

Research Article

Voices of Dissent: The Polemics of Islamic Thought in Gorontalo

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This study explores the polemic of Islamic thought in Gorontalo, focusing on the voices of dissent and the dynamics that arise from differing perspectives in society. The aim is to understand how these differences influence religious practices and reflect broader debates on contemporary issues within a local context. Using an ethnographic approach, the research draws on participant observation and in-depth interviews with clerics and leaders from key Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, Jama'ah Tabligh, and Wahdah Islamiyah. Observations were conducted in mosques, community centers, and religious gatherings. The results show that differences of opinion in Islamic thought in Gorontalo extend beyond traditional *fiqh* debates, encompassing deeper ideological issues, including differing views on state ideology and religious authority. While the diversity of thought generates some tension, it also fosters opportunities for dialogue and critical reflection. Many community members value this plurality and seek to preserve social harmony despite theological differences. However, there are also concerns about the influence of extremism that can threaten social stability. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how Islamic thought evolves in regional contexts and highlights the role of constructive dialogue in navigating religious diversity.

Keywords: Islamic thought, polemics, NU, Muhammadiyah, Jama'ah Tabligh, Wahdah Islamiyah, Gorontalo

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Published 16 May 2025

Publishing services provided by
Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the ICORSIA 2024 Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

The evolution of Islamic thought in Indonesia, particularly in Gorontalo, represents a complex interplay of tradition, reform, and modernity, deeply influenced by historical and social contexts. This intellectual journey can be traced back to the era of KH. Abbas Rauf, a pivotal figure whose contributions during the early 20th century laid the groundwork for contemporary Islamic discourse in the region. His progressive approach to Islamic teachings resonated with a society grappling with the challenges of colonialism and modernization, making him a central figure in the intellectual landscape of Gorontalo.

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KH. Abbas Rauf was born in a time of significant transformation in Indonesia. As the Dutch colonial regime exerted control over the archipelago, religious leaders and scholars began to reassess the role of Islam in society. Rauf emerged as a voice advocating for educational reform and social justice, emphasizing the importance of knowledge as a means to empower the Muslim community. His efforts to blend traditional Islamic teachings with contemporary needs marked the beginning of a broader movement toward reform within Gorontalo.

The intellectual environment fostered by KH. Abbas Rauf encouraged subsequent generations of scholars to engage critically with Islamic texts and teachings. This period witnessed the rise of local intellectuals who sought to address the pressing issues of their time, including poverty, inequality, and the lack of access to education. Their efforts contributed to the development of a unique blend of Islamic thought that was both rooted in tradition and responsive to modern challenges.

As Indonesia moved toward independence in the mid-20th century, the landscape of Islamic thought began to shift once again. The emergence of various Islamic movements reflected the diverse interpretations of Islam that were taking shape across the country. In Gorontalo, local leaders and scholars began to articulate their visions of an Islamic society that could coexist with democratic principles and modern governance.

During this period, there was a growing emphasis on social activism among Islamic scholars, who sought to address social injustices and promote equitable development. This activism was often informed by the teachings of KH. Abbas Rauf, who had laid the groundwork for a socially oriented approach to Islam. His legacy continued to inspire new generations, leading to a vibrant discourse on the role of Islam in public life.

In the latter part of the 20th century, the effects of globalization began to permeate Indonesian society, bringing with it new ideas and challenges. The rise of digital communication and social media platforms created avenues for the dissemination of diverse perspectives on Islamic thought. This development allowed for broader engagement in theological discussions, fostering a more pluralistic approach to interpreting Islamic teachings.

The landscape of Islamic thought in Gorontalo had transformed significantly. Contemporary scholars and activists were increasingly advocating for a contextual understanding of Islam that aligned with democratic values, human rights, and social justice. This shift marked a departure from more rigid interpretations of Islam, reflecting a broader trend toward reform and modernization within the Muslim community.

The interplay between traditionalism and modernity became a defining characteristic of Islamic discourse in Gorontalo. Scholars began to explore the relevance of classical Islamic texts in addressing contemporary issues, emphasizing the need for critical engagement with tradition. This approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of Islam that could adapt to the challenges of modern society.

Moreover, the dynamics of Islamic thought in Gorontalo were influenced by the broader national discourse on Islam and democracy. As Indonesia emerged as a democratic nation, the question of how Islam could coexist with democratic principles became increasingly relevant. Scholars and activists engaged in debates that sought to reconcile Islamic teachings with notions of pluralism, tolerance, and civic engagement.

Throughout this period, the voices of dissent played a crucial role in shaping the discourse on Islamic thought. Scholars who challenged established norms and interpretations contributed to a more vibrant intellectual environment, fostering a culture of critical inquiry and debate. This contestation of ideas enriched the landscape of Islamic thought, allowing for the emergence of diverse perspectives.

Importantly, the legacy of KH. Abbas Rauf continued to be felt throughout this evolution. His emphasis on education, social justice, and community empowerment served as a guiding principle for many contemporary scholars and activists. The dialogues inspired by his work facilitated a deeper understanding of the complexities of Islamic thought in Gorontalo, highlighting the importance of context in interpreting religious teachings.

As we reflect on the dynamics of Islamic thought from the era of KH. Abbas Rauf to modern Islam in 2015, it becomes clear that this journey is marked by a rich tapestry of ideas, challenges, and transformations. The interplay of tradition and modernity, coupled with the emergence of dissenting voices, has contributed to a vibrant intellectual landscape that continues to evolve in response to the changing needs of society.

Gorontalo is situated at the northernmost point of Sulawesi and became distinct from North Sulawesi in 2000. This separation allowed Gorontalo to establish its identity primarily as a Muslim region. The majority of the population adheres to Ahlul Sunnah Wal Jama'ah (ASWAJA), particularly the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) practices. Additionally, many residents also follow the teachings of Kyai Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, which was established in 1912 in Yogyakarta.

Drawing from the preliminary ideas and empirical insights outlined earlier, the research focuses on religious thought in Islam within Gorontalo, aiming to examine the presence of diverse religious groups that have distinct epistemological, ideological, and sociological foundations. These groups are divided by varying interpretations, religious beliefs, and organizational practices in the region. Additionally, the study includes an analysis of the ulema's responses, representing the traditional authorities of Islam in Gorontalo, concerning the contemporary evolution of diverse thoughts. By concentrating on these two areas, an anthropological approach to religion facilitates a comprehensive documentation and exploration of the local dynamics of Islamic thought in Gorontalo.

2. Literature Review

Recent studies on religious thought in Indonesia tend to concentrate on two main areas. The first area explores the role of religion in the public sphere (Abdullah, 2017) and its relationship with politics (Rahardjo, 2015). The second area focuses on the political identity of Islamic extremists, particularly concerning the establishment of a caliphate (Amiruddin, 2014; Nuh, 2014) and religious conflicts (Fajarini, 2014; Huda, 2009; Nurdianto, SA, Joebagio, 2018; Rasyidah, 2014). These two trends suggest that the contestation and polemics surrounding Islamic thought have not received sufficient attention in religious studies, despite their importance and potential to lead to internal conflicts within Islam. Such conflicts among Muslims represent a significant challenge to achieving unity and integrity within the Muslim community (Baihaki, 2018).

Academic focus on the religious dynamics (thoughts and movements) in Gorontalo has largely centered on biographical elements, as noted by Subair (Subair, 2015). Interest in the (new) Islamic movement began to emerge in 2014 (Thaib, 2014). However, this research primarily took a textual approach, particularly in its examination of Hizb ut-Tahrir's critiques of the 'Western' concept of democracy in Indonesia, resulting in findings that are often typical, broad, and superficial. Additionally, existing studies have favored a historical perspective, recounting events and Islamic organizations prevalent in Indonesia during the early 20th century. The only research to explore the contemporary phenomenon of 'niqab fashion' among Islamic college students in Gorontalo was a collaborative study by Sriwahyuningsih (R. Saleh, 2019), which effectively highlighted the influences of peers, family, and da'wah networks in certain Indonesian cities.

Consequently, a thorough investigation that comprehensively addresses the development of religious thought particularly in relation to organizational growth (Islamic thought) in Gorontalo has yet to be academically explored. This development is driven by new leadership models, media use, public spaces, and emerging networks (regional, national, and transnational) that have social and cultural impacts on Gorontalo in recent years. The dynamism of Islamic religion is rapidly evolving and significantly influences various aspects of life in Indonesia, intertwining with numerous local religious beliefs that are partially or wholly connected to broader national and global trends.

Alongside meticulously identifying potential conflicts arising from current polemics, this study introduces new insights to address the gaps in existing research and elucidates the underlying factors contributing to societal debates. The findings can be instrumental in fostering awareness for future peaceful coexistence. This paper posits that ideological disagreements can lead to conflicts among different Islamic groups, undermining the principles of *ukhuwa Islamiyah* and fostering suspicion and animosity within the community. Such hostility has affected various mainstreams, encompassing different schools of thought, age demographics, and local contexts.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses an ethnographic approach to explore the voices of dissent in the polemics of Islamic thought in Gorontalo. Ethnographic methods allow for an in-depth understanding of the cultural and social dynamics that shape religious discourse in this area. Ethnographic methods were chosen and the study was conducted in various communities in Gorontalo, with a focus on urban and rural areas to capture diverse perspectives. Key locations included mosques, community centers, and religious educational institutions where discussions about Islamic thought often occur. Data collection was carried out using Participatory observation techniques, in-depth interviews and document analysis. The data collected were analyzed thematically, identifying key themes related to dissent, unity, and the evolution of Islamic thought. This analysis will help build a comprehensive understanding of the interactions between different views and the broader implications for the community.

4. Research Result and Discussion

4.1. The Polemic of Thought: Navigating the Spectrum from Fiqh Debates to State Ideology

Religious thought in Islam appears to be a persistent issue in Indonesia, leading to the emergence of various schools, organizational structures, and shifting trends over time. The ongoing polemics arising from continuous contestation have produced diverse ideologies, each with distinct identities and prototypes. Some factions lean towards the extreme right, others towards the extreme left, while some adopt a middle ground known as *al-wasathiyah* or the 'moderate group.' Each of these perspectives asserts its own truth and collective ideals. Conflicts often escalate into perpetual debates between the extreme right, often labeled as the fundamentalist group, and the extreme left, recognized as the liberal group. These two factions represent opposing sides that rarely find common ground (*kalimatun sawa*).

Debates are a constant feature of polemics, often leading to accusations of takfir, labeling other groups as non-believers. This scenario is not new to Islam; historically, disputes over leadership (imamate) have sparked such polemics. The issue of *imamate* emerged as a political conflict between the Muhajirin and the Ansar following the death of the Prophet Muhammad but was resolved peacefully with the election of Abu Bakr Siddiq as caliph. However, divisions among Muslims began after the assassination of Uthman bin Affan, and since then, there has been no universally accepted Muslim leader. This period saw civil wars, particularly over political issues, referred to as *al-fitnah al-kubra* (the great disaster).

In addition to the *imamate* issue, Hizb ut-Tahrir aims to re-establish the caliphate, reflecting the ongoing crisis of Muslim leadership following the fall of the Abbasid (750-1258, 1261-1517) and Ottoman Caliphates (1517-1924). The call for a caliphate is intertwined with the implementation of sharia and the concept of an Islamic State. Besides Hizb ut-Tahrir, the DI/TII movement in Aceh and Imam Kartosuwiryo's DI/TII in West Java emerged in 1949, driven by aspirations to establish an Islamic State in Indonesia.

These issues have evolved into debates regarding the relationship between philosophy and religion, Pancasila and faith, reason and revelation, and the concepts of God, heaven, and hell. Among these topics, *fiqh* remains a dominant concern for Muslims, particularly between the two largest and oldest organizations in Indonesia: Muhammadiyah

and Nahdlatul Ulama. Muhammadiyah strongly opposes *Takhayul*, *Bid'ah*, and *khurafa* in an effort to purify Islamic teachings from local cultural influences, while Nahdlatul Ulama embraces local traditions that are prevalent in rural communities.

Recently, a Salafi movement has emerged in Gorontalo, driven by a desire to return to the principles of the 'al-Qur'an and Sunnah.' This group has arisen in response to efforts to purify Islamic teachings and is seen as reigniting the longstanding debates over *furu* (branches) or *khilafiyah* issues between Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama. This purification movement echoes the Padri movement in Minangkabau, which took place from 1821 to 1837 (Nashir, 2008). Known as the Whites, the Padri movement is associated with the Hambali school of thought and Wahhabi influences, reflecting an extreme interpretation of Islam aimed at religious purification (Nashir, 2008). The Padri group's puritanical approach sought to reform the religious and moral behaviour of the community and to implement sharia based on the Qur'an and Hadith.

Gorontalo, located at the northern tip of Sulawesi, is predominantly Muslim and experiences its own uncertainties in religious thought. Within Gorontalo, various Islamic thought groups present a range of movements and ideas, each with distinct epistemologies and ideologies. In addition to Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, some Salafi individuals participate in mass organizations like Wahdah Islamiyah and Tablighi Jamaat. These latter groups are considered 'New Islam' as their presence in Gorontalo has only been established in recent years, beginning in the 1990s. In contrast, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, referred to as 'Old Islam,' have roots that date back to the 1920s.

The majority of the people in Gorontalo are affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama and practice an-nahdliyah. Their religious customs are often criticized for allegedly violating the Sunnah of the Prophet, leading to accusations of being *ahlul bid'ah*, or groups that blend Islamic teachings with local cultural practices. Examples of such practices include *tahlilan*, *maulidan*, grave pilgrimages, *istighosah*, and *tawasul*. These criticisms stem from the belief that these practices are not grounded in the examples set by the Prophet Muhammad.

New Islam groups consider these practices to be *bid'ah*, which they see as misleading. They argue for the necessity of separating Islamic teachings from local cultural influences that were not exemplified by the Prophet. Their aim is to maintain the purity of the Islamic teachings conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad and the early generations of Muslims (*Salaful ummah*). The da'wah efforts of these groups are primarily conducted through formal channels, such as educational institutions and Islamic gatherings, as well

as tarbiyah and daurah sessions held in mosques across Gorontalo. This also includes informal discussions on social media platforms like live Facebook sessions.

In the 1960s, religious organizational matters in Gorontalo saw ulema caught in a dispute between Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah (Subair, 2015). During the 1970s and 1980s, debates among various religious leaders from Gorontalo sparked a polemic among Muslims that contrasted the Gorontalo Nahdlatul Ulama with a group advocating for Islamic purification. This polemic differed from the conflict in West Sumatra, which spanned from 1803 to 1838. That prolonged conflict involved the Padri, influenced by Wahhabi thought, and the local population led by Sultan Arifin Muningsyah. The Padri viewed the indigenous groups as having significantly strayed from the teachings of the Qur'an and al-Hadith.

The polemic features knowledgeable religious figures and scholars who have extensively studied works by renowned Middle Eastern scholars. In contrast, many participants in today's polemics lack a comprehensive understanding of religious matters, particularly among Muslim youth who are suddenly labelled as ustadz or are merely beginning their learning at Islamic gatherings. The discourse on religious thought in Gorontalo often involves this demographic and frequently takes place on social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, with many contributors remaining anonymous.

Discussions on social media primarily focus on two key issues: Islamic law (*masailul fiqhiyah*) and state ideology (*khilafah*). These topics are longstanding concerns among the Imams of the various madhhabs (Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanafi, and Hambali) that date back to the time after the Prophet Muhammad's death.

Fiqh, or Islamic law, often leads to debates over branches (*furū'iyah*), rather than core principles (*ushul*). This includes discussions around practices like wishing Merry Christmas, *qunut*, *tahlilan*, grave pilgrimages, and *tawasul*. While these issues have been addressed by the four Imams, they have re-emerged as hot topics in public discourse and social media. Current polemics focus on whether there is prophetic precedent for these practices. For instance, a social media account named "Portal Gorontalo," initially created for buying and selling, now engages in these discussions. Similarly, a WhatsApp group called "Gorontalo Bersyari'ah" also partakes in debates regarding khilafiyah and state ideology.

The *khilafiyah* issue is particularly contentious, as each group or individual relies on their interpretations of revelation and hadith to justify their practices. Participants in these debates often include members from Wahdah Islamiyah, Tablighi Jamaat,

Nahdliyin activists (like PMII or the Indonesian Islamic Student Movement and Ansor), as well as former members of Hizb ut-Tahrir and ex-Wahdah Islamiyah. Debates among these different schools of thought tend to result in ongoing polemics. Each group often approaches the discussions with an egocentric perspective, sometimes leading to irrational and emotionally charged arguments. Intellectual arrogance can lead to dishonouring opponents, with one group branding another as misguided. The criteria for determining right or wrong often hinge on “*Manhaj*.” For example, individuals aligned with the Salaf *manhaj* may consider themselves part of the “sunnah group,” casting other groups as erroneous or misguided.

The da’wah efforts of Wahdah Islamiyah focus primarily on purifying Islamic teachings. Their materials often provoke reactions from Nahdlatul Ulama activists in PMII and Ansor. These groups assert that there is no blending or syncretism between Islamic teachings and local culture, emphasizing a distinction between the two. They argue that Islamic teachings originate from the Qur’an and Hadith, while culture stems from human creativity and environmental interactions. Disagreements over these points often lead to polemics.

Hizb ut-Tahrir was dissolved under Government Regulation in Lieu of Law Number 2 of 2017, which pertains to social organizations. Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) aimed to replace the Pancasila foundation of the state with a caliphate system. Despite its dissolution, the group’s influence remains strong across Indonesia, with followers believing that establishing a caliphate is a religious obligation supported by the Qur’an, specifically the phrase “*la hukma illa lillahi*” (there is no law except from Allah). Their perspective is heavily influenced by khawarij ideology, emphasizing that all actions must adhere strictly to the Qur’an and Hadith. Wahdah Islamiyah and Hizb ut-Tahrir are often labelled as “dalil groups.”

The attempt by Hizb ut-Tahrir to replace Pancasila with a caliphate system has drawn responses from young Nahdlatul Ulama activists. For PMII and Ansor, Pancasila serves as the foundational philosophy of the nation and should not be altered or replaced. They view Pancasila as an ideology that unifies various differences—such as race, religion, culture, language, and ideology referred to as “*kalimatun sawa*” or agreement. These young activists assert that, despite Indonesia being a Muslim-majority nation, it does not equate to being an Islamic State.

4.2. Navigating Contestation: Religious Movements in the Public Sphere

The public sphere serves as a battleground for various religious movements, each vying for influence and legitimacy. This contestation often manifests through debates, social media discussions, and organized activities where differing interpretations of Islamic teachings and practices come into conflict. As groups like Wahdah Islamiyah and Hizb ut-Tahrir promote their views on Islamic purity and governance, traditional organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah respond by defending their interpretations of Islam and the role of local culture. This dynamic creates a complex landscape of religious discourse, where ideological differences challenge notions of identity, community, and the intersection of faith and politics.

The contestation among Muslims is challenging to avoid, as differing perspectives create a stalemate in Islamic debates. Language serves as a tool for confrontation among various interests, and ultimately, emotional tensions can erode the rationality that is often revered as the 'god' of knowledge. This phenomenon is particularly evident in how individuals comprehend their faith. Williams identifies four levels of religious interpretation (Robertson, 1993): (1) the secret level, where a person adheres to teachings privately without sharing them with others; (2) the private level, where one shares beliefs with a select group of close acquaintances; (3) the denominational level, where individuals share religious beliefs with others in a larger community; and (4) the community level, where beliefs align with those of fellow community members.

In discussions about religious understanding, conflicts of interest and identity struggles can damage common sense and undermine the values of brotherhood in Islam (*ukhuwa Islamiyyah*). The ongoing contestation between Islamic fundamentalism and Liberal Islam has become increasingly visible on social media and in the public sphere. According to Hasan (Nathan, K.S, & Kamali, 2005), Islamic fundamentalists emerged prominently after George W. Bush's declaration of a fight against terrorist groups following the September 11, 2001 attacks. This group formed as a reaction against American influence, including organizations such as FPI, the Islamic Youth Front of Surakarta, KAMMI, the Indonesian Muslim Student Association (Hammas), GPI, Hezbollah, MMI, PBB, and PKS. The terrorism associated with the United States is often associated with Islamic fundamentalists, frequently labelled as "Islamic terrorists" or linked to Salafi Jihadism (Fealy, G, & Hooker, 2006).

Fundamentalist ideas and movements are associated with concepts such as extremism, radicalism, and scripturalism. These movements can be analyzed through the lens of rationalism in modern social science. Islamic fundamentalism, in particular, represents a hard-line ideology that seeks to transform Islam from merely a religion into a political system within the contemporary world (Pomalingo, 2019).

Islamic fundamentalism is viewed as a socio-religious movement aimed at returning Muslims to core Islamic teachings (Mahendra, 1999). Fundamentalists adopt an exoteric approach, emphasizing strict boundaries of permissibility and prohibition based on fiqh (Azra, 1996). In contrast, (Khatib, 2003) characterizes Islamic fundamentalism as a new social movement that possesses relative power in the context of globalization. Rather than attempting to reject global realities, it seeks to reshape them, asserting the identity of a specific group as a primary strategy for competing for power and influence within the global system (Beyer, 1994).

These fundamentalist movements, often referred to as Wahhabis or Islamic revivalists (Choueiri, 2003), advocate for the implementation of Islamic law over secular laws and the establishment of an Islamic State. If the legal framework is Islamic, they aim to dominate judicial positions (Roy, 2005). This movement aligns with reformist theology and often rejects the authority of established madhhabs (Bruinessen, 1999). In Indonesia, the fundamentalist movement has historical roots in the Padri of Minangkabau, leading to prolonged horizontal conflicts among Muslims, driven by the radical interpretations influenced by Wahhabi thought.

In Gorontalo, as in other regions, various religious ideologies with differing epistemological foundations have emerged. These include three primary groups: the Sunni faction (comprising Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah), Islamic fundamentalism (represented by Wahdah Islamiyah and Tablighi Jamaat), and liberal Islam (associated with the Indonesian Islamic Student Movement and Ansor).

Young activists within Nahdlatul Ulama are frequently labeled as supporters of “Western liberals.” This characterization has some validity, given their liberal interpretations of Qur’anic and hadith texts. The term “liberal Islam” is derived from the works of Charles Kurzman and Leonard Binder. Kurzman (Samsudin & Lubis, 2019) defines liberal Islam as a synthesis of Socratic dialectical critical philosophy (470-400 BC), Descartes’ rationalism (1596-1650), and Mukhtazilah thought. This combination of philosophies significantly shaped the emergence of a liberal-secular-transformative mode of thinking. Assyaukani (Suhelmi, 2002) notes that liberal Islam aims to tackle the complexities surrounding the

relationship between Islam and the state, Islam and civil rights, as well as Islam and individual freedoms, which often cannot be adequately explained by classical Islamic concepts. Fundamentalists argue that such perspectives dilute the core messages of divine teachings.

Wahdah Islamiyah and Tablighi Jamaat represent a shift in thought from traditional Sunni groups like Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, as well as from organizations such as PMII and Ansor, which are associated with Nahdlatul Ulama. This shift is a natural result of the dialectical process, the social realities of religion, and varying understandings of left and right social theories. The emergence of new thinking is driven by changes in paradigms, methodologies, and interpretations of texts and reality (reinterpretation). These reinterpretations give rise to a new perspective that influences the characteristics of thought, movement, and ideology within Islamic fundamentalism, which tends to emphasize a textual or althabit approach (Huda, 2009) that returns everything to the Qur'an and Sunnah. This group is resistant to change and opposes all forms of modernism and westernization.

Wahdah Islamiyah is a group that fervently advocates a return to the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet. This group identifies itself as followers of the salaful ummah, adhering to the salaf or *masdar talaqi*. Their return to these sources encompasses not only theological beliefs but also practices related to religious obligations (*mahdhah*) like prayer and zakat, as well as non-obligatory matters (*gairu mahdhah*) such as muamalah, all sourced from the Qur'an and Sunnah. This emphasis on returning to these texts reflects a trend in da'wah aimed at purifying Islamic teachings. However, the topics they engage with often attract criticism, particularly concerning issues of khilafiyah.

In 2014, the Mosque of Baitul Rahman in Limboto hosted a significant gathering of the Tablighi Jamaat, commonly referred to as the "jama'ah kompor" or "congregation of stoves," drawing participants from various regions of the country. This event highlighted a strong religious enthusiasm for advancing Islam, particularly in promoting the principles of *amar ma'ruf* and *nahi munkar* among Muslims. However, the gathering sparked controversy, especially among younger Nahdlatul Ulama members, as the three-day event was deemed excessive due to its closure of essential access routes, such as main highways and public areas typically used for recreation (like the Limboto tower and park).

The activities of the Tablighi Jamaat are aimed at motivating and encouraging the spread of religious teachings. They believe that religion can evoke powerful emotions

and a commitment to worship, as well as facilitate the dissemination of God's messages through da'wah in public spaces. For them, religion operates as a system of symbols that generates deep, broad, and lasting feelings and motivations within individuals. Describes religion as a symbolic system that shapes profound and enduring emotions and motivations in humans by framing their understanding of the fundamental order of reality, presented in a way that makes these ideas feel uniquely real (Geertz, 1966).

The utilization of public spaces for religious activities represents a facet of the "new Islamic movement" in Gorontalo. The Great Mosque Baiturrahman, often referred to as the "customary mosque" in Limboto, serves as a key location for the Tablighi Jamaat and Wahdah Islamiyah. Other mosques throughout Gorontalo also function as venues for da'wah (*khuruj*) and educational activities conducted by these two organizations. These spaces foster the creation of discourse (da'wah) and cultivate individual personalities that tend to be reactive, fanatical, scriptural, and exclusive, with a preference for literal and textual interpretations.

Both the Tablighi Jamaat and Wahdah Islamiyah are relatively new to the Gorontalo scene and frequently find themselves in conflict with traditional Islamic groups, particularly Nahdlatul Ulama. Tensions also arise internally among these newer groups. For instance, some individuals who embrace a specific ideological understanding often share videos of lectures by 'Wahhabi ustadz' on social media. This sharing leads to emotionally charged debates within the ongoing discourse war. Disagreements escalate as each participant believes their perspective is justified, resulting in a discourse war on social media where individuals accuse one another of disbelief and misguidance. This phenomenon is evident among "young people" who are beginning to explore their faith, as well as those who claim to have a solid grasp of Fiqh and the interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith.

4.3. The Role of Ulema in Addressing and Resolving Religious Polemics

Gorontalo is often referred to as the Veranda of Medina, guided by the philosophy of "*adati hula-hula'a to syara'a, syara'a hula-hula'a to Kitabullah*" (customs based on syara', syara' based on Kitabullah)." These principles serve as the foundation for the religious identity of the predominantly Muslim community in Gorontalo. Elders, including religious and traditional leaders, frequently reference a guideline that states "*Agama To Talu Lipu Pe'l Hulalu,*" which translates to "religion first, the country is built." This

belief underpins the notion of “customs based on syara’, syara’ based on Kitabullah,” reflecting the emphasis on good morals and ethics over mere knowledge within the Gorontalo Muslim community.

The religious debates occurring in Gorontalo illustrate the unique religiosity of its residents. These discussions have led to the emergence of transnational Islamic ideological movements, rooted in historical conflicts among religious figures. One significant debate arose over the Baiturrahim mosque, which was seen as a *khilafiyah* issue related to the Tarawih Prayer (specifically the number of rakaat: 8 versus 20). The conflict between K.H. Abas Rauf of Nahdlatul Ulama and Mohammad Podungge of Muhammadiyah was mediated by the government with the assistance of Habib Ahmad Al-Masyhur from Yemen.

Currently, such polemics are often tolerated, viewed as a normal aspect of Islam. The influence of transnational Islamic groups, particularly Salafi movements, challenges longstanding perceptions regarding legal matters. These groups advocate for a purification of Islamic teachings, distancing them from traditional customs. Having established a presence in Gorontalo since the 1990s, many members of the local Muslim community have become devoted followers of their ideologies. Their influence is evident not only in the physical realm but also across social media platforms. Initially, their da’wah was quite assertive, but over time it has softened. Although their methods have adapted due to the stigma associated with Salafi teachings, they maintain a strong opposition to the integration of Islamic principles with local traditions.

The ulema in Gorontalo oppose this polemic, prioritizing the unity of Muslims above all else. The understanding of Islam among the Gorontalo Muslim community should be framed within the principles of *Ahlul Sunnah wal Jama’ah* (ASWAJA), which emphasizes moderation (*tawasut*), balance (*tawazun*), tolerance (*tasamuh*), and justice (*l’tidal*) as core tenets of *Islam rahmatan lil alamin*. To address the ideology and movements of the Salafi groups, such as Wahdah Islamiyah and Tablighi Jamaat, which have sparked religious debates within Gorontalo’s Muslim community, the ulema have engaged in counter-discourse to mitigate these issues, including Offering attractive ideas, valuing diversity, giving counsel in a good manner, and promoting da’wah with kindness.

The obama’s efforts to balance the ideas and movements of Salafi groups (Wahdah Islamiyah and Tablighi Jamaat) are crucial for maintaining the unity of Muslims in Gorontalo. This unity is essential for preserving the faith (*hifzud dien*). While differences among people are part of divine will (*sunnatullah*), Muslims are encouraged to respect

these differences and not be swayed by the propaganda of irresponsible groups. It is advisable to stay true to Allah's teachings by fostering friendships among those with differing opinions, a message often conveyed through various Islamic study sessions, *ta'ziah*, and religious commemorations.

In 2016, an incident occurred where an Islamic gathering of Wahdah Islamiyah at the Kota Barat Mosque was disrupted. The disbandment took place because the ulama were perceived to be disrespecting the practices of the Nahdliyin community. Local congregants around the mosque halted the activities in response to what they deemed impolite da'wah. This event was reported to the local police and the Indonesian Ulema Council of Gorontalo. The chief of the ulama in Gorontalo, K.H. Muin Mooduto, subsequently invited the ustadz and respectfully offered guidance on the da'wah methods and content presented during that gathering.

Ongoing polemics highlight the need for ulama to serve as role models who can bridge differences among Muslims. According to Weber (Rusli, 2005), legitimate power is necessary, characterized by rational-legal authority rooted in belief in charismatic leaders. The 'wild' discourses that arise can be a significant source of tension within the Muslim community.

Ulama, as charismatic leaders, play a vital role in addressing the dynamic landscape of Islamic thought, which can often lead to disputes. Their ability to interpret the Qur'an as a divine message that must be understood, internalized, and applied in the lives of Muslims is essential. Variations in interpreting the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet, especially when based on limited reasoning and lacking comprehensive knowledge, can be detrimental and spark further polemics among Muslims.

The transnational political movement, as an evolution of Islamic thought, has sparked controversies that undermine the consensus on maintaining unity among Muslims. Gorontalo is closely tied to the emergence of various ideas currently taking shape, prompting the ulama to respond to the escalating dynamism of thought among the local Muslim community. The widespread transnational da'wah movement, prevalent across social media and public venues, has consumed significant time and energy from the ulema. Intensifying da'wah efforts to counter the Salafi movement (transnational Islam) in these spaces is seen as a way to mitigate narrow interpretations of the 'New Islam' associated with Wahdah Islamiyah and Tablighi Jamaat.

In Gorontalo, the ulama serve as key figures for inquiry and discussion in addressing these changes. As holders of religious authority, they strive to engage with the local

Islamic thought landscape. Their responses are evident in ta'lim assemblies, where discursive rhetoric is employed to discuss Islamic values of rahmatan lil alamin in relation to the nation. One example is the "Ngaji Live" program initiated by a young group from Nahdlatul Ulama on NUtizen TV. Additionally, the Tabligh Akbar organized by Ansor in Gorontalo, in collaboration with the ulama, is seen as a response to the evolving dynamics of Islamic thought at the local level. The local population appears to be polarized by various religious ideologies and movements, with these patterns reflecting a type of change that is challenging to manage.

An example of extremist actions is the Kelompok Mujahidin Indonesia Timur in Poso, which carried out suicide bombings on March 29, 2021, at the Makassar Cathedral Church. These attacks were executed by millennial terrorists linked to Jama'ah Ansharut Daulah, who had pledged allegiance (bai'at) to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In response to the bombings, Densus 88 conducted a major operation, arresting 32 terrorists in various locations by the end of March 2021, including three women in Makassar.

The ulama in Gorontalo express concern over the recruitment of hard-line Islamic network members involved in suicide bombings. These individuals are believed to adopt a textual-atomistic mindset and tend to make hasty judgments, labeling those outside their group as kafir. To protect Gorontalo from the influence of extreme Islamic ideologies, it is crucial for Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah Gorontalo to work together, setting aside their egos. The religious moderation program initiated by the government is actively promoted by Ansor in Gorontalo to foster a more accommodating understanding of Islam amid ongoing ideological debates.

The ulama in Gorontalo play a vital role in addressing ideological disputes to preserve the unity of Muslims. Religious diversity in Indonesia is significant, and issues related to religion are seldom resolved quickly; instead, efforts to address them typically occur only after the focus has shifted from polemics to internal tensions within the Muslim community. When conflicts arise, reconciliation among the parties involved can take considerable time. The ulama aim to prevent Gorontalo from becoming caught up in conflicts similar to the civil wars that have occurred in various regions of Indonesia.

The ulama in Gorontalo recognize that the people of Gorontalo have anthropological roots in a small family known as laihe, led by pulahe. This evolved into a lembo'a, overseen by bantalo. From several lembo'a, a broader community called Linula emerged, led by alongia. The long-established structure of Gorontalo society is resilient against

differing viewpoints, as the people share a common ancestry (ngala'a/laihe). The five principles mentioned are viewed as social capital within the Gorontalo community to promote solidarity among Muslims.

5. Conclusion

The landscape of Islamic thought in Gorontalo is marked by a rich tapestry of dissenting voices that contribute to the ongoing polemics surrounding faith, interpretation, and practice. This complexity reflects not only the diversity within the Islamic community but also the broader socio-political context in which these discussions occur. The region's historical roots, anthropological narratives, and the role of the ulema collectively shape the dynamics of religious discourse, signifying that dissent can be both a challenge and an opportunity for growth within the community.

The ulema in Gorontalo are pivotal in this discourse, serving as mediators and interpreters of Islamic teachings. Their efforts to maintain unity among Muslims are essential, especially in a region where ideological differences can lead to significant tensions. The recognition of a shared ancestry among the people of Gorontalo fosters a sense of belonging that transcends individual interpretations of faith. This underlying unity is critical in ensuring that disagreements do not escalate into conflicts that could mirror the civil unrest seen in other parts of Indonesia.

Moreover, the voices of dissent in Gorontalo are not merely expressions of disagreement; they are vital contributions to the evolution of Islamic thought. These voices challenge the status quo, encouraging critical examination and reinterpretation of religious texts and practices. The presence of diverse interpretations fosters an environment where ideas can be debated and refined, ultimately enriching the community's understanding of Islam. In this context, dissent becomes a form of intellectual engagement rather than a divisive force.

However, navigating these polemics is fraught with challenges. The rise of extremist ideologies poses a significant threat to the moderate voices within the community. Efforts to promote a more inclusive understanding of Islam are crucial in countering these extremist narratives. The government's initiatives aimed at fostering religious moderation, supported by organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, are essential steps in this direction. By promoting dialogue and collaboration among various

Islamic groups, Gorontalo can cultivate a more resilient religious identity that is resistant to radical influences.

The community's response to dissenting voices also plays a critical role in shaping the future of Islamic thought in Gorontalo. Embracing constructive criticism and engaging in open dialogue can lead to a more nuanced understanding of faith that accommodates diverse perspectives. This approach not only strengthens communal bonds but also enhances the legitimacy of the ulema as leaders who are responsive to the needs and concerns of their constituents.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to fellow researchers who have assisted directly in the research, whether through technical assistance, access to data, or feedback.

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