Digital Islam in Indonesia: The Shift of Ritual and Religiosity during Covid-19

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Covid-19 has forced various Muslim groups to adopt digital platforms in their religious activities. Controversy, however, abounds regarding the online version of the Friday Prayer. In Islamic law, this ritual is wajib (mandatory) for male Muslims. In this picture, Muslims observe Covid-19 coronavirus social distancing measures during Friday prayers at Agung mosque in Bandung on 2 July 2021. Photo: Timur Matahari, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of digital platforms in religious rituals was already becoming an increasingly common practice among Indonesian preachers to reach out to young audiences. During the pandemic, some Muslim organisations and individual preachers have speeded up the use of such platforms as a way to communicate with people and to continue with religious practices among the umma.

- Among religious rituals that have shifted online are the virtual tahlil (praying and remembering dead person), silaturahim (visiting each other) during Eid al-Fitr, haul (commemorating the death of someone), and tarawih (night prayer during Ramadan). These new modes of rituals were accepted without much controversy. Controversy, however, abounds regarding the online version of the Friday Prayer. This is particularly because in Islamic law, this ritual is wajib (mandatory) for male Muslims, while the previous ones are only mustahab (recommended).

- Notwithstanding the controversy, some progressive scholars from Muhammadiyah such as Wawan Gunawan Abdul Wahid and Usman Hamid, have put forth well-argued and well-substantiated legal arguments for the permissibility of virtual Friday prayers. Such arguments have served to address the conundrum facing pious Indonesian Muslims who desire to fulfil their religious obligations while keeping safe and healthy during a pandemic.

- Such innovative approaches to Islamic jurisprudence also illustrate progressive strands in Indonesian Islam not observed elsewhere in the Muslim world.
INTRODUCTION

The requirements put in place to limit the spread of the Covid-19 virus, such as keeping physical distance, staying at home, and avoiding communal gatherings, have greatly affected Muslim practices that were previously conducted in mosques. Besides serving as a place for worship and religious rituals such as the five-daily prayer and the Friday Prayer, the mosque has been a space for strengthening a sense of brotherhood and solidarity.

Mainstream Muslim organisations in Indonesia, such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), gave support to government policies by recommending to their followers to avoid organising religious gatherings and to observe rituals in the privacy of their homes.¹ This was considered justifiable and in line with the objectives of Islamic law (shari’a), known as *maqasid al-shari’a*; these consist of *al-daruriyat al-khams*—protecting the basic needs of every person such as protection of life, religion, reason, progeny, and property.² It was apparent to most that during the pandemic, houses of worship could be venues where the virus would spread easily.³

The recommendation issued by Islamic organisations such as Muhammadiyah, Nahdatul Ulama (NU), and MUI, for Muslims to temporarily avoid houses of worship during Covid-19, however, has however not been entirely followed. Some Muslims, specifically those in rural areas, continue to observe religious rituals in mosques due to inadequate understanding about the seriousness and dangers of Covid-19. Meanwhile, in urban areas, some Islamic groups continue to insist on praying in mosques for different reasons. One of these is *Jamaah Tabligh*, which advocates a fatalistic belief that God will protect them.⁴ This group has been described as the “largest viral vector of Covid-19” or a “Super-Spreader, following their large gatherings in Malaysia and Indonesia during the first few months of the pandemic.⁵

This article discusses digital platforms as alternative means for Muslims to observe religious rituals during the Covid-19 pandemic. It addresses how Indonesian Muslim groups accept Islamic rituals being conducted on digital platforms, particularly the Friday Prayer, and puts the spotlight on the flexibility of Islamic law in allowing for adjustments in difficult times. It also reveals how Indonesians implement the concept of *maqasid al-shari’a* (objectives of sharia) in dealing with critical issues, and how they relocate the sacredness of physical spaces to digital space.

DIGITAL ISLAM AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Covid-19 has forced various Muslim groups to adopt digital platforms in their religious activities. This had previously been popular only for specific purposes such as matchmaking and preaching activities by young or millennial preachers. The rise of new preachers such as Hanan Attaki, Abdul Shomad and Felix Siauw, for instance, has been mostly facilitated or mediated by digital platforms, i.e. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. As elaborated by Suryana and Syafiqah, these three social media preachers are among the most influential and are followed by millions of followers. Hanan Attaki, for instance, has 8.5 million Instagram followers and 1.78 million YouTube subscribers, and Felix Siauw has 4.8 million Instagram followers and 3.3 million Twitter followers.⁶ Now,
with Covid-19, digital platforms have become the venue for the daily activities of diverse religious groups.

Currently, one of the most popular religious rituals using digital platforms is tahlilan—commemorating and praying for someone who has died. Although it is not mandatory in Islam, tahlilan is a strong tradition within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Literally, tahlilan is a form of dhikr (or chant) praising of God through repetitions of la ilaha illa Allah (There is no god, but Allah). It is conducted in the house of the deceased by a number of people, mostly family, friends, and neighbours, for seven days in a row. This ritual is then repeated during the 40th, 100th, and 1,000th day after the person’s death, usually attended by many people.

The pandemic has prohibited people from having communal meetings and religious gatherings to honour deceased relatives, family members and friends. Tahlilan online has therefore become the only option. No doubt, attending tahlilan online does not evoke the same degree of “efficacy” and solemnity (kekhusu'an), but at the level of showing sincere intention (niat tulus) and praying for someone who has lost his or her loved one, it is perhaps better than nothing. It may help comfort the family, reduce their sadness, and give tribute to the deceased, and establish a new model, to use Emile Durkheim’s term, for “collective effervescence” or togetherness in Indonesian Muslim society.
Islamic sermons during the Tarawih prayer organised by the IPV. Promoting women and human rights activists. Picture: Institute of Public Virtue.

The difficulty with going online for all rituals stem from the fact that certain rituals stipulate communal gatherings as a requirement. Friday Prayer, for example, cannot be changed into individual rituals with the same name as a “Friday Prayer”. In the Shafiite school of law, which is followed by most Indonesian Muslims, the Friday Prayer can only be conducted with at least 40 participants present. Therefore, a communal gathering is mandatory. It is not surprising therefore that the introduction of a virtual Friday Prayer by Wawan Gunawan Abdul Wahid, Senior Lecturer in Islamic Law, State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, received much negative response. Some segments of Indonesian Muslims reject this practice and claim that there is no clear justification for this in Islamic law.

According to Ustadz Oni Sahroni, all four schools of Islamic law agree that the Friday Prayer must be observed in a certain physical place in the presence of an imam (who leads the prayer) and of makmum (followers of the Imam). As a member of the board of the
Indonesian Council of Ulama Council (MUI) and an expert on Islamic jurisprudence with a PhD degree from al-Azhar University, Sahroni has strong authority to talk about this issue. For Sahroni, the Friday Prayer is not only a venue to maintain relationship with God, but also a significant means for establishing *silaturahmi* and strengthening Muslims’ solidarity, through shaking hands, giving each other hugs, or just saying hello to one another.7

Rejection of a virtual Friday Prayer has also been expressed by Buya Yahya (Yahya Zainul Maarif), one of the most popular preachers in Indonesia. Without indulging in academic references, he has argued that such a practice is prohibited in Islamic jurisprudence.8

Another prominent imam opposed to the virtual Friday Prayer is Ahmad Zahro, Professor in Islamic jurisprudence at the State Islamic University of Sunan Ampel Surabaya, and imam from the National Mosque of Al-Akbar, Surabaya, East Java. He takes the view that the virtual Friday Prayer is unacceptable or unlawful based on the requirement for geographical proximity between imam and ma’mum. Friday Prayer should be conducted with the imam and makmum on the same premises. He argues that those who allow virtual Friday Prayers do not understand Islamic teaching.9 Regrettably, he does not come up with any alternative ritual to replace the Friday Prayer during a pandemic.

A representative of Muhammadiyah and one of the members in the Muhammadiyah’s Council of Religious Affairs, Asep Shalahuddin, has also rejected the virtual Friday Prayer. For him, the virtual Friday Prayer violates Islamic regulations on conducting rituals, such as the integration of worshipers in one place physically. Since participants or the makmum’s location during online worship could be physically located anywhere, it causes a problem where the line of continuity between imam and makmum is concerned. Furthermore, there is no clear position on who is actually in front as imam and who is makmum (located behind the imam), thus failing the requirement for a straight line in prayer. Hence, he asserts that it is better to replace Friday Prayers with *dzuhur* prayer instead, rather than conducting Friday Prayers virtually. Replacing the Friday Prayer with Zuhur prayer does not violate classical standards and would be easy to implement during the pandemic.10
Flyers for some virtual Islamic rituals: Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Tahlilan. Picture: Takmir Masjid Virtual Jum’atan Online, Puslitbang Bimas Agama dan Layanan Keagamaan Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, one of Didi Kempot’s fans

THE JUM’ATAN VIRTUAL AND PROGRESSIVE ISLAM

The idea of holding a virtual Friday Prayer started when Wawan Gunawan Abdul Wahid and other young Muhammadiyah activists organised the Eid al-Fitr online on 24 May 2020. Following that event, the Friday Prayer was conducted on 29 May 2020. Wawan Gunawan argues that the main reason for conducting a virtual Friday Prayer is to address the diverse demands on Islamic worship (at-tanawwu’ fil ibadah) in a time of crisis. Even though both Muhammadiyah and NU have recommended replacing the Friday Prayer with the Zuhur praying, many Muslims still desire to observe a Friday Prayer. From Wawan’s perspective, instituting a virtual Friday Prayer on digital platforms accommodates the desire of Muslims to observe Friday Prayers while at the same time prevent them from getting infected with
Covid-19. This saves both soul and body (hifz an-nafs) and is consistent with the maqasid al-shari’a (the goals or objective in Sharia) in Islamic jurisprudence.

Wawan then provides three reasons for the permissibility or lawfulness of conducting virtual Friday Prayers. Firstly, based on Muhammad’s story in one of the hadiths, it is permissible to use a house as a mosque. The mentioned hadith tells us that Allah has made the entire land on earth sacred space and made it possible or permitted for any space to be used as places for worship. Secondly, Wawan makes a comparison to the practice of marriage contracts (akad nikah) being carried out online. The marriage contract is a sacred agreement (mithaqan ghaliza) that involves more than one person. If a marriage contract can be done online, then the same argument can be used for Friday Prayers. Thirdly, to reconcile the issue of imam and makmum being in separate locations, the imam’s voice being projected over online platforms serves as bridge between leader and congregation. This argument is based on Ibnu Qudamah’s view from the Zahiri school, and Ahmad bin Hanbal. The Zahiri school argues that if the makmum and imam are physically separated by a river, as long as the imam’s voice can be heard from across the river, then the congregational prayer is valid.
Virtual Friday Prayer with sermons from prominent figures or human rights. Picture: Institute of Public Virtue

Wawan’s argument is supported by Muhammad Abdul Darraz, one of Muhammadiyah’s young activists, specifically through a reference to al-Imam Abu al-Faydh Ahmad bin al-Shiddiq al-Ghumari (1901-1960). That Imam had given a fatwa for allowing Friday Prayers using radio. For Abu al-Faydh, the primary reason why that is allowed is the presence of the ability to listen to the imam’s voice. As long as the makmum follow what was said and conducted by the imam, then the prayer was valid. The technological invention in audio-visual form, specifically as radio and television, was able to mediate the voice in the congregational prayer. For Darraz, Abu al-Faydh’s fatwa can be used as a reference for the permissibility of Friday Prayers, and apply to the diverse digital platforms, the most popular of which at the moment is Zoom.
Eight months after observing virtual Friday Prayers held within limited circles in Muhammadiyah’s cultural community, the Institute of Public Virtue (IPV), led by Usman Hamid, a prominent Human Rights activist, adopted Wawan’s idea. Usman began organising a virtual Friday Prayer from 5 March 2021 onward, preparing those who will be khatib and imam and providing robust internet connection. Two crucial additions were made: Publishing khatib’s sermons, and; supporting sign language for the hearing impaired. Due to Usman Hamid’s popularity and strong connections, participants from various backgrounds have joined the Friday Prayer, including women such as Binny Buchori, a prominent personality in Indonesian NGO work.

Most of the topics at Friday sermons organised by the IPV have been on democracy and human rights, framed within Islamic perspectives. This has attracted a diverse audience that includes journalists, academicians, Islamic intellectuals and activists. Indeed, many women have been attending, with the highest number of them, 23 women, showing up on 19 March 2021. The virtual Friday Prayer has also been attended by some Christians, as observers.

In combining Islam with human rights issues such as women rights, ecological disasters, rights of disabled people, the crime of corruption, and poverty, these virtual Friday Prayer sessions not only present a new platform for religious rituals, but also different perspectives on Islam. These have indeed become an alternative expression of public Islam amidst conservative religious expressions. Even though only 100-300 people attend them, they have served to reintroduce to Indonesian Islam a progressive face that was massively popular during the 1990s and the early 2000s.

**CONCLUSION**

Covid-19 has forced Indonesian Muslims to change the pattern of their religious rituals. The mosque, normally a place of religious meeting and gathering, has had to be avoided to prevent the disease spreading. Following the government’s regulations, the three Islamic major organisations (Muhammadiyah, NU, and MUI) have offered religious guidance on how to observe rituals during a pandemic. One way is through the use of digital platforms, as in the exercise of online *tahlilan*, *tarawih* virtual, and *silaturahmi* virtual. Controversy grows strongest in the context of a virtual Friday Prayer. Muhammadiyah, as the representative of modernist Islam, officially argues against it, perceiving virtual Friday Prayers to be invalid. This argument is indirectly supported by both NU and MUI.

Nevertheless, the extended lockdowns amidst the spread of the Covid-19 Delta variant has forced some Indonesian Muslims to join virtual rituals. The virtual Eid al-Adha on 20 July 2021, for instance, was phenomenally popular, and was attended by more than a thousand people, limited only by the Zoom platform’s meeting capacity. Reflecting this, we argue that virtual religious rituals have strong prospects of becoming an answer to the problem of maintaining religiosity while keeping physically safe and healthy. It is a way to contextualize religion during the Covid-19, and to observe religious obligation while keeping both soul and body (*hifz al-nafs*) safe, as required by the *maqasid al-shari’a*.

Wawan Gunawan and Usman Hamid of the IPV believe that Islamic jurisprudence needs to adjust to the pandemic. Gunawan, Hamid, and other Islamic groups believe that virtual Friday Prayers is a possibility, and is in fact a form of *ijithad* and *ikhtiar* as endorsed by
Prophet Muhammad. Interestingly, in the Middle East, such an innovative approach to religious practice would be hard to find, since religious authorities there still tend to insist on a traditional interpretation of Sharia.¹⁷


