Between Piety and Safety:
The Question of Muslim Compliance with State and Religious Authority During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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1. Introduction

The outbreak and spread of COVID-19 had dramatically impacted the globe. The pandemic is still developing at the time of this writing (February 7, 2021). Except for gigantic American companies, GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon), most of the world's firms soured in their business. Economic conditions are worsening. One of the most direct reasons for economic recession is that social distancing has become a universal principle for avoiding public health risks.[1] In other words, the pandemic situation is a so-called global humanitarian crisis.[2]

Like other religious communities, Muslim communities have faced many challenges after the outbreak of the pandemic. As social distancing is imposed, or encouraged as a preventive measure to the spread of the pandemic, how to perform religious rituals and practices became a challenge. This problem is particularly the case with Muslims.

Muslims share a sense of community and bondage through religious rituals, ceremonies, charity activities, and so forth. Religious and cultural identity is manifested among Muslims through their collective and religious practices. They pray in the mosque, often in the plurality. They celebrate the break of fasting by enjoying Iftar (evening meal in the month of Ramadan) with family or community members. They make a pilgrimage to Mecca, where Muslims worldwide get together, performing various rituals collectively.

Every state should ensure "the right of all persons to worship or assemble in connection with a religious or belief." Many human rights protocols and international conventions recognize it. The Commission on Human Rights resolution 2005/40 (paragraph 4 (d)), Human Rights Council resolution 6/37 (paragraph 9(g)), and General Assembly resolution 65/211 (paragraph 12 (g)) all stipulate such a right.[3] Here, the

question is how religious rights (or the right to worship) and the right to life, mainly life safety, can be compatible in the real world.

Amid the pandemic, governments have taken different policies and measures. Some measures are legal, and others are in the realm of recommendations.[4] The Muslim communities in the world reacted to such government measures.[5] Some of them complied with the regulations, and other Muslims ignored restrictions on how they practice Islam.

In the process of their compliance and defiance, Muslims debated much about how they could perform Islamic prayers and funerals.[6] Should daily group prayer and Friday mass prayer, in particular, be restricted or suspended under the pandemic situation? Do Muslims need to change their way of conducting funerary rites to avoid contagion? Who has the authority to make these decisions?

Among these issues, this paper will draw attention to the Friday congregational player's question, as this is one of the most significant deeds for Muslims. This paper illustrates how state and religious authorities responded to the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic in the first two months after the first infection was found in Iran and Indonesia. How did each authority restrict congregational prayers? Who has the power to issue preventive policies and measures that are convincing to the Muslims? These questions are addressed in this study.

2. The Question of Authority

Why does this study address the question of authority in Muslim majoritarian states? This is because one of the representative authorities is the ulama (religious leaders) that generally plays a significant role in Muslims' social life. The position of the ulama varies depending on the state's relationship to the religion of Islam. In most countries where Muslims live, whether they are majoritarian or minority, the ulama is often a community leader and does not have much political power. However, when it comes to interpreting the Quran and/or the Islamic law that Muslims refer to for their practice of Islam, Muslims often seek advice from the ulama and listen to them. In this sense, what the ulama says or if they issue a religious decree (fatwa) may matter more to the Muslims than what the government orders to its citizen as long as it is Islam's question.

Muslims today are ubiquitous. They live mainly in Asia, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Russia. Nevertheless, they also live in the United States and Europe. For example, more than 16 million Muslims live in Europe. The study takes up two cases,

Indonesia and Iran.

There are two similarities between Iran and Indonesia. One is the fact that the number of infections in both countries still has not decreased. The other is that both countries are the Muslim majority states. However, the significant difference is that Iran's regime is mainly a theocracy with some elective government elements, while Indonesia is a secular state. Moreover, Indonesia's Muslims are mainly Sunni, while Iran's Islam is Shi'i and is the state religion. Despite these differences, taking up these two countries can highlight the roles of religious leaders in convincing Muslims in their communities, and therefore contributing or not to the suppression of the pandemic.

As stated above, Iran's system is a theocracy, and thus, the ulama is in the establishment and wields significant decision-making power. In other words, the ulama holds much of the state authority, as the Supreme Leader Khamenei holds ultimate state power. On the other hand, Indonesia is a secular state in which the ulema does not directly intervene in politics. The comparison between these states will address the impacts of religious authorities on their followers' compliance with their religious orders and decrees, and whether the ulama being within the government like Iran or outside the government authority like Indonesia matters much to the countries' Muslims.

3. Case Studies: Iran and Indonesia

Iran

After the government's initial denial of the presence of the coronavirus in Iran in late January to the middle of February 2020, the first infections came to surface in the holy city of Qom on February 19, 2020.[7] It took a week until the government issued on February 27 the cancelation of Friday prayers in Tehran and other major cities.[8] Shortly after this measure, on March 2, representing Iran's electoral part of the government, President Rouhani admitted that the coronavirus had spread through almost all provinces and blamed the U.S. for not lifting sanctions, particularly for medicine. Under these circumstances, Iranian people expressed their complaints on social media: they critiqued the government's delay in canceling the congregational prayers. The fact that the outbreak of COVID-19 started at the regime's power center, Qom, also provoked people's anger against the clerical regime.[9]

Moreover, according to a Reuters report, "some religious hardliners, including

clerics, have dismissed the idea of closing the holy site to prevent the spread of the virus, arguing that the shrine in Qom is 'a place for healing'."[10] On the other hand, another significant shrine at Mashad, the Imam Reza Shrine, closed from March 14 until May 25, 2020.[11] Thus, it is interesting to note that the religious leaders' reactions toward the government order were different between Qom and Mashad. Some ulema complied even inside Qom, and other ulema did not comply with the government's measures. Thus, the internal division was manifested.

What about the later development of the government's policy and measures to combat the pandemic? Headed by President Rohani, the National Headquarters of Administrating COVID-19 was established in the middle of March and hosted the Tehran Meeting on March 16, 2020. The Headquarters consists of the Ministry of Health, Health Education, the Foreign Ministry, representatives from other health and security-related government agencies, and the military to develop specific policies and measures to tackle the COVID-19 situation.

As is pointed out by the media, the Supreme Leader ordered the IRGC to play a significant role in containing COVID-19 in all provinces. The IRGC is reported to have mobilized 300,000 troops, including from Basij, an auxiliary paramilitary force, nationwide, "to help sanitize public places, direct traffic, and test and treat citizens."[12]

Thus, the overview of how the Islamic Republic coped with COVID-19, as analyzed above, indicates that the Supreme Leader's role was decisive. Moreover, the head of the elected government, President Rohani, exercised leadership in executing the urgently established National Headquarters, which took a whole-government approach to coordinate the different branches of government agencies in restricting the people's activities, including the congregational prayers less than a month from the COVID-19 outbreak. According to the Brookings' report, by mid-March, "the restrictions were tightened, including the cancellation of public Nowruz (New Year) celebrations and the first-ever cancellation of Friday prayers since the 1979 revolution."[13]

Indonesia

Indonesia's first case of COVID-19 was found on March 2, 2020. As was pointed out by different sources, the government's response was not so fast. President Joko Widodo first issued "Presidential Decree No. 11 of 2020" on March 31 as "Determination of COVID19 Public Health Emergency under Law No. 6 of 2018 on Health Quarantine."[14] On March 5, Health Ministry Spokesman Kianush Jahanpur tweeted a map that showed the

coronavirus's spread.

In response to the President's appeal to the people, the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI), on the next day, March 17, issued a religious decree, "No. 14 (fatwa) on Organizing Worship under the Conditions of the covid-19 Outbreak." [15] The fatwa categorized the regions into two groups and encouraged the areas with a high risk of contagion to replace Friday prayers with the Zuhr prayers. For the areas with low transmission potential, the decree stated that people are "required to perform the religious prayer and complying with the provisions of the health protocols."[16]

Jakarta's capital city had a higher number of infections than other cities in March and April 2020.[17] Consequently, Jakarta Governor Aries Baswedan requested its residents on March 19 to abolish the Friday prayer following the MUI's fatwa. However, the Istiqal Mosque administrators in Jakarta did not listen to the Governor's request and ordered the Mosque's imam to hold the Friday prayer of March 20. On the other hand, there was no serious opposition to the MUI fatwa in general other than a mosque in Bandung. Moreover, by March 27 (Friday), "many mosques no longer held public Friday prayers" (ibid).

However, the story did not end then. As the number of the infections continued to increase from the middle to the end of March, the MUI attempted to persuade people not to perform Friday prayers by referring to a hadith and interpreting the ongoing COVID-19 situation.

Regarding the effectiveness of the series of encouraging statements, recommendations, and requests made by the President, the Governor of Jakarta, and the MUI, the evaluation seems to be divided. On the one hand, some scholars insist that ulama can play a vital role in creating a norm in new normalcy. The article written by Permata, Nanda, and Dermawan suggested that local people in West Sumatra followed what the ulama preached about the significance of complying with the government's policy when they emphasized the need of practicing social distancing in the mass prayers.[18]

On the other hand, some scholars argued that Indonesia's case under the pandemic showed the general failure of Muslims' compliance with the government. As Yusuf Hanafi, Ahmad Taufiq et al. argued, Muslims, in general, did not change their attitude or behaviors in performing the congregational prayer, whether religiously affiliated or secular authorities issued public health messages.[19] Other authors such as Kuipers, Mujani, and Pepinsky also demonstrated in their quantitative analysis that any personal or institutional encouragement had much effect on Indonesian Muslims. Thus, the "Pray From Home" campaign of the government and the MUI was not successful.

4. Conclusion

The two case studies analyzed above give us an interesting comparison. In Iran's case, the ulama holds the decisive powers in many aspects of governance and is in the established government. Nevertheless, the government has faced defiance to their restrictive measures both from the ulama's conservative faction and those indifferent to the government's political power. On the other hand, the regime seems to have shown its governance capability to mobilize different government agencies' segments in creating the national headquarters to cope with the pandemic situation under the religious leaders' leadership. The case of Indonesia was different from Iran. Despite the common argument that the ulama plays a religious and communal role in Indonesia's civil society, Muslims did not necessarily listen to the ulama in the local communities and the MUI. The number of Muslims that continued to attend the Friday prayers did not decline amid the pandemic. Thus, who issues the restrictive measures toward the religious practices did not matter in Indonesia.

The World Health Organization published an interim guideline entitled "Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19." The guideline suggested social distancing during gatherings and "conducting faith activities remotely and virtually."[20] However, as this study showed, Muslim majoritarian states in Iran and Indonesia have faced a challenge of how to combat the spread of COVID-19, which meant the need of discouraging congregational prayers.

In both countries, the pandemic situation at the time of this writing has not improved. As for Muslim majoritarian states, the question of how to restrict religious rights and prevent the expansion of the pandemic will continue for some time. Though much study has emerged within the last year about this subject, many other aspects remain to explore. Other factors that influence people's behavior in the new normalcy, such as gender, education level, age, and socioeconomic attributes, should be further examined.

For example, mourning the loss of beloved persons is one of the most fundamental aspects of humanity. Though the right to mourn involves culturally determined practices of rituals and ceremonies, public health concerns in the age of COVID-19 dominates to the extent that the families of deceased victims suffer from deprivation of not conducting religious and cultural rituals and ceremonies that they ordinarily perform. Due to this paper's limited space, this study did not deal with this subject. It is certain that more substantial studies should be conducted on how to strike a balance between religious and cultural rights and the right to life.

Notes

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3   International standards on freedom of religion or belief, United Nations Human rights Office of High Commissioner. [https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/freedomreligion/pages/standards.aspx #5] (accessed February 14, 2021)

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11 IRNA English, May 25, 2020. [https://en.irna.ir/photo/84200955/Holy-shrine-of-Imam-Reza-AS-in-the-time-of-Coronavirus]

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