



Islamic Leadership in Gambian Madrasahs: Faith, Governance, and the Politics of Educational Reform

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Islamic leadership in Gambian madrasahs, situating local practices within broader debates on educational governance and reform. Drawing on a qualitative systematic review supported by interviews with madrasah leaders and ustasses, it analyzes how Qur'anic principles of justice (al-'adl), consultation (shūrā), humility, and communal responsibility shape institutional leadership. Findings reveal that madrasahs confront persistent financial constraints, slow integration into the national education system, limited career pathways for graduates, and dependence on informal leadership structures rooted in religious legitimacy. These conditions generate tension between spiritual authority and administrative accountability. The study argues that Gambian madrasahs articulate a distinct African Muslim perspective that remains underrepresented in Islamic educational leadership scholarship. It contends that sustainable leadership depends on structural integration, equitable resource allocation, teacher support, and policy recognition, enabling madrasahs to prepare students for both religious devotion and wider societal participation.

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1. Introduction

Since The Gambia gained independence in 1965, Islamic educational institutions have played an increasingly visible role in the country's moral, social, and intellectual formation. Madrasahs have not functioned merely as spaces for Qur'anic literacy; they have also operated as community-based institutions through which religious identity, social discipline, and educational aspiration are transmitted. Recent scholarship on Islamic-based educational leadership shows that Muslim educational institutions are shaped by local cultures, policy pressures, and religious authority rather than by a single universal leadership model (Arar et al., 2022; Alazmi & Bush, 2024). In The Gambia, this point is especially relevant because higher education and knowledge production remain entangled with postcolonial structures and local struggles over recognition (Mbah & Johnson, 2024). Similarly, studies on Al-Qur'an learning at the Islamic pre-elementary level in Indonesia indicate that Qur'anic literacy, method, and institutional management are closely connected in early Islamic educational formation (Hanif, Dewi, et al., 2023).

Leadership is therefore a decisive issue in Gambian madrasahs. Educational leadership is commonly associated with planning, supervision, teacher support, and institutional accountability, yet in Islamic schools it also carries a spiritual mandate. Leaders are expected to uphold justice (al-'adl), consultation (shūrā), humility, service, and communal responsibility while responding to contemporary demands for curriculum relevance, administrative transparency, social justice, and

graduate employability (Brooks & Ezzani, 2022; Ezzani et al., 2023; Said et al., 2023). In this sense, Islamic leadership in madrasahs cannot be reduced to managerial efficiency; it is an ethical practice that links spiritual legitimacy with institutional performance. Questions of teacher status and professional welfare also shape leadership capacity, as debates on teacher certification show that educational quality is affected by the intersection of professionalism, welfare policy, and institutional accountability (Hanif, 2012).

The international literature on Islamic-based educational leadership has grown substantially since the 1990s, but it remains uneven in its geographical coverage. Existing studies more often foreground Middle Eastern, Western, and Asian contexts, while African Muslim societies receive limited analytical attention (Arar et al., 2022; Ezzani et al., 2023). This imbalance narrows the applicability of Islamic leadership theories because it obscures how Qur'anic values are interpreted in settings shaped by cultural diversity, postcolonial educational policies, limited resources, and strong community-based religious authority. For Islamic education more broadly, the critique of Western epistemic dominance and the Islamization of knowledge debate suggest that institutional leadership must mediate between religious intellectual autonomy and global educational standards (Hanif & Fian, 2023; Hanif & Prasetyaningtiyas, 2023). The Gambian case is important because it shows how madrasah leaders negotiate tradition, policy integration, and social relevance within a small West African Muslim-majority society.

This article examines the dynamics of Islamic leadership in Gambian madrasahs. It asks how madrasah leaders understand and practice Islamic leadership, what structural challenges shape their leadership, and how the Gambian experience contributes to broader debates on Islamic educational governance. Comparative evidence from curriculum development in international-standard madrasahs also shows that leadership is central to balancing global standards with Islamic institutional identity (Hanif et al., 2026). Recent Islamic-oriented leadership models likewise affirm that sustainable school leadership in Muslim societies requires a connection between ethical authority, organizational competence, and social responsiveness (Alazmi & Bush, 2024). The central argument is that sustainable Islamic leadership in Gambian madrasahs requires not only moral authority but also institutional recognition, equitable resource support, and pathways that connect religious education with wider social participation.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative systematic review supported by interview-based field insights from selected madrasah leaders and ustasses in The Gambia. The systematic review was used to map and synthesize scholarship on Islamic educational leadership, madrasah governance, African educational leadership, and the integration of Islamic and secular education. The review followed contemporary guidance on qualitative literacy and qualitative interpretation by treating source selection, conceptual comparison, and synthesis as iterative analytical processes (Small & Calarco, 2022; Savin-Baden & Major, 2025). Literature was identified through academic databases and search platforms, including Google Scholar, using keywords such as Islamic leadership, Islamic educational leadership, madrasah governance, Qur'anic schools, The Gambia, African Muslim education, shūrā, and prophetic leadership.

The inclusion criteria prioritized peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and relevant academic sources published between 2022 and 2026 that addressed Islamic leadership values, educational governance, madrasah reform, and African or comparative Muslim educational contexts, while selected earlier works by Muh. Hanif were retained because they provide continuity for the article's Indonesian Islamic education comparisons. Sources that were conceptually relevant but not directly focused on The Gambia were used to build the comparative framework. The interview component was used to contextualize the literature by capturing leaders' experiences of finance, teacher retention, curriculum integration, graduate pathways, and institutional recognition, following conversational interviewing and qualitative ethics principles (Brinkmann, 2022; Nii Laryeafio &

Ogbewe, 2023). The data were analyzed thematically by identifying recurring patterns across the literature and interview narratives, then interpreting them through the lens of Islamic leadership values and educational governance. Reflexivity and trustworthiness were addressed through credibility, dependability, transferability, and careful attention to the researcher's interpretive position (Adler, 2022; Ahmed, 2024; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

3. Literature Review

Educational leadership has become a major concern in contemporary education because school leaders influence teacher performance, institutional culture, and student outcomes. Recent Islamic-oriented leadership research argues that leadership and management should remain connected to the ethical purposes of education rather than being reduced to administrative control (Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Ezzani et al., 2023). This concern resembles transformative learning arguments in Islamic education, where schooling is not merely instructional but also directed toward social emancipation and ethical agency (Hanif, 2014a). In madrasah settings, this distinction is particularly important because leadership involves both organizational responsibility and moral guidance. Principals, imams, and senior ustasses must support teaching and learning while also safeguarding the religious identity of the institution.

Islamic leadership is grounded in a normative vocabulary that includes stewardship, justice, consultation, accountability, humility, and service. The Qur'anic concept of khalifah emphasizes responsibility before God and society, while prophetic leadership highlights ethical conduct, mercy, consultation, and fairness. Recent frameworks of Islamic school leadership show that leaders are expected to integrate spirituality, moral formation, social justice, and organizational responsibility (Brooks & Ezzani, 2022; Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Said et al., 2023). Moral education scholarship also emphasizes the importance of modelling and emulation in adolescents' moral self-cultivation, which strengthens the relevance of exemplary leadership in religious schools (Sanderse, 2024). Philosophical discussions of Avicenna's Islamic education thought similarly place intellectual cultivation and moral refinement within a unified educational purpose (Hanif, 2023b). These concepts are directly applicable to madrasahs, where leaders are expected to be both religious exemplars and institutional organizers.

Classical Islamic political thought also offers important resources for educational leadership. Al-Mawardi's discussion of imāmah emphasizes justice, knowledge, sound judgment, courage, and the capacity to protect communal welfare. Although Al-Mawardi wrote within a political-legal framework, these virtues can be translated into educational governance by emphasizing integrity, competence, responsibility, and public trust. Contemporary Islamic-oriented leadership models similarly connect school leadership with ethical accountability, communal welfare, and institutional capability (Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Said et al., 2023). For madrasah leaders, this means that religious authority should be accompanied by administrative capability and a commitment to institutional development.

Contemporary scholarship on Islamic school leadership shows that leadership practice is shaped by the interaction between Islamic values and local institutional contexts. Brooks and Ezzani (2022) conceptualize Islamic school leadership as a spiritually grounded practice that must address culture, identity, and institutional responsibility, while studies of Muslim women's educational leadership show that authority is also mediated by social location and multicultural context (Amatullah, 2024). A philosophical review of the 2013 curriculum in Indonesia also illustrates that curriculum policy is never value-neutral; it encodes assumptions about knowledge, formation, and national educational direction (Hanif, 2014b). This framework is useful for analyzing Gambian madrasahs because leadership is not exercised in an abstract theological space; it is practiced within communities marked by linguistic diversity, economic limitation, public policy pressures, and expectations of religious authenticity.

African and comparative Muslim education studies caution against applying universal leadership theories without attention to culture, history, and local knowledge systems. In The Gambia, debates on decolonization and knowledge management show that education is closely tied to embodied experience, institutional memory, and the politics of recognition (Mbah & Johnson, 2024). Comparative studies of Muslim educational leadership also show that gender, spirituality, and communal legitimacy shape how authority is perceived and practiced across Muslim societies (Amatullah, 2024; Racman, 2022). In The Gambia, madrasah leadership is linked not only to teaching but also to community mediation, moral formation, and the maintenance of interreligious coexistence. Indonesian research on religiosity and tolerance among senior high school students likewise confirms that religious schooling can contribute to social trust when its institutional culture is inclusive and dialogical (Hanif & Astuti, 2017).

The integration of Islamic and secular education remains a major issue in Muslim educational reform. Recent work on Islamic teacher education argues that integration must be built on professional preparation, Islamic pedagogical purpose, and institutional renewal rather than on a superficial addition of religious subjects to secular structures (Memon et al., 2024; Succarie, 2024). Indonesian Islamic education policy studies also show that integration into national systems involves negotiation among state regulation, institutional autonomy, and religious identity (Kosim et al., 2023). Integration therefore requires more than a mechanical combination of subjects; it demands a framework that respects religious principles while preparing students for modern social and professional realities.

Existing literature also identifies persistent governance challenges in Islamic education, including limited teacher training, financial constraints, unequal access, inadequate infrastructure, and weak policy recognition (Memon et al., 2024; Said et al., 2023; Tanjung, 2022). Comparative scholarship further highlights the importance of social capital, local culture, gender and inclusion, digital transformation, and postcolonial educational governance in Muslim educational institutions (Amatullah, 2024; Mbah & Johnson, 2024). Recent Indonesian studies further show that digital transformation and learning design for Generation Z are becoming decisive in Islamic education, especially when technology is used to strengthen rather than displace moral formation (Hanif, 2025; Hanif, Qudsiyyah, & Hanifah, 2025). However, there remains a shortage of focused analysis on madrasah leadership in The Gambia. This gap justifies a localized examination of how Gambian leaders negotiate Islamic values, educational reform, and institutional sustainability.

4. Results and Discussion

The interviews with Gambian madrasah leaders indicate that financial constraint is the most persistent challenge affecting institutional sustainability. Many madrasahs rely on community contributions, tuition fees, and occasional assistance from donors, including support from Arabic-speaking countries. These resources are often irregular and insufficient for teacher salaries, infrastructure improvement, learning materials, and student scholarships. As a result, capable students from poor families may struggle to remain enrolled, while qualified teachers are attracted to better-paid opportunities in government or private English-medium schools. This finding supports recent studies showing that Islamic educational institutions often face governance, teacher development, and resource limitations that restrict educational quality (Memon et al., 2024; Said et al., 2023; Tanjung, 2022). This resonates with social-capital perspectives on educational quality, where community trust and relational resources help compensate for limited formal resources but cannot fully replace stable institutional funding (Hanif, 2023a).

Teacher retention emerged as a particularly serious concern. Madrasah leaders explained that many ustasses possess strong Arabic and Islamic studies competence, yet their remuneration rarely reflects their qualifications or workload. When such teachers move to government schools, they often receive more stable income but may have limited opportunity to teach Arabic or Islamic subjects at the level of depth available in madrasahs. This creates a paradox: madrasahs provide stronger

religious and linguistic specialization, but they cannot always provide the professional security needed to retain competent teachers. The problem mirrors evidence that teacher performance and organizational commitment in Islamic educational organizations are influenced by leadership climate, job satisfaction, and institutional support (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Tanjung, 2022). Sustainable leadership therefore requires a policy framework that treats madrasah teachers as part of the national educational workforce rather than as informal community volunteers.

A second major theme concerns the slow integration of Arabic schools into the national education system. Madrasah leaders reported that many graduates must shift into English junior or senior secondary pathways and, in some cases, repeat levels because their prior learning is not fully recognized. This process delays progression and weakens students' confidence in the value of their madrasah education. Leaders noted that many madrasahs already teach several English subjects, which means that students are not entirely outside the national curriculum. Full and carefully designed integration would enable smoother educational mobility while preserving the religious and Arabic foundations of madrasah learning. The problem resembles debates in Indonesian pesantren and madrasah contexts, where national curriculum alignment may generate both opportunities for mobility and resistance from institutions seeking to defend their distinctive educational models (Hanif, Suwito, et al., 2024).

The third challenge concerns limited graduate pathways. Many graduates of Arabic schools are expected to continue in Islamic studies and eventually become teachers or ustasses. While this pathway is valuable, leaders argued that it should not be the only option. A more responsive system would formally recognize students' bilingual and religious competencies and open routes into broader fields such as administration, social services, translation, public education, community development, and religious affairs. This issue parallels broader policy debates in Muslim education, where integration and teacher professionalization are needed to prevent Islamic school graduates from being confined to narrow academic and occupational tracks (Kosim et al., 2023; Memon et al., 2024; Succarie, 2024).

The findings also show a tension between traditional religious authority and modern educational governance. Imams and senior ustasses continue to command respect because of their knowledge, piety, and community legitimacy. This form of authority remains important, but it is not always accompanied by standardized administrative systems, transparent financial management, teacher development programs, or formal institutional evaluation. Brooks and Ezzani (2022) argue that Islamic school leadership must connect spirituality, social justice, and institutional practice, while Alazmi and Bush (2024) frame Islamic-oriented educational leadership as a theory that joins ethical authority with school improvement. Evidence from Indonesian Islamic boarding schools also indicates that institutional sustainability can be strengthened when religious schools develop social entrepreneurship and community-based management without abandoning their moral mission (Hanif, Dharin, & Hutaaruk, 2023). The Gambian case confirms this argument: spiritual legitimacy is indispensable, but it must be supported by professional governance if madrasahs are to remain sustainable.

At the same time, the Gambian experience should not be judged simply as a deficit when compared with formal bureaucratic models. Madrasah leadership is deeply embedded in community trust, religious identity, and cultural mediation. Leaders do more than manage schools; they sustain networks of moral authority and social cohesion. This makes the Gambian case analytically important for Islamic leadership scholarship. It demonstrates that theories developed in Middle Eastern, Western, or Asian contexts must be adapted when applied to African Muslim societies where institutional scarcity, communal responsibility, and spiritual authority are closely intertwined (Arar et al., 2022; Mbah & Johnson, 2024). Research on Islamic senior high schools during the COVID-19 period similarly suggests that resilience depends on the capacity of school leaders to adapt administratively while preserving institutional identity and community confidence (Hanif, Asdlori, & Efendi, 2024b).

The overall implication is that reform should not secularize madrasahs by weakening their religious foundation. Rather, reform should strengthen their capacity to deliver high-quality education while preserving Islamic values. Structural integration, transparent governance, teacher support, curriculum recognition, and scholarship schemes can help madrasahs prepare students for both religious devotion and civic participation. This balanced model reflects the core logic of Islamic educational leadership: leadership must be morally grounded, socially responsive, and institutionally competent (Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Brooks & Ezzani, 2022).

5. Conclusion

This study has examined Islamic leadership in Gambian madrasahs by connecting interview-based insights with wider scholarship on Islamic educational leadership and governance. The findings show that madrasah leaders face persistent financial limitations, insufficient teacher support, slow integration into the national education system, limited graduate pathways, and reliance on informal leadership structures rooted in religious legitimacy. These challenges constrain institutional effectiveness, but they also reveal the distinctive character of Gambian madrasah leadership as a practice shaped by spirituality, community trust, and educational aspiration.

The study contributes to Islamic leadership scholarship by foregrounding an African Muslim context that remains underrepresented in international discussions. It argues that sustainable leadership in Gambian madrasahs requires a dual reform agenda: preserving Qur'anic and prophetic leadership values while strengthening formal governance, policy recognition, teacher development, and curricular mobility. Madrasahs should be recognized as important educational institutions capable of producing students who are religiously grounded, socially responsible, and professionally adaptable. Future research should involve broader fieldwork across regions of The Gambia, include students and parents as participants, and compare madrasah governance models across West African Muslim societies.

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