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The Role of The Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) in Combating The Covid-19 Pandemic in Indonesia

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Abstract. The aims of this study were to describe and analyse the role of MUI in an effort to tackle and reduce the impacts of coronavirus (Covid-19) in Indonesia. It used qualitative methods in the form of literature studies using various sources such as scientific work, journals, newspapers, and other related sources. The results showed that MUI as a Religious Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) which oversees Muslims played an important role in dealing with the coronavirus outbreak in Indonesia. This role could be seen from the actions of MUI issued some fatwas and approaches for Muslims and the Indonesian government. Fatwa number 18 of 2020 regarding the guidelines for managing the body, fatwa number 17 of 2020 concerning prayer guidelines for medical personnel, fatwa number 14 of 2020 regarding the conduct of religion in situation of the outbreak of covid-19, fatwa number 2 of 2021 concerning Covid-19 vaccine, etc. MUI also provides suggestions such as prohibiting the public to mudik, following the advice of scientists, and avoiding crowds. Fatwa and MUI advice helped the government in maintain social distance and physical distance as an effort to prevent the further spread of covid-19. The MUI has successfully fulfilled its role as a Religious NGO. Its actions demonstrate that Religious NGOs can make a positive contribution in assisting the government and fostering the development of democracy in Indonesia.

Keywords: Covid-19; Fatwa; Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI); Government.

Introduction

Covid-19 or the coronavirus has become a terrifying virus that haunts the entire world, including Indonesia. The virus, which first emerged in China, specifically in the city of Wuhan in August 2019, has transformed into a pandemic, affecting hundreds of millions with millions of fatalities (Utomo, 2020). On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus a global pandemic. This was due to the virus having spread to 118 countries worldwide at that time. In Indonesia, the government announced the presence of two confirmed coronavirus patients on March 2, 2020 (Detik, 2020).

The worsening situation of the coronavirus worldwide, including in Indonesia, undoubtedly prompts all segments of society to prevent the spread of this deadly virus. One crucial role in this effort should come from religious leaders. Fatwas, calls, and actions from religious leaders will undoubtedly influence their followers, as demonstrated by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic leaders in the Middle East who maintain social distancing and advocate for the implementation of health protocols. In fact, Islamic scholars in the Middle East support the closure of mosques and recommend worshiping at home to avoid gathering (Wirawan, 2020). Additionally, the United Nations (UN) has also called on religious leaders to join the fight against this virus (Dikarma, 2020).

In Indonesia itself, the crucial role of religious leaders, including the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), is significant. MUI, as a religious organization whose fatwas are heeded by the Muslim community, plays a vital role. As a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and a platform for Islamic scholars and leaders in Indonesia, MUI has made positive contributions to national life. Throughout its journey, MUI has issued various fatwas covering economic, social, doctrinal, and health aspects for the Muslim community in Indonesia, including in the face of the coronavirus. This study analyzes the role of MUI in handling the coronavirus to depict its position and the actions taken by MUI in assisting the government in combating the virus.

Research on the role of MUI has been conducted by other researchers, such as Hamzah (2017), Wibowo (2010), and Harimurti et al. (2020). Hamzah (2017) conducted research on the role and influence of MUI in the socio-cultural changes in Indonesia by analyzing 47 MUI fatwas in the socio-cultural field from 1975 to 2009. He observed that fatwas play a unifying and guiding role for the

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Muslim community, in addition to exerting formal influence by shaping positive law. Furthermore, there is a non-formal influence through the increased understanding and religious commitment of the Muslim community in comprehending their fait.

Wibowo (2010) focus is more on examining the role of MUI during the New Order era from 1975 to 1998. He observed that since its establishment during the New Order era, MUI has played a crucial role, particularly in mitigating conflicts and fostering harmony among communities through the issuance of fatwas. Sedangkan Harimurti et al (2020) Meanwhile, Harimurti, in his research titled 'The Role of Majelis Ulama Indonesia and Its Fatwas within The Indonesian Governance System,' explored the general role of MUI and its fatwas within the governance system of Indonesia. He observed that MUI plays a crucial role in resolving societal issues related to religion, especially through its fatwas, which can serve as references in rule-making and policy decisions by the government. He also suggested that MUI should be integrated into the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Hamzah's (2017) research is more focused on fatwas related to socio-cultural aspects, spanning from 1975 to 2009. Wibowo (2010) focuses more on discussing MUI during the New Order era by examining its historical trajectory. Meanwhile, Harimurti et al (2020), primarily analyze the role of MUI within the Indonesian government system in general. In contrast to the aforementioned studies, the focus of this research is on analyzing and describing the role of MUI in responding to Covid-19 in Indonesia. Additionally, it aims to provide insights into the history of MUI and its relationship with the government in handling the coronavirus.

This research is crucial as it can provide in-depth insights into the role of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) in combating the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia. In times of crisis, the involvement of religious institutions can have a significant impact on health crisis mitigation and management efforts. The study aims to uncover the extent of MUI's contributions in delivering accurate information and providing guidance to the public regarding worship practices, health protocols, and preventive measures.

Moreover, it will examine MUI's responses to controversial issues related to COVID-19, such as vaccination or health measures that may conflict with religious beliefs. The research findings can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the role of religious institutions in addressing the pandemic, serving as a foundation for improvements or the development of future strategies. This information can be invaluable for the government, health institutions, and the general public in strengthening collaboration among various segments of society in tackling issues, including the ongoing challenge of Covid-19.

Research methods

The research employs a qualitative methodology. This choice is made because the study does not emphasize on 'numbers' but rather places emphasis on 'words (Margret et al., 2014). This method is used to investigate natural objects with the researcher as a key instrument. Qualitative research is indeed employed to understand and explore a central phenomenon (Sugiyono, 2012). The data analysis is qualitative/inductive, with a focus on emphasizing meaning. Data is obtained through documentation from various sources such as journals, books, papers, news, evidence of MUI fatwas, documents, and other relevant secondary sources to understand the role of MUI in combating Covid-19 in Indonesia. The collected data is then processed, analyzed, and presented in a descriptive-analytical discussion, outlining the history of MUI, the role of MUI as evident from its actions in response to the coronavirus in Indonesia, and the relationship between MUI and the Indonesian government in addressing the deadly virus

Discussion

The position of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) and its contributions.

The Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), established in Jakarta on July 26, 1975, during the New Order era, resulted from the National Consultation (Munas) I MUI, conceived by the then Minister of Religious Affairs, Abdul Mukti Ali. Prior to Munas I, several scholars had engaged in discussions emphasizing the necessity of an institution for the Islamic community, serving as a collective platform for ijtihad and providing religious guidance to the government and society (Al-Fatih, 2019). MUI emerged as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), serving as a platform for scholars, Islamic intellectuals, and leaders in Indonesia with the responsibilities of guidance, mentoring, and advocacy for Muslims across the

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nation (MUI, 2020). The establishment of MUI was also grounded in the Qur'an, referencing Surah Al Anbiya verse 92. MUI self-identifies as the successor to the mission of the Prophet, heirs to the Prophet, and servants of the community (Abdillah & Novianto, 2019).

According to Muhammad As'ad, MUI can be defined as a semi-governmental organization aiming to provide advice and religious decrees (fatwa) on religious and national issues to both the public and the government. MUI is expected to play a role in uniting the Muslim community and serving as a mediator between scholars and the government. MUI can be considered a semi-state organization, not officially part of state institutions like the National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) or the People's Consultative Assembly (DPR), but it receives support from the state and is funded by the Department of Religious Affairs (Baihaqi, 2019). According to Azumardi Azra, MUI is an independent religious organization, impartial to specific schools of thought, and unaffiliated with political parties (Suhartono, 2018).

The primary responsibilities of MUI include guiding Muslims in creating a socially and religiously approved way of life, issuing fatwas and providing advice on societal and religious issues for both the public and the government, enhancing Islamic brotherhood (Ukhuwah Islamiyah), serving as a liaison between scholars and the government (umaro) to contribute to national development, and fostering relationships among various Islamic organizations and intellectuals to guide and lead the community, especially in terms of mutual information and consultation (MUI, 2020).

In light of MUI's outlined duties, it can be asserted that MUI functions as a Religious Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) acting as a bridge between the government and the Muslim community, while simultaneously serving the interests of the Muslim population. As Affwan Gaffar emphasizes, NGOs play a crucial role in performing checks and balances, overseeing government actions, and protesting when governmental actions deviate from societal objectives (Ronasifah et al., 2019). This monitoring function is also undertaken by MUI.

Lembaga Penelitian, Pendidikan, dan Penerangan Ekonomi dan Sosial (LP3S) defines Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) as groups or organizations within society that, legally, are not part of the government (non-governmental), do not serve themselves or their members (non-self-serving), and are tasked with

serving the community rather than seeking profit (non-profit). The government can engage intensively with the public through NGOs, also known as civil society organizations, which exist in various forms, including religious organizations (Ubaedillah, 2015). The Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) can be considered one such religious organization, as it refers to itself as an NGO.

However, a different perspective is presented by Abdillah & Novianto (2019), who view MUI not merely as an NGO but as a Quasi Non-Governmental Organization (Quango). A Quango differs slightly from an NGO because it is a non-governmental organization that can act as a public institution. This is due to its funding from the government or the public, allowing it to engage in public affairs while maintaining independence. While MUI has authority in public matters, such as Sharia banking and the assurance of halal products, the lack of public awareness and legal clarity categorizes it more commonly as an NGO.

In its role as an NGO, MUI consistently collaborates with the government in various activities. Conversely, the government often involves MUI, particularly in issues related to the Muslim community and social activities. MUI typically engages the government within its domain, and this relationship is consistently maintained by MUI as a form of its awareness in preserving the nation's order and cooperating with all components of the state in accordance with Islamic teachings (Abdillah & Novianto, 2019).

Within the MUI organizational structure, in addition to the Leadership Council and regional executives, various commissions exist, such as the Commission for Da'wah, Commission for Islamic Brotherhood (Ukhuwah Islamiyah), Fatwa Commission, Education and Cadre Formation Commission, Commission for Interfaith Harmony, Women, Youth, and Family Commission, Research and Study Commission, Information and Communication Commission, Foreign Relations and International Cooperation Commission, Commission for Empowering the Economic Community, and the Legal and Human Rights Commission. Additionally, MUI houses several institutions, including the Lembaga Pengkajian Pangan Obat-Obatan dan Komestika Majelis Ulama Indonesia (LPPOM MUI), National Halal Council, National Sharia Council, and others (MUI, 2020).

In practice, MUI has contributed to bridging the government with the Muslim community and has actively engaged in religious and social activities in line with

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its designated tasks. Various fatwas have been issued for the public and provided input for the government, ranging from matters related to creed to social issues within the community. Despite generating controversy, such as the case involving Ahok, accused of blasphemy against the Qur'an, MUI's fatwas are aspirational in nature, with their binding power placed upon the community itself, allowing individuals to choose whether to follow them or not. MUI's fatwas also serve as recommendations when interacting with the government (Al-Fatih, 2019). Nonetheless, despite any controversies, MUI has significantly contributed to the development of the nation, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, where its fatwas have aided the government in addressing various aspects, including guidelines for worship during the pandemic and the legitimacy of vaccine use.

The Majelis Ulama Indonesia's (MUI) Response to Covid-19

MUI is an influential Islamic institution in Indonesia, as evidenced by a 2018 survey conducted by the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) and Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW). The survey, encompassing 2,000 respondents, indicated that MUI garnered 73 percent public trust, securing the fourth position after the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), the President, and the Police (CNN, 2018). This underscores MUI's substantial influence in Indonesia, given the predominantly Muslim population.

In its response to the Covid-19 pandemic, MUI has undertaken various measures, including the issuance of fatwas, sermons, advisories, and the establishment of a Covid-19 Task Force. Concerning fatwas, etymologically derived from the term "al-fatwa," meaning clarification, the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI) attributes two meanings to fatwa: (1) a response or decision provided by a mufti regarding a particular issue and (2) advice from a knowledgeable individual, representing good teachings or counsel (Aji & Habibaty, 2020).

Two general characteristics of fatwas include responsiveness, where they are issued in response to questions or events, and non-binding nature, signifying that those seeking fatwas are not obligated to adhere to them, in contrast to legally binding court decisions. Fatwas serve as responses to public inquiries and address contemporary issues, illustrating Islam's adaptability to the evolving times (Ma'mur, 2018).

MUI issues fatwas based on established principles, relying on the Quran, Hadith, Ijma' (consensus), and Qiyas (analogy). Four guiding principles govern MUI's

fatwa determination: (1) decisions are grounded in the Quran and Hadith, aligning with the interests of the community, (2) if a fatwa lacks Quranic or Hadith foundation, it must not contradict Ijma', Qiyas, or other legal evidence, (3) consideration is given to the opinions of imams of various schools of thought, particularly in areas with differing views, and (4) expert opinions are taken into account, necessitating consultations with scholars (Ma'mur, 2018).

Through established processes and regulations, MUI issues fatwa decisions, including its response to Covid-19 in Indonesia. These fatwas play a crucial role, particularly for the government, in controlling the population, especially among the Muslim community. MUI has issued various fatwas, such as fatwa no. 14 of 2020 on the conduct of worship during the Covid-19 pandemic, no. 17 of 2020 providing guidelines for the prayer posture for healthcare workers wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) while treating and handling Covid-19 patients, no. 18 of 2020 guiding the handling of deceased Muslims infected with Covid-19, no. 23 of 2020 on the utilization of Zakat, Infaq, and Sadaqah for Covid-19 mitigation and its impacts, no. 28 of 2020 on the guidelines for Takbir and Eid prayers during Covid-19, no. 31 of 2020 on the organization of Friday prayers and congregational prayers to prevent the spread of Covid-19, no. 36 of 2020 on Eid al-Adha prayers and the slaughter of sacrificial animals during the Covid-19 pandemic, no. 2 of 2021 on Covid-19 vaccine products from Sinovac Life Science, Co. Ltd China and PT Biofarma, a fatwa on the use of Human Diploid Cells for the production of drugs and vaccines, no. 14 of 2021 on the legality of using the AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine, and no. 23 of 2021 on the legality of swab tests for Covid-19 detection during fasting.

These MUI fatwas provide benefits for the Muslim community in general and specifically aid the government. Fatwas assist the government in addressing public inquiries, particularly among the Muslim population in Indonesia, and countering hoaxes about Covid-19 widely circulated on the internet. Several fatwas, such as no. 14 of 2020 related to worship during the pandemic and no. 31 of 2020 on the organization of Friday prayers, have significantly assisted the government in handling Covid-19 by preventing Muslim congregations and anticipating mosque clusters.

These MUI fatwas, at the very least, provide guidance for Muslims in Covid-19 emergency areas to refrain from holding congregational prayers in mosques initially. Congregational prayers are only permissible in non-emergency Covid-19

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areas while still adhering to health protocols. This recommendation has been followed by various Islamic communities, such as the Grand Mosque Sheikh Yusuf, which temporarily closed Friday prayers (Fakhruddin, 2020), Aa Gym, a national preacher who temporarily closed Daarut Tauhid Mosque (Nursalikah, 2020), Istiqlal Mosque, which temporarily suspended congregational prayers (Mashabi, 2020), the Presidential Palace mosque, also temporarily closed according to MUI's fatwa (Liputan6, 2020a), and the majority of other mosques in epidemic areas also closed to prevent the spread of Covid-19, although some did not adhere to the fatwa. Additionally, fatwas such as no. 2 of 2021 on Covid-19 vaccine products from Sinovac Life Science, Co. Ltd China and PT Biofarma, and no. 14 of 2021 on the legality of using the AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine, assist the government in implementing vaccines in Indonesia, providing a strong religious legal basis for the government's vaccination efforts.

In addition to issuing guiding fatwas for the Muslim community during the Covid-19 pandemic, providing input, and assisting the government in handling Covid-19, MUI has also organized educational webinars on coronavirus and delivered religious talks. Through mainstream media, MUI has conveyed advisories on responding to the coronavirus, urging individuals to adopt a healthy lifestyle, enhance empathy, and contribute to creating a healthy environment to anticipate the virus. MUI consistently encourages the public to intensify prayers and supplications for the safety of the nation and individuals (Riana, 2020).

MUI advises the public against undertaking the annual exodus (mudik), especially in red zones (Ihsanuddin, 2021), following the recommendations of scientists (Liputan6, 2020), and avoiding crowds (JPPN, 2020). MUI also emphasizes the prohibition of spreading hoaxes about the coronavirus (Solopos, 2020). As reported by the Ministry of Communication and Informatics (Kominfo), there were 1,396 hoaxes related to Covid-19 by the end of January 2021 (Dewi, 2021). MUI's unequivocal stance on the dissemination of Covid-19 hoaxes serves as a warning to Muslims to exercise caution in sharing information.

In addition to issuing fatwas, advisories, and conducting education on Covid-19, MUI has established the Covid-19 Task Force. The objective of this task force is to assist the government in handling the coronavirus, demonstrating MUI's commitment to continually contribute to addressing the pandemic. The tasks of the MUI Covid-19 Task Force include, firstly, disseminating education on the coronavirus and guiding the Muslim community on their stance towards the

virus, as well as providing education by religious scholars on worship guidelines during the pandemic. Secondly, the MUI Covid-19 Task Force mobilizes funds to aid healthcare workers in acquiring Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and provides financial assistance to individuals affected by Covid-19 (Ilman, 2020). Since 2020, MUI has distributed thousands of aid packages to communities in need (MUI, 2020).

The actions taken by MUI demonstrate its crucial role in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia. In addition to offering guidance on worship during the pandemic, MUI issues fatwas that aid and provide input to the government in implementing policies to combat this deadly virus. The social initiatives and educational efforts undertaken by MUI serve as tangible evidence of its significant contribution to Indonesia during these challenging times.

MUI and the Government in Combating COVID-19

In contributing to Indonesia's response to COVID-19, MUI consistently coordinates with the government. The government relies on MUI's fatwas to guide the Muslim community and support its policies. During the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, Vice President Ma'ruf Amin requested fatwas from MUI on the handling of COVID-19 patient corpses, guidelines for not performing congregational prayers in severely affected areas, and directives for healthcare workers using Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) (Hastuti, 2020).

MUI responded to these requests by issuing Fatwa No. 18/2020 regarding the guidelines for handling the corpses of Muslim COVID-19 victims and Fatwa No. 17/2020 outlining the prayer guidelines for healthcare workers using PPE when caring for COVID-19 patients. Fatwa No. 14/2020 on conducting worship during the COVID-19 pandemic had already been issued earlier.

Furthermore, Ma'ruf Amin requested MUI's fatwas on the guidelines for Eid al-Fitr prayers during the pandemic and the approval of vaccines before their distribution and use by President Joko Widodo. MUI subsequently issued several fatwas, including Fatwa No. 28/2020 providing guidance on Takbir and Eid al-Fitr prayers during COVID-19. Regarding vaccines, MUI issued Fatwa No. 2/2021 on the Sinovac Life Science and Biofarma COVID-19 vaccine's permissibility and halal status. Fatwa No. 14/2021 addressed the permissibility of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, considering it permissible under urgent conditions but discouraged due to its use of pig-derived substances. MUI

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encouraged the government to prioritize the use of halal and pure vaccines, emphasizing the importance of community participation in the COVID-19 vaccination program to boost immunity and aid the government's efforts.

This reciprocal relationship illustrates some instances of collaboration between the government and MUI, where MUI acts as a bridge between the public and the government. MUI supports government policies aimed at addressing COVID-19, as stated by Asrorun Niam Sholeh, the Chairman of MUI's Fatwa Division, emphasizing Muslims' obligation to support and adhere to the government's policies in combating COVID-19 in Indonesia (Yahya, 2021).

However, while supporting the government, MUI leadership remains critical of policies they deem unclear in handling the pandemic. Anwar Abbas, MUI's Secretary-General, has criticized the government's handling of gatherings, contrasting the closure of mosques with issued fatwas on worship practices. Additionally, he criticized government officials for not wearing masks, emphasizing the need for the government to set an example for the public (Mawardi, 2020; Kumparan, 2020). Such critiques underscore MUI's willingness to scrutinize government actions while avoiding labeling the Jokowi-Maruf administration as a failure in managing COVID-19 (WartaEkonomi, 2020).

These actions showcase how MUI's leaders express critical opinions when necessary, demonstrating a common practice in which NGOs not only act as intermediaries between the government and the public but also perform a check-and-balance function while monitoring government activities. MUI's critical stance highlights its role as a religious-oriented NGO in Indonesia.

In practice, MUI plays a significant role in assisting the government in COVID-19 mitigation efforts, providing guidance and enlightenment to Indonesia's Muslim community. This is evident in the fatwas issued by MUI, educational activities, fundraising through the MUI COVID-19 Task Force, and other initiatives supporting the government in facing the COVID-19 challenge in Indonesia.

Conclusion

The mitigation of Covid-19 requires the participation of all parties, including the Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia or MUI). MUI has played a significant role and made essential contributions to addressing the coronavirus

situation in Indonesia. Various roles are evident through the fatwas issued by MUI regarding Covid-19, encompassing guidelines for worship during the pandemic, responses to vaccine usage, and other fatwas that aid in providing understanding to the public and supporting the government in handling the Covid-19 situation, particularly in terms of enlightening the Islamic community. Furthermore, MUI has issued appeals to encourage public awareness and care for the pandemic, along with delivering religious advice (tausiyah). Additionally, MUI has established the Covid-19 Task Force (Satgas Covid-19) responsible for educating and fundraising for healthcare workers and the general public, especially for Covid-19 patients. MUI has also engaged in a reciprocal relationship with the government, where MUI has provided substantial assistance and input to the government. This collaborative effort between MUI and the government demonstrates mutual support in facing the challenges posed by Covid-19. However, MUI, through its prominent figures, maintains a critical stance toward government policies and actions deemed inappropriate.

The role played by MUI as a religious-based non-governmental organization has proven instrumental in aiding the government's efforts to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. The Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI), as one of the Religious NGOs playing a crucial role in Indonesian society, has demonstrated that Religious NGOs can contribute to assisting the Indonesian government in addressing various issues. The fatwas and advice provided by MUI can strengthen government policies. MUI also illustrates that Religious NGOs can have a positive impact on the development of democracy in Indonesia. This opens up opportunities for collaboration between MUI, the government, other institutions, and the general public in addressing issues such as Covid-19.

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