



JUMMAH PRAYERS IN PAKISTAN: AN ISLAMIC APPROACH TO COMMUNITY WELFARE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

It's Friday. The confusion around *Jumma* congregations stands as relevant as it did last week, except for in Sindh where a ban was imposed late last night. Amidst the exponential spread of the COVID-19 in Pakistan and all around the world, several major Islamic countries cancelled all forms of religious gatherings including Friday prayers as well as pilgrimages¹.

Earlier this month, several countries including Saudi-Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, and UAE cancelled daily and weekly congregational prayers. Pilgrimages to Makkah and Madinah were also halted until further notice. However, Friday prayers were observed in Pakistan and the rest of South Asia. On March 19, a massive collective prayer reportedly attended by 25,000 people in Rajpur, Bangladesh, generated widespread outcry all over the world². Videos circulating across social media showed large groups of South Asian Muslims observing Friday prayers in congregations. Some media reports showed groups of people in Pakistan and India debating how it is obligatory upon Muslim men to observe prayers in congregations, inside mosques.

Earlier this week, the Council of Islamic Ideology was to connect to Ulema all over the world in order to reach a solution. Yesterday, the Grand Imam of Jamiah Al-Azhar in Egypt issued a *fatwa*, in response to a special request made by the President of Pakistan³. The *fatwa* clearly states that under the current pandemic situation, the state has the right to cancel congregational prayers. The *Fatwa* also quotes Abu-Dawood, who quotes Ibn-i-Abbas, who has quoted from The Prophet (PBUH) that the chance of getting sick is enough of an excuse to skip congregational prayers. To further emphasize how this decision was not only for one's own personal safety but also a matter of communal safety, the *fatwa* quotes the Prophet (PBUH) from Abdur Rahman Ibn-i-Auf, saying that one should avoid praying in public if their odour was to create inconvenience for other people. While religious teachings suggest that congregational prayer should be skipped for as much as the nasal convenience of other people, it would definitely suggest so in a matter of life and death. The *fatwa* suggests local mosques to alter the *azaan* (call for prayers) and recite "pray from your homes" instead of "come for prayers".

The question underlying the situation is bi-fold. Why is collective prayer important? And why are religious decisions and *fatwas* more sensitive in South Asia, than in the rest of the world. To answer the first part, Fuist (2015)⁴ conducted an in-depth investigation into collective prayers across all religions of the world. Fuist observes that religious gatherings are a form of meaningful religious performance for individuals belonging to almost all religions, historically. Collective performance of religion and religious rituals is therefore a

means through which groups form collective history, behavioural expectations, and seek social and cultural identity cues. It hence holds a significant position in the social performance of faith and individuals belonging to different religions have sentimental understandings of religious collectiveness.

Within all factions of Islam, daily congregational prayers, and special collective prayers such as the Friday prayer, Eid prayer, and funeral prayer, hold a significant place. Apart from the religious teachings, Muslims all over the world have sentimental attachments and derive sense of community from their respective mosques which also helps with identity construction in Muslim-minority countries. However, as we move to the second part of the question, it is apparent that Muslims in other parts of the Islamic world followed lead when a call for the ban of congregational prayers was announced. Without passing by with reductionism, I would partly introduce the larger problem of the South Asian Muslims, especially their turbulent sense of identity within the contemporary discourse and leave it to the readers to investigate further.

While Muslims in South Asia comprise almost one-third of the world's overall Muslim population, the understanding that the South Asian Muslim is one monolithic community is far from correct⁵. With diversity within religious and political thought, cultural performance of religion, and linguistic traditions, it is pertinent to observe that the fight for religious identity in South Asia has had a history both within and outside the South Asian Muslim community. The ongoing outcry against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in India has but given the identity-based insecurity another spin.

Hence, it is hard to get the South Asian Muslim to follow lead in the presence of a turbulent sense of religious identity, longstanding partialities, and a disturbance within the contemporary discourse. It remains a mystery until afternoon whether there will be an adherence to the *fatwa*.

References:

1. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1543355/govt-in-limbo-over-banning-congregation-prayers-in-mosques-amidst-virus-lockdown>
2. <https://www.afp.com/en/news/15/massive-banladesh-coronavirus-prayer-gathering-sparks-outcry-doc-1pz9ny2>
3. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1543801/egypts-al-azhar-issues-fatwa-permitting-juma-prayers-suspension-in-pakistan>
4. Fuist, T. N. (2015). Talking to God among a cloud of witnesses: collective prayer as a meaningful performance. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 54(3), 523-539.
5. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/islam-islam-south-asia>

By: Mariam Mohsin, PIDE.

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics

Web: www.pide.org.pk, Twitter: @PIDEpk, Facebook: PIDEIslamabad