

Responses to Fatwas of Islamic Religious Leaders and Institutions during the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) in the Philippines: Looking at How Guidance Was Provided to Muslim Communities in the Philippines.

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Abstract: The Philippine constitution guarantees the free exercise of religion and religious worship. The law forbids public officials from interrupting religious activities. However, with the sharp rise of Coronavirus (COVID-2019) infection all over the world, the Inter-Agency Task Force (AITF) on Emerging Infections Disease created resolutions to assess, monitor, contain and prevent the spread of the pandemic. Religious leaders and Islamic institutions are no exceptions and they must abide to these resolutions including mass gatherings, safety procedures on burials, and strict observance of social distancing.

Muslims strictly perform five times a day prayer, Friday Jamaah prayer, and bury the dead in accordance to Islamic practices mentioned in the Quran. Therefore, the study focus on how Islamic leaders and institutions responded to AITF resolutions to prevent the spread of the pandemic.

The data were collected from mixed sources: from official announcements, social media accounts, and by phone interviews. Meaningful central themes were derived from the data.

Findings noted responses of Muslim communities focused on (1) suspension of collective religious activities and programs until the pandemic is over; (2) abide by government directives on how to be safe from the threat of COVID-19; (3) institutionalization of positive sanitation practices of their facilities personnel and families; (4) cancellation of classes and their religious learning institutions; and (5) public interest and dharurah (possibility of harm or injury).

In conclusion, the concept of collective duty (farḍ kifāya) as a basic of principle of Islam was practiced by Islamic religious leaders and institutions. Hence, maintaining social order on the basis that Islam is founded on individual and collective morality and responsibility.

Keywords: Islamic religious leaders and institution, COVID-19, Pandemic, Fatwa, Philippines, Islamic practices, Muslim communities

1. Background

Minorities, whether this may be religious, cultural, or sectoral minorities tend to experience disparities and inequalities most especially when disasters, whether manmade, natural or epidemics, as such it is important to see how these communities respond to current challenges that they may face.

Muslims in the Philippines presents such unique example of a minority, comprising of 13 ethnolinguistic tribes, and belonging to different schools of thought from indigenous Islam to Salafi Islam and Shiism, presents a multipolar community that is both conflicted by its internal socio-cultural, educational, political and religious challenges today.

The Muslims in the southern Philippines have been facing several decades of armed conflict and secession which was addressed gradually from the creation of national agencies to address its issues to the creations of regional political entities to cater to specific regional challenges and concerns. Muslims, for most part remain outside the mainstream of national life, set apart by their religion and way of life.

In the early month of January 2020, the first local case (someone without travel history) of COVID-19 infection was a 62-year-old male who frequently visited a Muslim prayer hall in Greenhills Mall in San Juan City. Also, Jamaah Tabligh members who attended international events in Malaysia and India were reported carrier of the infection.

2. Context

Upon declaration of the state of Public health emergency different Muslim institutions responded in a variety of ways, The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) government and the MILF gave instructions to do contact tracing of those who attended the Juhur Ijtima event in Malaysia to assess the impact of the religious event in Mindanao. Also, the recently enacted law-Republic Act 114695 known as the “Bayanihan to Heal as One Act” on March 23, 2020, mandates its citizen to strictly adhere and follow the guidelines and procedure to promote and protect the collective interests of the Filipino people.

The National Commission on Muslim Filipinos guided the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) on handling Muslim Cadavers that died due to COVID-19. Hence, the Department of Health (DOH) and

DILG translated this advice in a joint memorandum circular on how to handle Muslim corpses: (Reiteration for local government units). The remains of all Muslim classified suspect, probable, and confirmed COVID-19 cases should be buried within 12 hours from the time of death at the nearest Muslim cemetery.

Among the institutions that responded was the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos which provided guidelines in consultation with some religious leaders in Metro Manila; the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) through its Darul Ifta provided guidance to Filipino Muslims residing in BARMM; the Darul Ifta for Region IX and Palawan; one of the oldest religious institutions providing religious guidance also provided guidelines. Also, the Ulama Council of Zamboanga Peninsula, the Basilan Supreme Ulama Council, Sulu Ulama Council for Peace and development, Tawi-Tawi Ulama Council as well as other Muslim and religious institutions provided their insights.

It would be important to understand that communicable diseases greatly impact and affect religious institutions and communities, but how did this affect Muslims? This understudy would evaluate their official positions based on the fatwa (religious edicts) and advisories that they have provided to the Muslim Filipinos. Each religious community followed their religious authorities as they provided guidance and instructions on how to respond to the threat of COVID-19.

Notable in the case of Masjid Anguilia in Alaminos Pangasinan, they convened their council and consulted their religious scholars, and based on the decision of their religious scholar present, their leader has created a set of guidelines and protocols that have given for madrassah and masjid to follow. Among which are as follows: *"have canceled classes in their Madrassah, congregational prayers canceled, ensured that only the ones who stay in Masjid Anguilia would pray in the mosque as they have closed down the mosque to outsiders, anyone requiring documents is only allowed to transact at the gate, they have also ensured that social distancing would be practiced at all times."* They have actively engaged and coordinated with the local government to ensure that they would be in line with the local government's directives in addressing the COVID Pandemic.

In Cebu City, the Muslim communities through engagement with the regional office of the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (who issued a memorandum circular) and the instructions of the Local provincial government of Cebu complied with the suspension of activities in mosques and other religious activities. This was to ensure that their communities would be protected from infection of COVID-19.

In the case of Zamboanga City, the office of the Mayor called the different Muslim religious leaders on March 25, which came out with their policy statements and pronouncements as guidance to their Jamaahs during this pandemic. Eighteen Institutions such as the Sabeilal Muhtadien (ASWJ), Darul Ifta for Region IX and Palawan (ASWJ), the Ulama Council of Zamboanga Peninsula (Salafi), Sunnah Preacher's council of the Philippines (Salafi) came out with their policy guidelines. Sabeilal Muhtadien released a social media post informing its members that its Amir Sheikh Khadzraji Tapsi has suspended all congregational prayers in its member communities and Masajids in Zambasulta. The Jambangan Surga, the social media page of the Temboro Alumni association of Ulama (ASWJ) based in Zambasulta also issued its advisory on 13 March 2020.

Other areas in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao also issued their respective area pronouncements; the Regional Darul Ifta of BARMM has periodically issued fatwas from engaging communities, suspension of congregational prayers to handling cadavers of those who have died of the COVID-19, the Sulu Ulama Council for Peace and Development after being called by the Sulu Taskforce on COVID-19 and as a result releasing their statement to Muslim communities on April 19, while the Basilan Ulama Supreme Council issued their statement to their constituents on April 8 while some Ulama groups of Tawi Tawi issued their statement on April 12.

The Jamaah Tabligh communities were mixed in the sense that some were unsure of how to respond to the local governments initiative for suspension of local congregational prayers, in Sulu their mosques were hesitant to close until they were directly asked to close, although there were small numbers from around 5 to 10 people who would pray in their masjids when they hear the Adhan, majority of the Tablighs in Sulu complied with the directives²⁵. In Basilan, only small numbers would attend the Markaz Isabela. The Global Amir of the Jamaah Tabligh released a letter on 2nd April to the global Tabligh community to assist and cooperate with their host governments to effectively combat this pandemic.

The Shia communities in Mindanao awaited both the decision coming from their maraji (religious sources of emulation) and the local government pronouncements before coming out with their own decision. Like other religious groups, they suspended congregational prayers to the public and instead used social media to broadcast religious proceedings, prayers, and lectures.

The Ahmadiyah community, on the other hand, received instructions from their global leader who instructed them to observe sanitary protocols, cooperate with governments on the implementation of safety procedures and suspension of congregational activities, and to practice self-quarantine to protect members of their community from being infected from COVID-19.

Religious learning institutions such as madrasahs and torils closed their schools; regular madrassahs such as Mahad Moro, Mahad Quran wal Hadith which had to stay out students, simply suspended their classes, boarding schools which had stayed in students have asked their students to go back to their families, although not all of the students who studied in these stay-in schools managed to go home and as a result, stayed at their schools and complied with the quarantine protocols imposed on their areas such as Almakhdumin Islamic Center in Mampang, Darul Uloom At-Tayfury in Baliwasan, Darul Uloom al-Sharif Karimul Makhdum Islamic Center in Sulu and Mahad Sali Nudjang in Bonggao Tawi-Tawi.

While most of the Religious institutions recommended social distancing and sanitation, when the local and national government issued orders for suspension of group activities such as religious activities, some responded by issuing statements calling for the suspension of congregational prayers explaining the legal basis for such issuances. The Regional Darul Ifta for Region IX and Palawan on the other hand emphasized that they did not prevent people from doing (congregational) prayers or prevent people from going to mosques which caused some confusion among some Muslims.

This can also be seen as the Muslims were preparing for the end of Ramadhan wherein the different groups and institutions issued advance declarations primarily stressing that due to the still-standing threat of COVID 19, Prayers for Eidul Adha (marking the end of the month of Fasting/Ramadhan) is to be done in the residences of the Filipino Muslims, while the President declared May 25 as the National Holiday for Eidul Adha and emphasizing the religious and cultural impact to Filipino Muslims, their president also reiterated the need for social distancing. The Bangsamoro Regional Darul Ifta, the Basilan Ulama Supreme Council, the Sulu Ulama Council for peace and development and the Supreme Council for Islamic Preaching and Guidance Tawi Tawi all issued reminders that as the health threat is not over, prayers are to be done in their residences and less movement due to the need for social distancing and sanitation. The Darul Ifta Supreme Council for Islamic Preaching and Guidance Region IX and Palawan in their supplemental advise to Muslims simply told them that it's a choice if they decide to pray in the Mosques, it should have sanitation provisions and disinfect of its facilities and neighboring houses and people are to practice social distancing with special emphasis on following government issuances on health safety amidst the pandemic.

3. Methods

Qualitative research design is the approach used in this study. The data were collected from mixed sources: from official announcements, social media accounts, and by phone interviews. Meaningful central themes were derived from the data.

4. Findings

Notable responses from Islamic religious leaders and institutions can be classified under the following: (1) Suspension of collective religious activities and programs until the threat is over; (2) Abide by government directives on how to be safe from the threat of COVID-19; (3) Institutionalization of positive sanitation practices for their facilities personnel and families; (4) Cancellation of classes and their religious learning institutions; and (5) Public interest and dharurah (possibility of harm or injury).

While each of these religious organizations followed relevant safety protocols in guiding their Jamaah (followers) in the wake of COVID-19, the following were found to be the primary basis for their provision of guidance on how to engage in religious and personal activities in the face of COVID-19 among them were:

Theme 1. Quranic and Prophetic injunctions on plague (communicable diseases)

Theme 2. Legal opinion on protecting communities from harm (darurah) and public interest (maslaha)

Theme 3. Scientific and medical information that is available on COVID-19 D. Responses from both the National and local government policies made to protect citizens from COVID-19.

5. Conclusion

Each Muslim is a steward of Allah (God) on earth. It is an individual obligation for a Muslim to act in defense of what is right as much part of his faith. Maintaining social order depends on every individual belonging to a community. And Muslims as part of the community must adhere to the same moral principles and practices. It

is a collective duty (farḍ kifāya) to respond the eminent threat of COVID-19 pandemic. Responding to the community individual duties as well as collective duties. One must participate in the society to promote cohesion and formed social fabric to achieve social order, peace, and solidarity

6. Implication to Practice

Farḍ kifāya is a communal obligation and a role to play in ensuring the community's health and well-being. Additionally, there are shared responsibilities to monitor medical and empirical studies concerning epidemics that may harm the Muslim community in particular and human society in general..

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