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The Challenge of “Halal Lifestyle” and Occupational Preferences in Indonesia

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The concept of “halal lifestyle”, which is considered to be aligned with Islamic principles, is highly popular in Indonesia today. The Indonesia Halal Lifestyle Centre is one of the many Facebook pages reflecting this. Source: Indonesia Halal Lifestyle Centre, Facebook.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The concept of “halal lifestyle”, which is considered to be aligned with Islamic principles, is highly popular in Indonesia today. Proponents of the concept argue that it encompasses a range of practices that adhere to ethical and religious guidelines. Studies on halal lifestyles tend to focus on the development of the halal industry as an economic consequence of the growing adoption of halal practices.
- The extent to which the halal lifestyle has affected individuals’ occupational preferences remains largely unexplored. By focusing on the movement of middle-class Muslims in Indonesia leaving their current occupations for jobs perceived as halal, this article examines the conditions supporting the emergence of this trend.
- We argue that since the fall of the authoritarian Suharto regime in 1998, Indonesia has witnessed a rise in social conservatism. This encouraged not only the emergence of Islamic revivalist groups, but also an emphasis on personal piety. Our observations indicate that three specific employment industries—entertainment, finance, and Multi-Level Marketing (MLM)—are considered contentious, with varying interpretations of their alignment as a “halal occupation”.
- Finally, the growing social and economic vulnerability of Indonesian Muslims at the individual and community levels may contribute to religious intolerance within Indonesian society.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of “halal lifestyle” is gaining prominence in Indonesia. While halal means permissible in Islam, halal lifestyle, a relatively new terminology, refers to how a person lives in accordance with Islamic principles. The concept follows the Quranic verse that maintains Islam as *ad-deen*, a way of life, and that the religion regulates behaviours, habits and interests. The halal lifestyle discourse has contributed to the development of the halal industry—which offers halal products to satisfy Muslim consumers globally. Today, the halal industry encompasses food and beverages, finance, travel, pharmacy, cosmetics, fashion, education, healthcare, wellness, recreation, and music. The global growth of the Muslim population, which directly leads to higher demand for halal products, is driving the halal industry. While this industry is a global phenomenon, Indonesia is leading the way.¹ The Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) has played a significant role in shaping the halal industry by promoting sharia compliance in the public sphere.²

In response to the global trend, the Indonesian government, particularly during the Jokowi administration (since 2014), has devised a strategy to support the halal industry’s potential economic contributions. This strategy materialised as the “Indonesia Islamic Economic Masterplan 2019–2024,” developed by the Ministry of National Development Planning (Bappenas). Subsequently, the government established Bank Syariah Indonesia (BSI), the nation’s largest state-owned Sharia-compliant bank, to create a conducive environment for the rapid development of the Islamic economy.³

While many studies on the halal lifestyle often focus on the development of the halal industry as an economic consequence of the growing adoption of halal practices, the extent to which the halal lifestyle affects individuals’ occupational preferences remains largely unexplored. Shifting from one job to another is a common phenomenon and a respected right of every individual. However, turning from well-established, stable jobs to uncertain, low-paid ones on religious grounds is a trend that needs looking into. This article addresses why shifting to ‘halal’ occupations is gaining ground among middle-class Muslims. What jobs are in line with a halal lifestyle, and does this movement impact Indonesians in general?

POPULARISING ‘HALAL’ OCCUPATIONS

While no official statistics are available on the matter, people leaving a well-established job for a so-called ‘halal job’ is becoming more prevalent among middle-class Muslims in Indonesia. The end of the Suharto authoritarian regime saw the growth of Islamic revivalist groups that had long been suppressed under the New Order regime, and these now seek to revive the “authentic” tenets and teachings of Islam as they imagine these to have been developed by the first Muslim communities.⁴ This rise in Islamic conservatism coincides with the growing emphasis among Indonesian Muslims on rigid personal piety as the ideal mode of thinking vis-à-vis other orientations of Islam such as communitarian spirit and progressive rational sciences. The reinforcement of the halal and haram dichotomy in all aspects of Muslim life, including occupational preferences, is one apparent example of this rigid interpretation of Islam.

Since the end of the Suharto authoritarian regime in 1998, democratisation has allowed various Islamic groups to articulate their previously suppressed views and ideologies. At the same time, media and digital technologies have also amplified conservatism in offline and online spaces. A study by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) UIN Jakarta, which extracts social media data from 2009 to 2019, shows firstly, that religious narratives during the ten years were dominated by conservative religious narratives (67.2%); and secondly, these narratives were heavily echoed by conservative figures active on social media.⁵ Many of these figures were the initiators of the “hijrah movement” (hijrah means migration) which encourages Muslims to shift to a more Islamic way of life. This movement covers the hijrah of occupation.⁶ The term “hijrah” was initially used to describe the movement of the Prophet and his Companions from Mecca to Medina in 622. While the original meaning of hijrah referred to the physical movement from one location to another, a moral meaning of the term later developed, referring to Muslims’ spiritual upliftment. The rise of Islamic conservatism has encouraged a narrow moral interpretation of hijrah that refers only to the virtues acclaimed by certain groups and that marginalises other groups who have different interpretations.⁷

The hijrah movement is vocal in expressing their views online and offline. The personalities associated with it are likely to have sizable followers and social media engagement. Their ideas relating to occupational hijrah gain much traction and are quickly and widely circulated among their followers. Syafiq Riza Basalamah is one of the figures who actively motivates Muslims to embark on occupational hijrah, and he has more than two million followers and subscribers on his social media platforms. Responding to one of his followers who was thinking of leaving his current job but doubting if that would be economically sustainable, Basalamah said:

Hijrah is something that entails a struggle and the struggle requires sacrifice. When the Prophet’s companions hijrah from Mecca to Habasyah, they had no relatives, home, or job. All of them left Mecca for the sake of Allah. They believed that it was Allah who provided their livelihood. It is not the company, the workplace, or the boss. It is not a matter of resigning and then you would lose your livelihood.⁸

Other hijrah movement groups also helped articulate occupational hijrah among the Indonesian Muslim middle class. They include, among others: the *Shift of Pemuda Hijrah* in Bandung, *Kajian Musyawarah*, *Yuk Ngaji*, *Strangers Ghuraba*, and *Terang Jakarta* in Jakarta, and *Better Youth* in Surabaya.⁹ Interestingly, most of these religious networks employ hybrid methods, combining social media platforms and Islamic teachings and packaging these with pop culture in order to attract urbanised Muslims.

TYOLOGIES OF ‘HALAL AND HARAM’ OCCUPATIONS

Distinguishing between halal and haram occupations remains difficult, given that between the permissible and non-permissible poles are sub-categories such as *subhat* (doubtful) and *makruh* (permissible but discouraged). Islamic law is usually a generic guidance allowing room for multiple interpretations previously dominated by established Islamic organisations such as Muhammadiyah, NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), and MUI. Our observation indicates that three specific areas of employment—entertainment, finance, and Multi-Level Marketing (MLM)—remain contentious. |

Indonesian Muslims pursue various professions in the entertainment scene. A number of them became prominent musicians and artists, or play supporting roles. However, due to their work, some have to frequent nightclub environments, where they may be exposed to what Muslims consider ‘immoral behaviour’ (*maksiat*), such as alcohol consumption, and free intermingling between unmarried men and women. Musicians particularly are faced with this moral dilemma. Even if these musicians do not consume alcohol—considered sinful in Islam—their line of work may be seen as encouraging alcohol consumption in others (called *subhat*).

Due to the lack of clear boundaries in Islamic law for categorising the entertainment industry as halal or haram, Indonesian celebrities working in this field find themselves in a liminal state, hovering between these two classifications. This liminality creates uncertainty and doubt among many of them, prompting questions about the ethicality of their profession. Amid this uncertainty, new Islamic resurgence movements, particularly those led by Salafi preachers, have emerged to provide their versions of clarity. They offer black-and-white categorisations within Islamic law, and provide definitive answers for these Indonesian celebrities. Notably, these preachers excel in employing digital platforms and pop culture products, and are effectively reaching a broad audience. Consequently, their teachings have profoundly impacted many Indonesian celebrities, motivating them to embark on an occupational hijrah.

Those working in the banking and finance sectors are posed with other distinct sets of challenges. There is consensus among the Islamic organisations of Muhammadiyah, NU, and MUI that usury (*riba*) is forbidden (*haram*). Nevertheless, these organisations differ on whether bank interests constitute *riba*; some argue that interest is doubtful (*subhat*) while others allowed for it (*mubah*).¹⁰ Muhammadiyah and NU contend that it is permissible for individuals to work in banks as wage earners but not participate directly in usurious transactions. The critical consideration is that the source of income is halal, but they should refrain from facilitating usury transactions.¹¹ MUI, however, is stricter in its interpretation, and consider the transactions and wages earned in these banks as haram because bank interests are strongly related to usury. While this may already be considered rigid, resurgence groups such as HTI and Salafi are even more exclusivist and categorise such employment as clearly haram.

Consequently, those affiliated with the hijrah movement leave their jobs in banks and pursue alternative careers that are deemed halal. This shift is often motivated by a desire to adhere more closely to these groups’ anti-riba (anti-usury) principles.

Another industry that is affected by this change is the multi-level marketing (MLM) business. This type of business revolves around a distributor organisation that conducts multi-level product sales. It is commonly referred to as network marketing because group members involved in selling a specific product increase in number, eventually forming a network. This network becomes their marketing system, comprising many individuals working to introduce and sell particular products. With certain requirements and careful consideration, Muhammadiyah, NU, and MUI agree that MLM business is halal.¹² A new trend, however, suggests that MLM businesses selling certain products are haram. While this trend is still relatively small, it is significant for some who work in the industry. Those arguing that this business is haram often include former leaders who once held top positions in their MLM

careers, and their influence contributes to a significant shift within the MLM business community.

The primary reason why the hijrah movement considers the MLM business haram is that it lacks a clear definition of *samsarah*—trade intermediary or intermediaries between sellers and buyers—in Islamic law, particularly the direct intermediary transaction between buyers and sellers. This movement argues that MLM business instead establishes an indirect intermediary between buyers and sellers, meaning that the person occupying the highest hierarchical position in the business will earn income from product sales, even though another seller of a lower rank performs the work. This movement perceives this reality to be unjust, although those at the top argue that they provide guidance and consultancy services to their subordinates. This latter argument, according to this movement, does not align with the requirements of *samsara* in Islamic law.¹³

THE IMPACT OF HALAL OCCUPATION

The decision to work, to change jobs, or to quit remains an individual right. However, when many decide to leave their steady jobs to pursue jobs with uncertain levels of stability in the name of religion, then a deeper dive into the reasons this, and whether this aligns with true Islamic principles becomes necessary.

At a personal level, a shift in employment may affect the economic stability of any individual and their families. Among the professions promoted as halal, or which are deemed to be following the sunnah of the Prophet, are those of traders or entrepreneurs. For example, we encountered some who had embarked on occupational hijrah ending up selling Islamic books near mosques where they studied Islam. Some offered perfumes said to be Prophet Muhammad's favourites, engaged in culinary ventures, or specialised in Muslim apparel.¹⁴ Some shift to informal sectors such as small and medium enterprises. In Indonesia, the informal economy still dominates. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics (BPS) in 2022 showed that 59.31% of Indonesia's working population are engaged in the informal sector, which is likely to have relatively high job risks such as income uncertainty, low wages, and lack of social protection.¹⁵

As with any business, entrepreneurship comes with the risk of failure. For those who are fortunate and have good entrepreneurial skills, hijrah may provide them with better economic security than what they received from their previous jobs. However, those who do not have enough entrepreneurial skills—and the majority do not—become economically vulnerable without any steady source of income, and they tend to become part of an already saturated Islamic business market. Additionally, it will be difficult for them to grow their business if they furthermore refuse to use conventional banking services—the most skeptical among them even reject sharia banking.

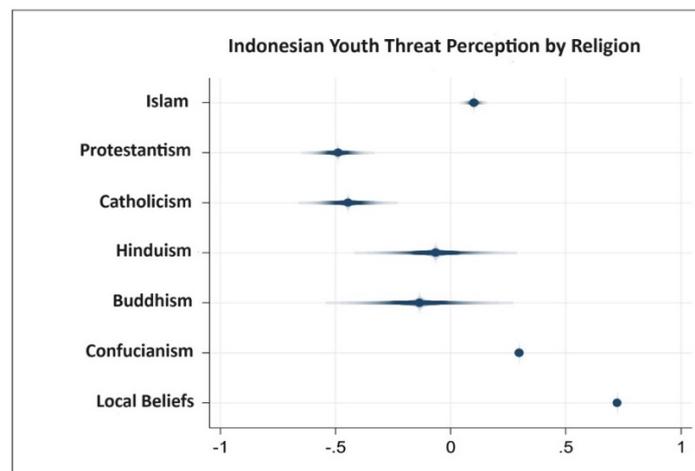
Despite the possibility of failure, hijrah leaders commonly motivate people by framing hijrah as a big decision and not an easy one. The term is always made synonymous with risks, sacrifices, challenges and tribulations. Syafiq Riza Basalamah, for example, emphasises that when trying to leave a “haram” job, there is no guarantee that the person will be wealthy. These individuals might experience hardships such as poverty, ostracism and hatred. However, he

highlighted that there would be God’s assurance for those who wish to hijrah for the sake of the divine.¹⁶ Such framing often encourages people to embrace hijrah regardless of the economic insecurity and uncertainties involved.

Recognising the potential setbacks of hijrah, some hijrah groups have been expanding the functions of mosques as work-training centres. Currently, some mosques managed by conservative groups, such as the Jogokariyan Mosque and United Mosque in Yogyakarta, and the Mosque of al-Latief in Bandung, are being used not only as places of worship and Islamic learning, but as centres for training Muslim youths to engage in halal businesses and to equip them with the skills needed to become Muslim entrepreneurs.

Since a considerable number of Muslims collectively pursue this occupational hijrah, economic insecurity may not only be experienced at the individual level but also increase the Muslim community’s collective economic insecurity, thus increasing their sense of being threatened by other groups. A survey conducted by PPIM Jakarta in 2020 showed that perceived threat is associated with religious intolerance.¹⁷ It indicates that the more individuals feel that their group is under threat, particularly economically, the lower their level of religious tolerance would be. The survey also showed that compared to other religious groups, Muslims—in this case, Indonesian Muslim youth—have the highest perception of threat compared to other religious groups, as shown in the figure below:

Figure 1. Indonesian Youth Threat Perception by Religious Affiliations



Data Source: PPIM Survey, 2020

Figure 1 shows that Muslims are more likely to have a greater perceived threat than other religious groups—and the variation in the perception of threat among Muslims is relatively small. In other words, perceived threat among Muslims in general is relatively similar. Protestants and Catholics have a smaller perceived threat than Muslims, although their belief interval is larger. Hindus and Buddhists have a lower average sense of danger than Muslims, even though their belief interval is the largest. Beyond that, the perceived threat of the Confucian and Aliran Kepercayaan (local belief) groups is difficult to interpret since they are only represented by one respondent per group.

CONCLUSION

Given the drawbacks of occupational hijrah, society and the Indonesian state should proactively prevent further deterioration of social and economic conditions. The ulama and scholars need to provide the public with a better understanding of the advancement of occupations from a religious standpoint that is compatible with the rapidly changing economic and technological systems. Such a comprehensive understanding will significantly help individuals to adapt to the needs of the workforce while complying with religious teachings. They must also educate Muslims that the religion does not draw a sharp distinction between what jobs they can enter into, as long as they do not deviate from the broader principles of social justice and welfare. Moreover, there is no hierarchy of knowledge in Islam. The fact that religious subjects such as theology, Quranic studies, and Islamic jurisprudence are deemed by the Muslim resurgence to be of higher value than science, social sciences, humanities, and technology does affect what parents choose as the field of study for their children. This prioritisation of religious fields versus secular ones—in itself a problematic division—affects the career options of young Muslims.

The government should improve the quality of its social protection policies to minimise inequality in society and mitigate the adverse effects of job loss or the transition from one type of employment to another. For example, the government’s pre-employment card programme should be optimised to upgrade prospective workers’ skills. Additionally, the government should provide better training options than those offered by conservative groups, which would inevitably incorporate the ideological aspects of their movements. In all, the state and religious elites must work together to halt negative perceptions of “secular” occupations and prevent low take-up rates for important sectors of the economy, such as the arts, banking and financial sectors, simply because these are deemed by some to be non-halal. Moreover, adults who venture into low-paying but Islamic compliant jobs could put an unnecessary burden on their families and trigger other social problems.

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