

Covid-19 and Muslim Philanthropy in Indonesia

Technological and Theological Innovations

Indonesia is home to the largest Muslim population in the world, with some 230 million Muslims out of a total population of 280 million. The initial spread of Covid-19 in March 2020 coincided with the start of the holy month of Ramadan. In order to prevent a rapid spread of the virus, restrictions were urgently placed on human interaction and movement, including those pertaining to religious rituals and practices. In this policy brief, we explore the role of religion in the Covid-19 response in Indonesia.

Brief Points

- In Indonesia, religion figured centrally in the public debates around Covid-19.
- Religious actors had mixed reactions to the imposed restrictions; while the Islamic mass organizations took the pandemic seriously and supported the government, other religious actors denied the seriousness of the virus and dismissed government policy.
- The Islamic mass organizations were among the first to change their policies and practices.
- The government relied on collaboration with religious actors to reach the masses.
- Muslim philanthropic organizations adapted their ways of working, moving activities online and finding new ways to provide relief and uphold religious practices.
- Some of these changes required theological innovation and reinterpretation.

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State and Muslim Philanthropy

Indonesia is a majority Muslim country. The country is home to several Islamic mass organizations, most importantly the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the modernist Muhammadiyah (MU), which together claim some 100 million followers. Indonesia also hosts transnational religious groups and networks such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (banned by the government), and various salafi movements. This diversity was also reflected in the religious response to Covid-19.

Indonesia has a vibrant and varied civil society, including secular and religious organizations. While Islamic traditions for helping the poor and people in need have a long history, new forms of Islamic social activism have developed, mobilizing the new and growing middle class in Indonesia. After the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, and following a process of democratization and islamization, Muslim philanthropic organizations transformed from doing charity-oriented welfare work to delivering emergency relief and engaging in longer term development activities.

The Indonesian state has been supportive of the Muslim philanthropic sector, recognizing its contributions in welfare provision and broader socio-economic development. The Zakat Law (1999 and 2011), the Waqf Law (2004), and the establishment of the national *zakat* and *waqf* boards have facilitated the utilization of Islamic social finance. Today, some 550 state-registered *zakat* organizations and 400 NGOs exist, complementing the activities of Indonesia's many community and mosque-based organizations, of which there are an estimated 800,000. There are 18 leading Muslim philanthropy organizations. Their annual income in 2020/2021 is more than 50 billion rupiah (USD 3.2 million), making their contributions to welfare and development in Indonesia significant.

Competing Religious Authority

Religion has figured centrally in debates about the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia. Islamic scholars and religious authorities expressed diverse views about the virus and how to respond to it. Theological discussions centred on how to understand the pandemic within an Islamic framework. For example, whether the Covid-19

Muslim Philanthropy and Social Finance

- **Zakat:** obligatory donation, the “Islamic tax,” commonly calculated as 2.5% of excess wealth paid annually.
- **Zakat ul fitr:** obligatory donation at the end of Ramadan.
- **Sadaqah:** voluntary acts of giving.
- **Qurbani:** the annual animal sacrifice.
- **Waqf:** Islamic endowment. Rotating fund used for social purposes.
- **Qard al-hassan:** interest-free, goodwill loans for welfare purposes.
- **Sukuk:** Islamic bonds.
- **Islamic social finance:** a financial term describing the various Islamic institutions for giving and redistribution of wealth.

outbreak in Indonesia should be classified as a pandemic or not would decide the legitimacy of measures such as the dispensation of religious practices and rituals, including the closure of mosques for communal prayer and the discontinuation of physical alms collection and distribution.

The mainstream Islamic organizations, including the NU and MU, as well as the independent but government-empowered Indonesia Ulema Council (MUI), supported the government's policies early on and urged their members to follow government instructions. MU acted fast by issuing religious guidance and rapidly started organizing religious sermons and gatherings online. The MUI followed suit, issuing fatwas and advice that became the main reference point, followed by other organizations and individual ulama. NU, which has the largest following, did not ban congregational prayers, but instructed people to be cautious and follow the fatwa of MUI.

Other religious leaders criticized and rejected the government's policy to close mosques and other religious sites. For example, Kyai Najih Maimoen Zubair – from the prominent, traditionalist *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) Al-Anwar (associated with the NU) – argued that the Covid-19 outbreak could not be categorized as a pandemic, as in his interpretation a pandemic that justifies ritual dispensation should

kill at least 100,000 people, and in Indonesia, mortality rates had remained low. Therefore, it could not be termed a pandemic, and rituals such as congregational prayers should be upheld. Instead, Kyai Najih perceived Covid-19 as a new form of imperialism, exercised by the World Health Organization (WHO), the US, China and other enemies of Islam, and as a Zionist conspiracy to destroy Islam. As infections and death tolls rose, Kyai Najih and other religious figures modified their positions.

Muslim Philanthropic Responses

In 2020, Covid-19 infection rates started rising just before Ramadan. This is a busy time of year for Muslim philanthropic organizations. During Ramadan, these organizations distribute food, collect and distribute *zakat ul fitr*, and arrange and carry out qurban, the annual animal sacrifice. Ramadan is also the time of year where they raise large parts of their annual income through the collection of *zakat* and other forms of alms.

The rapid spread of Covid-19 quickly changed these organizations' ways of working. Lazisnu and Lazismu, two major Muslim philanthropic organizations (associated with Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah respectively), work across multiple sectors (e.g., education, health, economic empowerment, food distribution and other relief activities). Being large and well-established organizations, they were positioned to respond quickly and in a comprehensive way. Both Lazisnu and Lazismu quickly adapted to the pandemic by shifting their activities online.

The government's national board of *zakat* (BAZNAS) became an important actor in supporting the online shift. However, numerous community-based *zakat* organizations (Lembaga Amil Zakat, LAZ) were among the first to respond and were more proactive compared to provincial and district state-based *zakat* organizations.

While conspiracy theories, hoax messages and rumors about Covid-19 flourished in Indonesia, most community-based *zakat* organizations (LAZ), including organizations normally in opposition to the government, followed official policy and recommendations, focusing their efforts on aiding people in need and gaining momentum in fundraising.

Creating Community Online

During Covid-19, religious organizations shifted their activities online. This included communal Quranic readings, *takziah* (comforting the bereaved), and *tahlilan* (congregational prayers) for the deceased. Quite unprecedentedly, Friday prayers and Eid mass congregations – activities that normally bring people together in a physical space – were forced to be held in a limited space and/or at home. However, some of the most progressive organizations shifted to online platforms. This was not uncontroversial as these rituals are seen as integral to religious practice, bringing the *ummah* – the global Muslim community of believers – together.

By shifting many activities online, religious organizations, not least Muslim philanthropic organizations, found ways to maintain religious practices and rituals, sustaining the community through the pandemic.

Online Zakat

As Ramadan was approaching, the Islamic philanthropic organizations rapidly instigated new ways of giving and distributing *zakat*, mainly by moving activities online. Although online *zakat* payment is not new and many of the larger charity organizations had done this for some time, the pandemic took online *zakat* to a new level. Giving *zakat* online was encouraged by the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Indonesian Ulama Council. Online *zakat* collection was adopted across the various types of organizations.

'Smart' Qurban

The Islamic ritual sacrifice (*qurban*) is an annual ritual slaughter of a livestock animal during Eid ul Adha. Traditionally the *qurban* has been carried out at mosques and private houses. The pandemic, however, required new ways of organizing the annual sacrifice. To prevent further spread of the virus, the ritual sacrifice was shifted to professional slaughterhouses; the production and distribution of canned meats was increased; and people were encouraged to donate money in lieu of the ritual.

In June 2020 Muhammadiyah issued a circular advising that “giving something that is more beneficial for the public good is a priority.” Following this, the humanitarian organization Lazismu encouraged a shift towards canned

meat – “RendangMu” – and urged people to prioritize giving cash donations for Covid-19 programs rather than for *qurban*. Its circular further states that “the law of *Qurban* is *sunnah muakadah* [voluntary act of worship] for any Muslim who has the ability to do it [...]”. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused social and economic problems and increased the number of poor people. Therefore, we suggest that Muslims who have the ability to perform [*qurban*] should prioritize giving donations in monetary form rather than giving sacrifice by slaughtering animals.”

Religious Authority and Change

The authority of religious organizations and leaders is created and sustained through these rites and rituals, key practices which sustain the global Muslim community of believers, the *ummah*. When not able to fulfill these functions, religious leaders risk losing authority. Those not able to move online will lose out, not only in financial terms, but also in terms of legitimacy and influence. This risk affected the way the religious organizations in Indonesia worked during the pandemic.

Muslim philanthropic organizations have in common that they are guided by Islamic principles founded on Islamic jurisprudence in their work. The urgency required in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, however, made many organizations institute rapid changes to their core practices.



Online zakat in Indonesia. Photo: Amelia Fauzia

Some of these changes broke with established norms to the extent that they required theological, jurisprudential review. Through progressive interpretation of religious texts, Islamic philanthropic organizations found legitimacy for adapting religious practices and rituals to the pandemic situation. Some of the changes introduced during the pandemic include:

- The ritual sacrifice of *qurban* shifted from being performed at mosques and private homes to being carried out in professional slaughterhouses, and there has been an increase in the production and consumption of canned *qurban* meat.
- The period allowed for distribution of *zakat ul fitr* was increased from one day to six months, making it possible to reach more people over time.
- *Zakat* and *sadaqa* could be provided to anyone, without discrimination.
- The ritual of shaking hands between the giver and receiver of *zakat* was abolished.
- *Zakat* funds were used for disaster relief activities.

Muhammadiyah, the main modernist Islamic mass organization, sees no conflict between religious knowledge and modern medical knowledge. The organization generally embraces technological development and actively works to develop Islamic jurisprudence that is up-to-date and addresses contemporary challenges.

The Nahdlatul Ulema, the main traditionalist group – and largest mass organization – has embraced the online shift at the headquarter level. The NU's decentralized structure, with relatively independent *kyias* (teachers) and *pesantren* making their own interpretations and decisions, seems to have resulted in a less coherent response. Still, both these mass organizations can be seen as having set an example, as they adapted their policies and practices in response to the pandemic long before the Indonesian government.

Increased Donations

During the pandemic, Muslim philanthropic organizations reported a significant increase in funding. This is similar to what has been seen in earlier periods of crisis and economic

downturn in Indonesia, such as after the 2004 tsunami, revealing a willingness to help people in need in times of high uncertainty. We have found that:

- Many organizations reported an increase in *zakat* in 2020.
- While the large organizations saw high levels of online donations also in 2021, smaller organizations saw a drop in online *zakat* donation in 2021.
- Larger organizations benefit from skills and resources.
- Online activities appear to be most popular among “millennials,” indicating generational differences.

While many Muslim philanthropic organizations reported a considerable increase in income in 2020, this was not the case across the board. Many of the smaller, mainly *zakat*-based organizations that used to work through face-to-face interactions with members of the community suffered from the restrictions. They report losing out on income normally collected offline at mosques and other gatherings. Further, the extended use of digital technology requires access to both equipment and skills, which gives the larger organizations with professional and efficient set-ups for online operations an advantage over the smaller ones. Rapid digitalization of *zakat* and other online donations also presents more general cybercrime risks, which require increased technological literacy and risk assessment. With about 89% of Indonesia’s population (167 million people) using smartphones and with connected mobile devices reaching 370 million, the potential in using digital technology for the collection of funds is huge.

New Collaborations

The pandemic necessitated new collaborations between philanthropic organizations, religious actors, and the government. The government needed the support of religious actors to communicate with the masses; the backing of religious authorities to provide legitimacy for its policies; and assistance from philanthropic organizations in distributing aid and helping with the management of corpses.

Collaboration between *zakat* organizations and the government was strengthened through the inclusion of *zakat* organizations in the National Task Force for Covid-19. The Zakat Forum – an association of Muslim philanthropy organizations – encouraged collaboration among *zakat* organizations and beyond. In 2020, the Zakat Forum reported 41 *zakat* organizations coordinating activities and joint fundraising, collecting and distributing some Rp 23.9 billion to 529,714 beneficiaries in 22 provinces. In the years since the Zakat Forum’s inception in 1997, its membership has steadily increased, with a drastic rise in membership following the 2018 Lombok earthquake relief operation (from 33 to 141 in 2019, and up to 201 in 2022). These collaborations have strengthened the Muslim philanthropy sector, not only through collaboration between the philanthropic organizations themselves, but also with other, different faith actors, broader civil society, and the state.

Sustaining Community through Innovation

The need for fast, effective, and safe ways of managing and distributing alms and relief necessitated new ways of working. For many organizations, this involved moving charity collection and distribution to the online sphere. This resulted in changes in Muslim religious practice, which in some instances broke with

established Islamic jurisprudence and required theological innovations such as reinterpreting the holy text in response to new, rapidly changing situations.

We find that Muslim philanthropic organizations in Indonesia have played an important role throughout the pandemic, not only in providing much needed relief, but also in sustaining the religious community through facilitating religious practices and rituals during a time of crisis. ■

Notes

1. Muhammadiyah Central Board (2020) Circular Number 06/EDR/I.0/E/2020, Guidelines for Arafah Fasting, Eid Al-Adha, Sacrifice, and Sacrifice Prayer Protocols during the COVID-19 Pandemic. 24 June. Available at: tarjih.or.id/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/EDARAN-PP-Muhammadiyah-05_2021-Imbauan-Perhatian-thd-Covid19-dan-Persiapan-Iduladha-1442.pdf; VOI (2020) Muhammadiyah Urges Residents To Pray Eid Al-Adha At Home. 24 June. Available at: voi.id/en/news/7757/muhammadiyah-urges-residents-to-pray-eid-al-adha-at-home.

Further Reading

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THE PROJECT

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