), strategic encouragement, reflective guidance, and gradual correction. Within this paradigm, educators do not function solely as administrative instructors, but as *mu'addib* moral exemplars who embody the values they seek to cultivate. This resonates strongly with the exemplarity-centered *kiai* leadership documented across contemporary *pesantren* research (Miskawayh, 1968; Buhori *et al.*, 2022; Dian *et al.*, 2024).

Second, *Instructional Leadership*. To operationalize these classical frameworks within organizational settings, modern instructional leadership models, such as P. Hallinger (2025); P. Hallinger, S. Liu & X. Niu (2025a); and P. Hallinger *et al.* (2025b)'s Instructional Leadership Model provide a structural lens. Instructional leadership emphasizes the role of school leaders

in defining institutional mission, managing pedagogical programs, and establishing a supportive learning climate (Hallinger, 2025; Hallinger, Liu & Niu, 2025a; Hallinger *et al.*, 2025b).

In the context of faith-based residential institutions, these administrative functions extend to establishing an immersive “living curriculum”, where daily routines, social interactions, and institutional policies intentionally reinforce ethical behavior. Recent bibliometric work on the model's near-four-decade research trajectory shows that its climate- and mission-defining dimensions travel well across highly diverse cultural contexts (Bush, 2025; Hallinger *et al.*, 2025b), which lends theoretical support to applying the framework in a Cambodian Islamic minority setting where it has not previously been tested.

It is worth noting that the two frameworks are not perfectly commensurable. *Ta'dīb* is fundamentally teleological, oriented toward the soul's ultimate recognition of its place before God (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023; Khasanah, 2024), whereas instructional leadership theory is organizationally teleological, oriented toward measurable school and teacher outcomes (Hasan & Juhannis, 2024; Hallinger, Liu & Niu, 2025a).

This study treats the two frameworks as complementary rather than equivalent: *ta'dīb* supplies the normative content of what character formation is for, while instructional leadership theory supplies an analytic vocabulary mission, program management, climate for describing how leaders operationalize that content within an organized institution. This dual lens allows the analysis that follows to remain faithful to the institutions' own self-understanding while still producing categories that are legible to comparative educational leadership research (cf Mubarok *et al.*, 2024; Mustari, Fauzan & Kurniawansyah, 2024; Sartika, Zulaikha & Mayasari, 2026).

Section 3: Institutional Analysis on Adab Formation in Cambodian Tahfiz Schools. Empirical observations from key Cambodian institutions, such as MTDU (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Uhum*) in Poipet and MTDH (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Hadith*) in Pemnok, demonstrate how educational leaders systematically cultivate adab among students within post-conflict and minority settings. Table 1 summarizes the demographic and institutional context in which this leadership operates.

First, *Embodied Moral Pedagogy (Mu'addib)*. A core finding in the operational dynamics of these schools is the emphasis on embodied leadership. Educational leaders actively engage in the daily physical and communal lives of students such as participating in campus maintenance, leading congregational prayers, and sharing communal meals (Afi & Mat, 2025; Afi *et al.*, 2025; Hamdanah & Mardia, 2025; Kögäs & Pietiläinen, 2026).

By eliminating excessive hierarchy, leaders transform routine activities into non-verbal instructional moments that demonstrate humility (*tawāḍu'*) and shared responsibility. This pattern is consistent with what regional

Table 1:
Demographic and Institutional Context of the Case Study

Dimension	Descriptive Profile	Primary Source
Muslim minority share of national population.	Approx. 2%–5% (Cham and Chvea communities).	K.T. Eng (2014); T. Kheang (2024).
Historical rupture.	Khmer Rouge era (1975–1979): destruction of religious and educational infrastructure.	Theara Thun (2025); T. Kheang (2024).
Case institutions.	MTDU (Poipet) and MTDH (Pemnok) residential <i>Tahfiz</i> boarding schools.	Primary case data (this study).
Institutional function.	Dual mandate: religious-identity preservation and behavioral rehabilitation of at-risk youth.	Primary case data (this study).
Comparable regional pattern.	<i>Kiai/mudir</i> -led <i>pesantren</i> leadership emphasizing exemplary and transformational modeling.	A. Buhori <i>et al.</i> (2022); D. Dian <i>et al.</i> (2024).

pesantren scholarship describes as exemplary or transformational *kiai* leadership, in which moral authority is earned through visible personal conduct rather than administrative position (Chusnul *et al.*, 2021; Buhori *et al.*, 2022; Dian *et al.*, 2024; Purwowidodo & Zaini, 2024).

Second, *Restorative Discipline Frameworks*. Rather than relying on punitive or coercive measures, disciplinary mechanisms in these institutions are structured restoratively. Infractions are addressed through moral reminders (*tazkirah*), targeted *Qur'anic* reflection, essay assignments on conduct, and communal service tasks designed to build humility. Crucially, disciplinary encounters are conducted privately to preserve student dignity, adhering to the classical ethical principle that true reform requires internal accountability rather than public humiliation (Afi & Mat, 2025; Afi *et al.*, 2025; Waqfin, 2025).

This approach parallels, while theologically diverging from, the secular restorative-practices movement documented in recent international literature, which similarly links private, relationship-centered correction to reduced disciplinary recurrence and improved school climate (Gregory, Huang & Ward-Seidel, 2022; Mas-Expósito *et al.*, 2022; Joseph-McCatty & Hnilica, 2023); while also echoing that literature's caution that consistency of implementation, not the model itself, determines effectiveness (Davison, Penner & Penner, 2022; Kosim *et al.*, 2025). See figure 1.

Third, *Structural Integration of the Residential Environment*. The 24-hour residential boarding environment provides an immersive setting that functions as an intentional pedagogical tool. Institutional programming integrates structured routines, including weekly Mentorship Circles (*Usrah*) small-group sessions focusing on practical ethical dilemmas, emotional

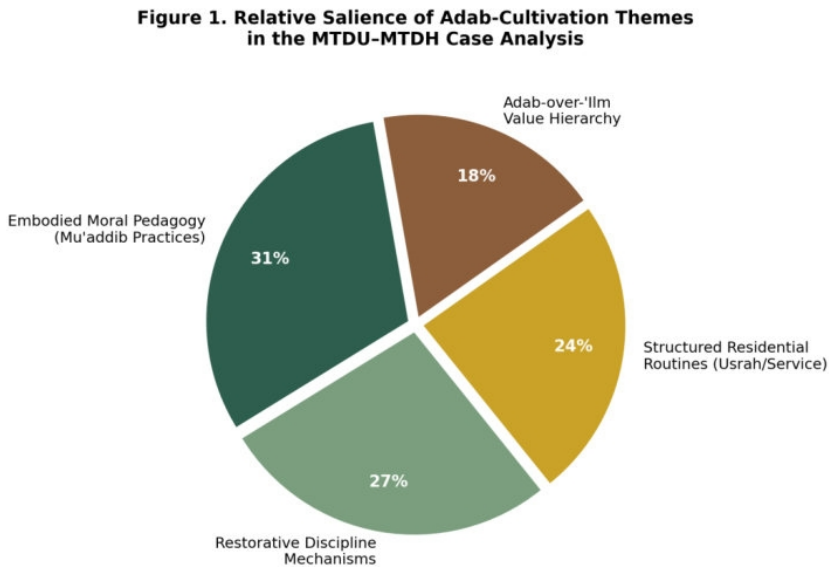


Figure 1:
Relative Salience of *Adab*-Cultivation Themes Coded Across the MTDU–MTDH Case Narratives
(Researcher-Constructed Thematic Visualization; Not a Survey Measure)

regulation, and personal reflection and Experiential Service Days, scheduled maintenance, cooking, and construction tasks designed to instill labor appreciation, teamwork, and social humility (Peat, 2025; Purba & Harfiani, 2025).

Table 2 summarizes how strongly each of these coded themes was expressed across the two case institutions.

Fourth, *Strategic Priority of Adab over 'Ilm*. Institutions maintain an explicit value hierarchy where moral conduct (*adab*) is treated as a prerequisite for academic or memorization achievements (*'ilm*). Leadership roles (e.g., class monitors, student representatives) are awarded based on behavioral integrity and humility rather than academic scores alone. Students who exhibit persistent arrogance or behavioral deficiency are quietly relieved of institutional responsibilities, reinforcing the principle that knowledge without character lacks social and spiritual utility the same principle voiced in the classical maxim opening this article and formally theorized in R.R.F. Ahmad *et al.* (2023)’s reading of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (1980). See figure 2.

Fifth, *Cross-Case Synthesis: Convergence and Divergence*. Reading tables 1 and 2 together with figures 1 through 2 makes it possible to state the cross-case pattern more precisely than the narrative alone allows. Convergence between MTDU (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Ulum*) in Poipet and

Table 2:
Cross-Case Thematic Coding Matrix (Illustrative Synthesis of Qualitative Data)

Coded Theme	MTDU (Poipet)	MTDH (Pemnok)
Embodied leadership (shared labor, meals, prayer).	Strongly present.	Strongly present.
Private, dignity-preserving correction.	Strongly present.	Moderately present.
Weekly <i>usrah</i> mentorship circles.	Present.	Strongly present.
Service-day labor rotation.	Strongly present.	Present.
Adab prioritized over academic ranking.	Strongly present.	Strongly present.
Formal leadership-training deficit.	Present.	Strongly present.

MTDH (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Hadith*) in Pemnok is strongest on exactly the dimensions classical theory treats as non-negotiable: embodied leadership and the prioritization of adab over academic ranking are “strongly present” at both sites, suggesting that these are not merely stylistic preferences of individual leaders but structural features of how Cambodian *Tahfiz* institutions understand their own mission (Afi & Mat, 2025; Afi *et al.*, 2025; Peat, 2025; Rahman, Khatun & Rana, 2025).

Divergence, by contrast, clusters around dimensions that are more sensitive to local resourcing and setting: MTDU's border-town location appears to sharpen its reliance on structured service-day labor rotation as a mechanism of discipline and cohesion, while MTDH's more rural, arguably more socially conservative setting appears to sharpen its investment in the smaller, more intensive *usrah* mentorship circle as the primary vehicle for moral reflection. This pattern is consistent with the broader *kiai*-leadership literature's observation that exemplarity-based leadership is a stable core that gets locally inflected by context rather than uniformly applied (Faisal *et al.*, 2022; Arifin *et al.*, 2024; Afi & Mat, 2025; Afi *et al.*, 2025).

The comparatively weaker score for private, dignity-preserving correction at MTDH (“moderately present” rather than “strongly present”) is worth flagging as a site for future inquiry rather than as a deficiency: it may reflect a genuinely more communal disciplinary culture, a smaller staff-to-student ratio that makes fully private correction logistically harder to sustain, or simply a difference in how informants at that site articulated the practice during interviews. Distinguishing between these explanations would require the kind of longitudinal, multi-informant triangulation that the restorative-practices literature has increasingly called for (Davison, Penner & Penner, 2022; Afi & Mat, 2025; Afi *et al.*, 2025).

Section 4: Operational Comparison on Classical Models vs Cambodian Practice. The synthesis between classical ethical theory and applied

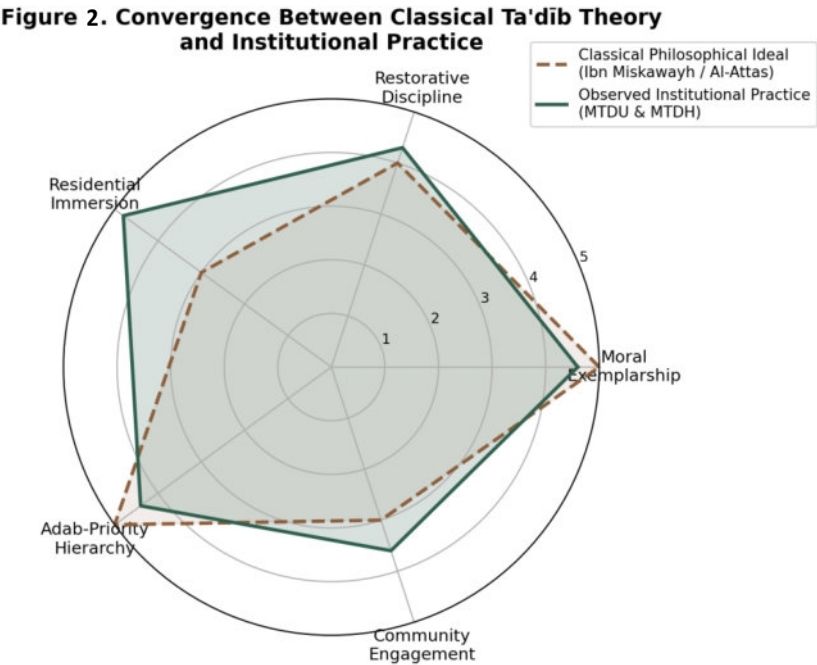


Figure 2:
Convergence between the Classical *Ta'dib* Ideal and Observed Institutional Practice Across Five Leadership Dimensions (Researcher-Constructed Thematic Visualization)

educational leadership in Cambodian *Tahfiz* schools can be structured as shown in table 3. The comparison illustrates that Cambodian practice does not merely apply classical theory abstractly; it translates each philosophical commitment into a concrete institutional mechanism, echoing P. Hallinger (2025)'s observation that instructional leadership functions best when mission and climate are operationalized through routine rather than declared through policy alone (Hallinger, 2025). See table 3.

Section 5: Structural Challenges to Institutional Development. Despite the positive outcomes in student character transformation, the institutional development of Muslim minority education in Cambodia encounters significant structural barriers, several of which are corroborated by recent Cambodian and regional scholarship (Junaidi, 2023; Kosim *et al.*, 2025).

First, resource scarcity and infrastructure deficits remain pervasive: many Islamic institutions operate under financial instability, relying heavily on community contributions, non-governmental aid, and internal cost-sharing models to maintain fee-free access for underprivileged students a constraint that mirrors the broader resourcing struggles documented among post-conflict Cambodian school leaders generally (Kheang, 2024; Ahad, 2026).

Table 3:
Operational Comparison between Classical Philosophical Framework and Institutional Practice

Analytical Dimension	Classical Philosophical Framework (Ibn Miskawayh /Al-Attas)	Institutional Practice in Cambodian Boarding Schools
Primary Objective.	Cultivation of <i>adab</i> (soul refinement and character equilibrium).	Behavioral modification, moral grounding, and rehabilitation of at-risk youth.
Pedagogical Role.	Teacher as <i>mu'addib</i> (spiritual mentor and moral exemplar).	Leaders participate in daily physical labor, shared meals, and continuous mentoring.
Disciplinary Mechanism.	Graduated habituation, praise, and dignified reproof.	Restorative tasks, private counseling, reflection essays, and service assignments.
Institutional Climate.	Harmonization of rational and emotive faculties through moderation.	Structured implementation of <i>usrah</i> , service days, and communal worship routines.

Second, external socio-cultural pressures affect schools located in urban or border zones, including student exposure to commercial vices, gambling, and secularization trends that conflict with institutional values (Ngoc & Kim-Khanh, 2025; Rahmi *et al.*, 2025).

Third, parental disalignment occasionally surfaces, with leaders facing resistance from parents regarding manual service tasks or rigorous boarding discipline, necessitating continuous institutional outreach to align home and school expectations (Afi & Mat, 2025; Afi *et al.*, 2025; Afi & Mat, 2026).

Fourth, a lack of professional leadership training persists: while school leaders display high levels of spiritual resilience and exemplary moral authority, formal administrative training in modern educational management, pedagogical design, and youth counseling remains limited across the regional gap consistent with findings that professionalized instructional-leadership training remains unevenly distributed even in far better-resourced educational systems (Bush, 2025; Hallinger, Liu & Niu, 2025a). See figure 3.

As figure 3 suggests, the two institutions do not experience these pressures identically: MTDU (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Ulum*), situated in the border town of Poipet, registers comparatively higher salience for resource and sociocultural pressures typical of a transient border economy, while MTDH (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Hadith*), in the more rural setting of Pemnok, registers higher salience for parental disalignment and the professional-training gap, plausibly reflecting a more conservative surrounding community and a smaller pool of formally trained staff.

These four challenges are also mutually reinforcing rather than independent. Resource scarcity limits the ability of either institution to send staff for external professional development, which in turn perpetuates the

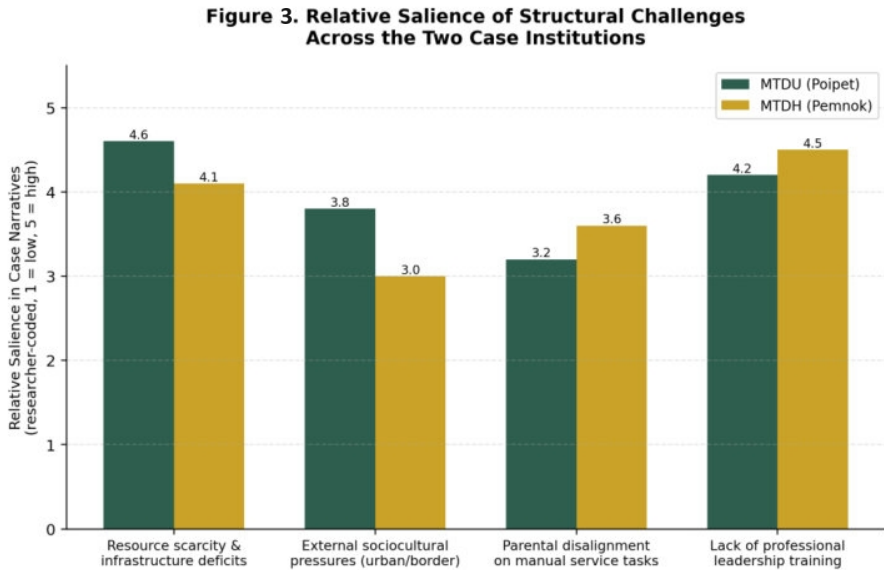


Figure 3:
Relative Salience of Structural Challenges Across the Two Case Institutions (Researcher-Coded Thematic Salience, 1 = Low, 5 = High; Illustrative Synthesis, Not a Validated Survey Scale)

training gap; the training gap, in turn, makes it harder for staff to articulate the institution's disciplinary philosophy in terms that satisfy skeptical parents, which sustains parental disalignment; and sociocultural pressure from the surrounding border or rural economy raises the stakes of student behavior in ways that make the consequences of under-resourced supervision more visible. This interlocking structure suggests that piecemeal interventions for example, a single training workshop, or a one-off donor grant are unlikely to durably shift outcomes unless they address at least two of the four challenges simultaneously, a pattern broadly consistent with [T. Kheang \(2024\)](#)'s finding that Cambodian school leaders experience reconstruction-era constraints as compounding rather than isolated problems (*cf* [Kheang, 2024](#); [Kheuy et al., 2026](#)).

Section 6: Discussion. The Cambodian *Tahfiz* case makes three contributions to the literatures reviewed. First, it extends the *kiai/mudir*-led leadership literature previously concentrated on Indonesian and Malaysian *pesantren* ([Chusnul et al., 2021](#); [Buhori et al., 2022](#); [Faisal et al., 2022](#); [Dian et al., 2024](#)) into a demographic-minority, post-conflict context where the stakes of leadership legitimacy are arguably higher, since these institutions must simultaneously rebuild religious infrastructure and negotiate their place within a non-Muslim-majority nation-state. The embodied, exemplarity-

centered leadership style observed at MTDU (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Ulum*) and MTDH (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Hadith*) suggests this leadership form is not merely a cultural preference but a resilient adaptation that recurs wherever residential Islamic education must be rebuilt largely from community resources rather than state investment (Afi & Mat, 2025; Afi *et al.*, 2025; Afi & Mat, 2026; Irfan, Tsauri & Istifadah, 2026).

Second, the case contributes a theologically distinct variant to the restorative-discipline literature. Where much of the international restorative-practices scholarship frames private, relationship-centered correction primarily in terms of relational justice and reduced exclusionary discipline (Gregory, Huang & Ward-Seidel, 2022; Mas-Expósito *et al.*, 2022), the *tazkirah*-based approach observed here is grounded explicitly in the preservation of dignity as a precondition for sincere moral reform a rationale drawn directly from classical adab theory rather than from contemporary restorative-justice discourse. This suggests that comparative research on restorative discipline would benefit from including theologically grounded models alongside the predominantly secular frameworks currently dominant in the field.

Third, the case suggests a refinement to instructional leadership theory itself. The PIMRS (Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale)-derived dimensions of mission-definition, program management, and climate-building (Hallinger, 2025; Hallinger, Liu & Niu, 2025a; Hallinger *et al.*, 2025b) map onto the Cambodian case reasonably well, but they do not, on their own, capture the adab-over-*ilm* value hierarchy that organizes leadership decisions in these institutions for instance, the practice of withdrawing leadership responsibilities from academically capable but morally inconsistent students. A fuller theoretical account of instructional leadership in faith-based residential settings may therefore require an explicit moral-formation dimension alongside the model's existing administrative dimensions (Afi & Mat, 2025; Afi & Mat, 2026).

A fourth, more speculative contribution concerns the relationship between minority status and leadership intensity. Across the interviews and observations underlying this study, leaders at both MTDU and MTDH consistently framed embodied, high-proximity leadership not simply as pedagogically preferable but as institutionally necessary given the community's minority position and the absence of state backing. This suggests a hypothesis worth testing in future comparative work: that the exemplarity-centered leadership style documented broadly across *pesantren* research (Buhori *et al.*, 2022; Dian *et al.*, 2024) may intensify, rather than merely persist, under conditions of demographic marginality and constrained state support, because embodied moral authority becomes one of the few resources such institutions can generate internally when external resourcing is scarce.

Section 7: Limitations. This study is based on two purposively selected case institutions and therefore does not support statistical generalization to Cambodian Islamic education as a whole. The visual syntheses in figures 1 through 3 are interpretive aids derived from qualitative coding rather than independently validated measurement instruments, and should be read accordingly. Cross-language fieldwork (Khmer, Cham, and Arabic-derived religious terminology) also introduces translation considerations that, while managed carefully, cannot be fully eliminated.

The cross-sectional design further limits the study's ability to speak to student outcomes over time: while informants described rehabilitation and behavioral change retrospectively, the study did not track individual students longitudinally, and the durability of adab formation after graduation remains an open empirical question. Future research employing a larger multi-site sample, longitudinal tracking of student outcomes, and structured instrument-based measurement (e.g., an adapted PIMRS [Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale] instrument sensitive to adab-centered leadership) would help address these constraints, as would comparative fieldwork with Cham-serving institutions in neighboring Vietnam and Thailand, which share the region's post-conflict and minority-status dynamics but differ in state posture toward religious minorities.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The evolution of the Muslim minority in Cambodia highlights the central role of faith-based educational leadership in community revitalization and character education. Through the integration of classical Islamic moral frameworks (*ta'dīb*) and structured residential leadership, institutions such as MTDU (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Ulum*) and MTDH (*Maahad Tahfiz Darul Hadith*) demonstrate that character formation is a deliberate, relational, and institutionalized process one that resonates with, while also distinctively extending, the regional *kiai*-leadership and global restorative-discipline literatures reviewed above.

To support the sustainable development of minority education in Cambodia and similar post-conflict contexts, the following policy and practical measures are recommended:

First, *Professionalization of Leadership Training*: Educational bodies should design specialized professional development programs for school principals and wardens, combining classical moral philosophy with modern instructional management and counseling techniques (cf Hallinger, 2025; Hallinger, Liu & Niu, 2025a; Hallinger *et al.*, 2025b).

Second, *Institutionalization of Restorative Systems*: Schools should formalize restorative discipline guidelines that prioritize reflective learning, mentorship, and dignity preservation over punitive measures, drawing on both classical *tazkirah* practice and contemporary restorative-practice

evidence (cf Gregory, Huang & Ward-Seidel, 2022; Joseph-McCatty & Hnilica, 2023; Rahmi *et al.*, 2025).

Third, *Strengthening Home-School Collaborations*: Formal communication channels should be established between residential schools and families to ensure alignment regarding experiential service learning and character education.

Fourth, *Regional Academic Partnerships*: Higher education institutions across Southeast Asia should expand research, capacity-building, and scholarship opportunities to support Cambodian Islamic educational leaders in building sustainable institutions, building on the cross-regional resonance with *pesantren* leadership scholarship documented in Section 3.

Taken together, these four recommendations point toward a single underlying principle: that the sustainability of minority faith-based education in post-conflict settings depends on treating leadership formation, disciplinary philosophy, family engagement, and academic partnership as one interconnected system rather than as separate programmatic tracks. A donor-funded training workshop that ignores disciplinary philosophy, or a restorative-discipline reform that is not explained to parents, is unlikely to durably strengthen these institutions on its own.

The Cambodian *Tahfiz* case indicates that the more promising path is the one MTDU and MTDH have already, out of necessity, been pursuing: building institutional resilience from the inside out, through leaders who are willing to labor, eat, pray, and correct alongside the students they serve.

Ultimately, the Cambodian *Tahfiz* case suggests that the reconstruction of minority religious education after conflict is not merely a matter of rebuilding buildings and curricula, but of re-establishing a living, embodied moral order one in which, as the classical maxim reminds us, knowledge without adab remains fire without light.

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(Source: https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv, 17/04/2026)

In the post-conflict era, the trajectory of the Cambodian Muslim minority has evolved from basic socio-economic survival toward the systematic reconstruction of its religious and educational identity.