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Global Health Security

Temporary Closure of Mosques: Sharia Flexibility in Singapore

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SYNOPSIS

Due to the worsening situation of COVID-19, a decision was made to close all mosques temporarily. This difficult decision was reached after intense consultations and research based on Sharia law. The unprecedented move demonstrates the adaptability of the Singaporean Muslim community in facing new challenges.

COMMENTARY

AS COVID-19 began to spread within the community, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) on 24 March 2020 took the unprecedented step to announce the temporary closure of all mosques in the country. Upon the advice of the Fatwa Committee, MUIS also directed the suspension of the obligatory Friday prayers pending recovery from the global pandemic. The objective was to break the cycle of local community transmission of COVID-19 through mosque clusters.

Singapore is among the first few countries in the world to close their mosques amid the COVID-19 threat. As the move had never been done before, it required a certain boldness of resolve backed by independent reasoning to formulate the supporting fatwa. Thereafter, other countries whether with Muslim majorities or minorities took a similar stance. Singapore's fatwa has resonated globally as other Islamic authorities and scholars similarly called for the temporary closure of mosques and suspension of Friday prayers in the face of the pandemic.

Progressive Muslim Community

The fatwa or religious edict on mosque closure reflects the progressive spirit of a minority Muslim community. It also highlights the need for religious scholars to be proactive, courageous and be open to work hand-in-hand with authorities to make decisions that are timely and accurate, yet without compromising religious principles.

In this regard, MUIS exhibited independent religious thinking by acting swiftly based on the situation report from the Ministry of Health about returnees from a Tabligh movement's mass gathering in Kuala Lumpur, two of whom tested positive for COVID-19.

Recognising the potential of large mosque clusters emerging within the community, the Fatwa Committee convened within days and issued its newly formulated fatwa authorising the mosque closures.

This probably helped narrow the window for the virus to circulate among the mosque congregants, thus preventing large clusters from forming. Malaysia, which closed all its mosques about a week later on the 18 March 2020 saw a large cluster formed from the same Tabligh event.

This flexibility and independence of thought are also exhibited in other MUIS initiatives during this highly-challenging period, extending Muslim verbal greetings while refraining from the traditional handshakes.

Extensive research has also been conducted by MUIS on how to incorporate national measures like social distancing into congregational prayers should conditions allow for mosques to be reopened.

The Singapore Fatwa

Twelve days before the blanket temporary closures of mosques, MUIS directed the disinfection of all mosques in Singapore. This followed confirmation by the authorities that at least 90 Singaporeans had attended the Tabligh gathering at Seri Petaling Mosque in Selangor. Two of them subsequently tested positive for COVID-19.

It was the rising number of infections that led MUIS to close the mosques pending recovery from the pandemic. The Mufti of Singapore, Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir, emphasised the need for mosques to remain closed and for congregational prayers to remain suspended until there were significant improvements in the situation as advised by the Ministry of Health.

To date, the Fatwa Committee maintains the view that the temporary closure of mosques or the suspension of congregational prayers during the pandemic is an emergency, which required exceptional religious rulings to save lives.

Using the Islamic legal maxims of "emergencies permit the unlawful" and "harm must be eliminated", the Fatwa Committee ascertained that it was therefore permissible for Muslim men to forego the obligatory Friday prayers as such large gatherings would enhance the risk of community exposure to the virus threat.

Mosques were also closed for other congregational prayers and religious activities. Subsequently, similar moves were taken up by Muslims in other countries to close mosques as the virus threat spread rapidly within communities across the globe.

Flexibility of Sharia Law

The point that is often missed is that Sharia is not a static set of rules devoid of flexibility. The nature of Sharia has been indiscriminately abused by conservative Islamist groups such that Sharia law is associated with rigidity and severity.

In actual fact, flexibility is one of the defining characteristics of Sharia. Through the process of *ijtihad* (the exercise of reasoning to derive new rules from Islamic principles), Muslim jurists throughout Islamic history had codified legal theories and established a plethora of methodologies to suit the context and challenges of different times.

These theories accumulated over time to form a treasure trove of guidelines for future jurists to rely on with room for flexibility and adaptability. This very feature has enabled Sharia rulings to remain applicable and adjustable according to context, dealing even with society's unprecedented situations.

Islamic scholars are guided by Sharia law's principles, while providing Muslims with practical and appropriate guidance. There is no better example than the permitted lifting of restrictions to eat pork during life-threatening emergencies. Should a Muslim ever be in a position to choose between dying or eating pork, the guiding principle of life preservation takes precedence over the prohibition to consume the meat.

The adaptability of Sharia is probably its greatest asset and manifestation of a living religion. The fatwa on mosque closure provides a model of how Sharia law is not cast in stone and can adapt to change in a timely, yet religiously-aligned manner. This requires wisdom, courage and flexible mindsets on the part of religious authorities. By adopting these values of the Sharia, an authentic yet progressive Islam can provide solutions to problems that Muslims face today.

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