

Religion and Covid-19: Islamic Scholars and Muslim Humanitarian Actors in Pakistan

When the Covid-19 pandemic spread in 2020, religious sites were early recognized as centers of transmission. Around the world, places of prayer were closed and religious gatherings postponed. In Pakistan, however, Islamic clerics opposed lockdown. Muslim humanitarians on their side stepped up their service provision in response to the pandemic. The importance of religion to many people in Pakistan gives Islamic scholars and local imams considerable influence over people's attitudes and behaviors. This makes it pertinent to understand the role of religion in the pandemic. This policy brief examines the response to Covid-19 by Islamic scholars and Muslim humanitarian organizations in Pakistan.

Brief Points

- At the onset of Covid-19, the traditionalist clerics resisted government restrictions on religious gatherings, including mosque closure.
- Muslim humanitarian organizations largely supported government policy and operated in detachment from the politics of religion playing out in the public debate.
- Drawing on Islamic teachings, Muslim humanitarians developed innovative methods to mobilize financial support and assist communities in need.
- The response from Muslim humanitarians revealed new solidarities with marginal groups (e.g., transgender people).

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The Initial Response

The first cases of Covid-19 in Pakistan were reported on February 27, 2020 among Shia pilgrims returning from Iran. In response, the government closed the border with Iran and cancelled flights to affected destinations in China, Iran, Qatar, and Italy. Frequent trade and pilgrimage between Pakistan and Iran, Afghanistan, and China, however, make the border porous and difficult to control. Due to weak testing, tracing and quarantine capacity, the virus soon spread across the country.

As more cases emerged, the government instigated several measures, yet was hesitant to impose a full national lockdown. Provincial governments, however, soon enforced regional lockdowns. A countrywide lockdown was enacted on April 1, 2020. Security forces were deployed to ensure infected people's entry into quarantine centers. Markets were shut down, provincial borders were monitored, and congregations and meetings were banned.

The government also introduced initiatives to mitigate the detrimental economic effects of the pandemic and the associated national lockdown. Despite this, the lockdown still faced staunch opposition from both the business community and the religious establishment. As a result, enforcement of the lockdown was weak. The full lockdown was soon replaced by a "smart lockdown," with short-term restrictions imposed in geographical hotspots. The Government of Pakistan has been criticized for doing "too little, too late" and for not prioritizing resources to deal with the pandemic effectively.

Multiple Challenges

Pakistan faced multiple challenges in the wake of Covid-19. The pandemic placed severe strain on already weak health infrastructure, the economy suffered, and the poorest were the ones hardest hit.

Fake news and conspiracy theories

Along with the virus, misinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories and rumors rapidly spread on social media. This contributed to Covid-19 denial and vaccine hesitancy becoming prevalent in Pakistan. Among the critics of the government's approach to the pandemic were Islamic scholars, who claimed that both

the virus itself and the vaccination developed against it were "Western," "American," and "anti-Muslim" plots.

Sectarian dimensions

In Pakistan, the first cases of Covid-19 were reported in February 2020 among Shia Muslim pilgrims returning from Iran. Many Sunni Muslim clerics labelled it "the Shia virus." This contributed to exacerbating discrimination and harassment of Muslim minorities. Conflict around Shia religious processions in the month of Moharram further aggravated sectarian fault lines.

Covid-19 and the Politics of Religion

Mixed responses to Covid-19 by Islamic scholars

In Pakistan, Islamic clerics exhibited a mixed response to Covid-19. While some were supportive of government measures, others were vocally critical. The public debate in Pakistan was marked by prominent Islamic scholars, from different schools of thought, rejecting the restrictions being imposed on public religious life, with some scholars denying the existence of the virus, while others proclaimed it as an anti-Islamic conspiracy.

An independent clergy

Unlike in other Muslim majority states where Friday sermons are frequently directed by the state, the Pakistani clergy has a highly autonomous status, making them a potent pressure force vis-à-vis the government. Utilizing this status, the Pakistani clergy – reluctant to support government policy – negatively impacted the initial response.

In early March 2020, religious sites were closed around the world, including the holy sites of Mecca and Medina. In Pakistan, however, Islamic scholars from all Sunni sects opposed the closure of mosques. The all-Pakistan Ulema Council, from which the government had expected support, did not agree to more than a shortening of the sermon, an increase in the distance between rows of seats, and a recommendation that the elderly stay at home. It was not until 17 March 2020 that the Pakistan Ulema Council issued a fatwa to postpone political and religious gatherings and urged people

to adopt precautionary measures. While some measures were taken, the mosque closure was generally not enforced and lack of support from influential Islamic clerics contributed to weak social distancing practices.

Changing attitudes

Gradually, as the virus spread widely in the population, the attitudes of several high-level influential Islamic scholars changed, which impacted the public debate. In April 2021, the Pakistan Ulema Council urged the nation to observe Covid-19 restrictions during Friday prayer and encouraged people to get the coronavirus vaccine.

Government engagement with religious leaders

Research conducted among local religious leaders, such as the village imams (prayer leaders), during the pandemic have found that one-to-one engagement with individual religious leaders can change attitudes and behavior towards Covid-19 prevention measures.¹ Little effort has been made by the government to engage local religious leaders in constructive ways. Instead, there have been reports circulating on social media of government officials using intimidation tactics to pressure religious leaders into forming a united front with the state.

The Muslim Humanitarian Response

While Pakistani Islamic clergy presented a mixed response, many Muslim humanitarian actors rapidly stepped up their efforts. Islamic charity is core to Muslim religious practice and is widely practiced in Pakistan. Although such charity is often given directly and through personal networks to family and neighbors, over the past decade several professional aid organizations have emerged. Here, we look closer at two organizations: the Al Khidmat Foundation Pakistan and Akhuwat.

The Al Khidmat Foundation – working under the slogan "service to humanity" – originates from the Islamist political party Jamaat e Islami. It is now the largest humanitarian actor in Pakistan. It claims an independent status and works across the country, in multiple sectors.

Akhuwat, meaning "brotherhood," brands itself as the world's largest interest-free micro



Wazir Khan mosque in the old city of Lahore Photo: Paul Keller/ Flickr (CC BY)

finance institution. It mainly works through economic empowerment, skill development and education.

Although different in their origins and ways of organizing, the two organizations have over the past decade become two leading national NGOs. Both organizations draw on established networks of volunteers and operate on a low-cost basis. Both are inspired by faith and mobilize human and financial resources through their networks of supporters and sympathizers in Pakistan and abroad – not from international donor agencies. Both organizations enjoy good working relationships with the government and have grown considerably, expanding program volume and areas of activity.

When the pandemic broke out, both the Al Khidmat Foundation and Akhuwat responded immediately. Each took an active role in spreading information about the government’s Covid-19 standard operating procedures (SOPs), utilizing their existing networks of volunteers and supporters, and engaged directly with local-level religious leaders.

Food and economic support

With increasing infection rates, the government sealed areas off, placing whole communities in virtual lockdown without the means to work, earn an income and access food. In response, the Al Khidmat Foundation and Akhuwat distributed cooked meals and food items to affected communities on a large scale. Both

organizations also adapted their existing micro finance activities to the pandemic, extending payment schedules and broadening their beneficiary bases.

Working with government

In the early days of the pandemic, the fear of the virus incapacitated many government bodies. Given that both the Al Khidmat Foundation and Akhuwat already enjoyed an established working relationship with the government, during the pandemic both organizations coordinated with the government at different levels – not least at the local level, where the government actively approached the organizations asking them to assist. As such, the responses to the pandemic by the Muslim humanitarian organizations we have studied were largely detached from the public conflict between the clergy and the state.

New ways of working

In response to the pandemic, Akhuwat devised new models of working built on people-to-people networks of solidarity: “neighbor-to-neighbor,” “mosque-to-mosque” and “locality-to-locality.” Finding ways to adapt their work to the pandemic, the organization drew on Islamic teachings when working locally to reduce spread of the virus.

“[W]e used to tell people that if today Allah has given you everything and, in your neighborhood, there is a daily

wager or poor who is out of work due to lockdown, it is the time to renew and revive the convention of ‘Ansar Muhajir.’ In this way we dedicate one poor household to a neighboring wealthier household, [following] the concept of ‘Akhuwat, Ansar and Muhajir’” [referring to the notion of brotherhood and the bond of solidarity between the communities of Mecca and Madinah, when The Prophet first migrated from Mecca to Madinah in September 622 A.D.] – Interview with Akhuwat relief worker

New beneficiaries

While the organizations kept the focus on the most vulnerable, the pandemic exposed the vulnerability of new groups, including “white collar workers”: people that normally manage well, and will not ask for help. Also, transgender communities and people with substance abuse problems – socially and religiously stigmatized groups in Pakistan – have emerged as particularly vulnerable groups during the pandemic.

Social media

The contagious nature of the virus, making person-to-person contact dangerous, meant that social media was a key tool for the Muslim humanitarian organizations in their strategies to reach out to communities in need. In rural areas typically not reached by social media, however,

Al Khidmat also reached out to imams of mosques, urging them to inform people about the virus – and the government policy – through their sermons. Akhuwat used their networks of customers and the loan distribution events in mosques, temples, and churches to inform people about and encourage them to follow the government SOPs.

Main Findings

Religion has featured centrally in the response to Covid-19 in Pakistan, not least in the public debate.

Influential religious leaders. Although the responses of the clergy have been mixed, at the national level the Islamic scholars opposing government measures have dominated the debate, with some fiercely opposing the closure of mosques and sites of worship. The hesitant response contributed to delays in the prevention work and gave legitimacy to conspiracy theories and anti-vaccine attitudes.

In a country where religion guides the lives of large parts of the population, the opinions of Islamic scholars and mullahs – the community-level religious leaders – matter. This awards responsibility to the Islamic clergy, but also to the government, which needs to devise appropriate ways of engaging the clergy in responses to emergencies such as the pandemic.

Demonstrated willingness for change. As the virus spread, gradually more religious scholars endorsed government policy and supported the vaccination campaign. Although differences exist, we witnessed a clear shift in the attitudes of Pakistan's religious establishment towards the end of 2020. Influential religious leaders, such as Mawlana Tariq Jamil, demonstrate the importance of individual authorities in raising awareness and gathering support in the fight

against Covid-19. Yet, we still know little about the role of religious leaders and institutions at the local level.

Muslim humanitarians responded quickly. The Muslim humanitarian organizations we have studied took it upon themselves to provide trustworthy information and advice about the prevention measures towards and vaccination against the virus. By combining knowledge and expertise from religious and medical sources, they were well placed to contribute to the containment of the virus and assist vulnerable segments of society. The rapid and continual response – in addition to time, as the fatality of the virus has made it more difficult to deny – seems to have contributed to the organizations gaining support among the public.

Humanitarian actors detached from the politics of religion. We find that the Muslim humanitarian actors we have studied have largely operated in detachment from the politics of religion at the national level. A focus on the contributions of Muslim humanitarian actors reveals insights regarding the role of religion in the pandemic response that a focus on solely Islamic scholars and their role in the public debate would leave unnoticed. We find that interactions took place in local communities, on the ground, and that local religious leaders demonstrated willingness to cooperate, even before the national-level Islamic clergy supported government policy. Still, these findings are preliminary. To gain a fuller picture of the role of religion would require more detailed studies, examining the interplay between the government and religious actors at national and local levels.

Religious civil society. The Government of Pakistan needs to mobilize all parts of civil society to mobilize against threats like the Covid 19 pandemic. While collaboration between the government and the religious establishment

exists, there seems to be an unutilized potential in reaching out to local communities through religious leaders, not only centrally but also locally, through engaging the local mullahs and imams in neighborhood mosques. ■

Notes

1. Aftab, Maniha; Syed Uzair Junaid, Lala Rukh Khan & Kate Vyborny (2021) Engaging with local religious leader to Combat Covid 19 in Pakistan. *International Growth Centre Policy Brief*. Available at: www.theigc.org/publication/engagement-with-local-religious-leaders-to-combat-covid-19-in-pakistan.

Further Reading

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THE PROJECT

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