

The Strategic Role of Religious Authority in Supporting State Policy on Non-Natural Disaster Management in Indonesia

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has not only posed a grave threat to global public health but also disrupted the socio-religious fabric of Indonesian society, particularly in how Muslims perform communal worship. In response to government-mandated restrictions, resistance emerged from various societal groups, exposing a growing distrust toward state policy and weakening public compliance. This study investigates the strategic role of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) as a religious authority in supporting government efforts to manage COVID-19 as a non-natural disaster. Specifically, it addresses two key questions: (1) How did MUI contribute to the government's pandemic response through its fatwas? and (2) What was the strategic significance of these fatwas in the broader context of state development? Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered through field observation, interviews, and document analysis in three regions of Central Java. The findings reveal that MUI fatwas were instrumental in aligning religious practice with public health directives at macro, meso, and micro levels. Through its fatwas and outreach programs, MUI functioned as both a moral guide and policy communicator. This study contributes to the discourse on religion-state relations in new democracies and highlights how religious legitimacy can enhance state resilience during public crises.

Keywords: Religious Authority; Fatwa; COVID-19 Pandemic; State-Religion Relations; Non-Natural Disaster Management

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly transformed nearly all aspects of human life, not only in terms of public health but also in socio-economic, political, and religious domains. In Indonesia, the government imposed a series of public mobility restrictions—ranging from PSBB (Large-Scale Social Restrictions) to multi-level PPKM policies—aimed at curbing virus transmission (Roziqin et al., 2021). However, these measures triggered widespread resistance among segments of society, even in red-zone areas. This resistance manifested in various forms: defiance of mask mandates, refusal to



follow worship restrictions, opposition to vaccination, and even hostile acts against health workers (Hasyim, 2022; Wijayanti & Mahsun, 2022; Haryanto, 2021). Such actions reveal two critical social facts: first, a deteriorating trust in the government's authority, and second, the state's limited capacity to enforce health policies amid crisis (Musi, 2021; Mietzner, 2020). These challenges necessitated the involvement of actors outside the state structure—particularly religious authorities—whose influence in Indonesia's majority-Muslim society is profound and persistent.

Prior studies have examined the role of religious organizations and leaders in mediating state policies during the pandemic. Hasyim (2020) highlights the significant influence of Islamic civil society—especially NU and Muhammadiyah—in supporting government appeals through social norms and religious messaging. Similarly, Bastomi (2020) and Nurhayati & Purnama (2021) found that many religious leaders encouraged compliance with health protocols during congregational worship and funeral rites. Some scholars employed quantitative approaches to explore Muslim perceptions toward MUI fatwas and their impact on behavior (Hanafi et al., 2020). Others, such as Pabbajah et al. (2020), used qualitative methods to document local-level resistance to both state regulations and MUI directives, attributing such noncompliance to ineffective communication and weak religious literacy. Despite this growing body of literature, most existing research remains descriptive, lacking an in-depth exploration of the *strategic* role of religious authority—especially the MUI—in shaping national disaster response mechanisms. In particular, few studies critically assess the extent to which MUI fatwas were institutionalized and functioned as instruments of governance during the pandemic.

This study aims to address these gaps by examining the strategic role of the Indonesian Ulema Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia or MUI) in supporting state policy during the COVID-19 pandemic, conceptualized as a non-natural disaster. The research focuses on two interrelated objectives: first, to analyze how MUI, through its fatwas, contributed to guiding religious responses to public health directives; and second, to assess the strategic significance of MUI's position as a religious authority in relation to the state, particularly in crisis governance. By grounding this study in the theory of religion as a multi-level phenomenon (Herzog et al., 2020; Yendell et al., 2021), the research offers a framework to evaluate MUI's influence at macro (national), meso (organizational), and micro (individual/community) levels. The case study is empirically situated in Central Java—Semarang, Pekalongan, and Rembang—where MUI actions and fatwa dissemination were closely observed and analyzed.

Based on preliminary observations and document analysis, the central argument of this study is that MUI has played a pivotal and multidimensional role in aligning religious norms with state pandemic policies. At the macro level, MUI fatwas legitimized government action and shaped regulatory frameworks. At the meso level, they were adopted and propagated by major Islamic organizations, while at the micro level, grassroots ulama and mosque leaders used them to adjust worship practices. This study hypothesizes that MUI fatwas were not merely symbolic religious texts but functioned as tools of crisis governance, mediating between state authority and Muslim obedience. As such, the MUI represents an institutional bridge that helped to maintain social cohesion and trust in public policy during a time of national emergency. Through this lens, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how religious authority can play an integrative role in development and public crisis management, especially in democratic societies with high religiosity such as Indonesia.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Religious Authority and State Development: General Perspectives

The study of the role of religious authorities in state development has been an important topic of discussion in the social sciences, especially when discussing how religion interacts with political structures and public policies. In the Islamic tradition, religious authority is not only positioned as the guardian of the morality and spirituality of society, but also as a social agent that has an influence on the dynamics of development (Firmansyah & Pratiwi, 2019). This is due to the existence of normative values in Islam, which include the principles of social justice, the welfare of the ummah (masalahah), and order in social life. Religious authorities, in this case scholars and religious institutions such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), have a role not only as spiritual leaders but also as legal interpreters and determinants of social attitudes that are able to influence the collective behavior of Muslims. In the context of Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia, the legitimacy of public policy often requires support from religious actors to gain public trust and improve the effectiveness of policy implementation.

In Indonesia, the role of religious authorities has become increasingly important as the country faces crises that test institutional capacity and public trust, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In this situation, the state cannot work alone and needs partners from civil society, especially religious organizations, to expand the reach of communication and ensure community compliance with policies (Hasyim, 2020). Hasyim's research emphasizes that when the state shows weaknesses in its responsive capacity, religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah take a strategic role in calming public unrest and socializing social restriction policies. These two organizations have a strong social infrastructure and a network of scholars up to the local level, so that they are able to bridge the gap between state policies and the interests of the people. This phenomenon also shows that development is not only related to economic growth and formal policies, but also involves aspects of trust, symbolic authority, and cross-sectoral collaboration, especially with religious institutions that have strong roots in people's lives (Yendell et al., 2021; Herzog et al., 2020).

2.2. Religious Leaders and Public Compliance During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The role of religious leaders in shaping public compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic has been an important focus in many cross-disciplinary studies. Religious leaders are considered opinion leaders who have moral and symbolic authority, especially in a very religious society like Indonesia. Quantitative research conducted by Bastomi (2020) and Nurhayati & Tri Bayu Purnama (2021) shows that most religious leaders follow and even promote government policies related to health protocols. This includes regulating the implementation of Friday worship, the management of the bodies of COVID-19 patients, and the management of religious activities in places of worship with strict protocols. In many regions, the invitation of clerics for the people to comply with health protocols has been proven to reduce resistance to state policies. This study highlights that in crisis situations, religious leaders have the potential to strengthen public trust in public policies, as well as bridge the state's technocratic approach and the spiritual values of the community (Nurhayati & Purnama, 2021; Hanafi et al., 2020).

Widiyanto (2020) added that large religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah have transformed Islamic values into a knowledge system that is responsive to the pandemic. Through fatwas, religious guidance, and public education, these two organizations not only serve as conveyors of religious messages but also act as agents of public health development. They serve as translators of state policies into normative frameworks that are acceptable to the people, thereby increasing the effectiveness of those policies at the grassroots level. Despite this, most studies are still limited to normative descriptions of the roles of religious leaders without further dissecting the dynamics of multi-level interactions between states, religious organizations, and civil society. This kind of approach is still rarely developed to understand how fatwas, invitations, and actions of religious leaders can affect collective behavior systemically and strategically. Therefore, a more comprehensive theoretical framework is needed—such as a multi-level approach to religious phenomena (Herzog et al., 2020; Yendell et al., 2021)—to appropriately assess the contribution and impact of the involvement of religious leaders in the management of public crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3. Fatwas of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI): Reception and Gaps in Existing Studies

The fatwa issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) during the COVID-19 pandemic is an important object of study in understanding how religious authorities are involved in mitigating national crises. Several studies have highlighted the theological background and rationality of the fatwa. For example, Mushodiq & Ali Imron (2020) explained that the MUI fatwas are not only sourced from religious *nash-nash* such as the Qur'an and Hadith, but also from the *maqāṣid al-sharī'a* approach, especially in the aspect of *hifz al-nafs* (protection of the soul). This approach shows that MUI tries to accommodate the interests of public health through contextual *ijtihad*. Nurhayati & Nasution (2020) support this view by showing that a fatwa on the adjustment of worship during the pandemic is a form of socio-religious responsibility for the safety of the *ummah*. These studies indicate that the MUI fatwa is not a reactive response, but a normative decision formulated through religious, medical, and social considerations. This marks an important shift in the way religious institutions exercise their authority in the face of contemporary challenges such as non-natural disasters.

Although many MUI fatwas were positively received by the Muslim community, as found in a quantitative study by Hanafi et al. (2020), not a few responded to them with rejection or resistance, especially at the local community level. A qualitative study by Pabbajah et al. (2020) shows that many Muslim communities in the region do not understand the substance of the MUI fatwa or reject it because it is considered contrary to the religious traditions they have adhered to. Lack of socialization and religious literacy is a major factor that causes the distance between central authorities and religious practices at the grassroots. This phenomenon indicates a gap between the normative regulation of the central religious institution and the sociological reality of the *ummah*. Unfortunately, most of the existing studies have not sufficiently explored in depth the strategic position of the MUI as a religious actor involved in the crisis governance structure. In this context, this study aims to fill this gap by mapping how the MUI fatwa works at various social levels (macro, meso, micro), as well as how it functions as an instrument of communication, legitimacy, and coordination between the

state and society in handling non-natural disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Herzog et al., 2020; Yendell et al., 2021).

3. Methods

3.1 Material Object

This study focuses on the Indonesian Ulema Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia or MUI) as the central unit of analysis. MUI is examined as a religious authority institution that plays a strategic role in supporting state policy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis covers how MUI's fatwas and institutional actions influenced government decisions, Islamic organizations, and Muslim communities, particularly in the context of non-natural disaster management.

3.2 Research Design

A qualitative case study approach was employed to explore the complex role of MUI within real-life socio-political and religious contexts. The design allows for an in-depth understanding of how MUI's fatwas functioned as instruments of legitimacy and social coordination during the crisis. The research adopts a descriptive-analytical orientation, which enables the authors to capture layered meanings and multi-level interactions between religious authority and the state.

3.3 Data Sources

Participants included MUI fatwa commission members, local clerics, mosque leaders, academics, and members of civil society organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. The study focused on three research locations in Central Java—Semarang City, Pekalongan City, and Rembang Regency—where the reception and implementation of MUI fatwas were observed. Participants were selected based on their involvement in religious decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4 Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using a combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document review. Observations were conducted during religious gatherings to examine behavioral responses to MUI fatwas. Interviews aimed to capture participants' perceptions, motivations, and experiences in responding to state and religious regulations. Additionally, relevant fatwas, public statements, and government policies were reviewed to contextualize the empirical findings.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis followed several stages, including data reduction, thematic coding, triangulation, and interpretation. Coding was used to identify key themes such as fatwa dissemination, grassroots response, and state–religion synergy. Triangulation across sources and methods ensured the validity of interpretations. Interim conclusions were developed during data collection and refined through continuous reflection, allowing the study to maintain coherence between the theoretical framework and empirical evidence..

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 The Strategic Role of MUI in COVID-19 Response: A Multi-Level Analysis

In this section, the author presents a discussion of the theory of *religion as a multi-level phenomenon* that has been used as a framework of thought in answering the questions posed in this study. Specifically, this theory is used to help understand the contribution of religious authority (the Indonesian Ulema Council), which is quite complex in helping the government overcome the COVID-19 pandemic and the socio-economic impact it causes.

The concept of *religion as a multi-level phenomenon* in this study is studied by referring to the thinking developed by several scholars, namely Yendell et al. (2021), Barman (2017) Herzog, et al.(2020), and Dobbelaere (2004). With this theory, the analysis of the role of religion in development, especially related to the strategic role of the Indonesian Ulema Council in handling COVID-19 in Indonesia, is focused on three levels of analysis, namely the macro, meso, and micro levels.

At the macro level, social, cultural, economic, and political contexts are taken into account in analyzing religion and development, more especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, this level refers to the country (national) as the unit of analysis. Thus, large social institutions and sub-systems depend on the degree of functional differentiation and modernization of society and are usually placed and analysed at this level. This analysis, for example, includes the political system, social system, cultural system, economic or legal system, and religion or religion-based organizations placed as sub-systems in a country that have a special relationship with the government or state actors (Herzog et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, at the meso level, civil society, faith-based community organizations, community communities, and networks of political organizations (such as political parties) are involved, which are the pressure points for analysis in understanding religious issues and the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the framework of this theory, these various organizations are understood as entities that exchange information and influence each other, following their own logic and binary code based on systems theory. Among them, they will also negotiate for themselves how they handle the COVID-19 pandemic, whether because they get rewards, interests, and maybe also compete with each other and synergize with other organizations. Religious organizations can be included in all other community organizations with their values, ideologies, or fatwas issued (Herzog et al., 2020; and Yendell et al., 2021).

As for the last level, which is the micro level, this theory puts the focus on the individuals who make up the organization (meso level) and ultimately also the subsystem (macro level). Individuals have a variety of mental and economic prerequisites, social situations, attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies, including religion. Individuals are affected by the macro and meso levels. However, through their different social actions and roles, there is also individual communication to other levels, especially when they join together in institutions and organizations, for example in terms of attitude patterns, cultural and religious backgrounds, and the same political beliefs will encourage individuals to follow or not follow religious policies or fatwas issued by religious authorities (Herzog et al., 2020).

The theory of *religion as a multi-level phenomenon* has the basic assumption that "religion" or fatwa issued by religious authorities, and how religion/fatwa works in people's lives, is understood as the multi-level construction mentioned above (Herzog et al., 2020). This means that actors or

religious leaders act in carrying out efforts to handle COVID-19 through policies, fatwas, or strategies that are carried out at different levels. However, in reality, a number of actions at all three levels are interconnected, and the boundaries are blurred (Yendell et al., 2021). The study on the strategic role of religion or MUI fatwa as a religious authority in helping the state overcome the spread of Covid-19 will be analysed using the three levels that have been described above. On the one hand, this theory will help understand and analyze the complexity and relationships between many actors related to the MUI's efforts to overcome the spread of Covid-19, both through the policies/fatwas issued and through other strategic roles in its efforts to make the fatwa followed by the Indonesian government and people. On the other hand, the separation of analysis from various levels of different levels is for the purpose of compiling structures and patterns to understand the strategic position and impact resulting from MUI policies/fatwas in tackling the Covid-19 pandemic and the socio-economic, socio-religious, and political impacts it produces.

4.2 The Institutional Role of MUI and the Politics of Fatwa in Crisis Governance

The Indonesian Ulema Council (later abbreviated as MUI) is defined as an organization that serves as a forum for deliberation for Ulama, Zu'ama (leaders of organizations and/or government leaders), and Muslim scholars in Indonesia. In addition to being a forum for deliberation on religious issues, the organization was built to provide guidance, guidance, and protection for Muslims in Indonesia.

Officially, MUI was established on 7 Rajab 1395 Hijri, coinciding with July 26, 1975, in Jakarta. On its website, the establishment of an organization called the Indonesian Ulema Council is explained as the result of the deliberations of ulama, Muslim scholars, and zu'ama representing many regions in Indonesia. Based on the available information, there were at least 26 representative scholars from 26 provinces in Indonesia at that time, of which 10 scholars were elements of central-level Islamic organizations, namely, NU, Muhammadiyah, Syarikat Islam, and Perti. Al Washliyah, Math'laul Anwar, GUPPI, PTDI, DMI and Al Ittihadiyyah. Then there are 4 scholars from the Islamic Spiritual Service, the Army, the Air Force, the Navy, and the National Police, as well as 13 figures/scholars who are individual figures (Editorial, 2022).

The birth of the MUI, which was managed by the New Order regime, was part of a *top-down* approach in subjugating the Muslim community in Indonesia. That is, by mobilizing and subduing the ulama, who are the religious elite, in an organization called the Indonesian Ulema Council, the New Order regime can easily influence and also make the Muslims in Indonesia submissive. Thus, it is hoped that Muslims, who are the majority of Indonesian society, will easily follow and/or support the development programs adopted by the government. Likewise, public resistance to the New Order government's development programs can also be minimized or repelled through scholars who are role models for Muslim society. As is known, ulama in the Muslim community in Indonesia are not only placed as religious authorities who have the ability to make religious facts or advice, but most are also positioned as charismatic figures who are respected and used as role models by most Muslims. So, with the logic of the top-down approach, the government can easily lead the Muslim public to participate in supporting the development agenda and policies of the Suharto government, or, with political language, the Muslim community can be easily subdued by the state in practical development and political activities (Ichwan & Nina Mariani Noor, 2019). Affirming Ichwan's argument, (1993) explained that the establishment of the Indonesian Ulema Council was not only used as

part of gaining support from scholars and Muslims in general for the authoritative New Orade development agenda, but also as a strategy to dampen the relationship between Islam and the state which was not good during the early period of Suharto's rule until the 1970s. In short, there are important political events that are the background behind the formation of the MUI as a gathering place for Muslim scholars, *zu'ama*, and scholars in Indonesia.

As a religious institution, the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) has one of the main tasks, one of which is to give fatwas to Muslims in Indonesia, whether requested or unrequested. As explained in the AD/ART, the MUI in giving fatwas tries to accommodate and channel the aspirations of Muslims in Indonesia who have various beliefs and thoughts, as well as religious organizations. However, this statement has been rejected by many scholars who have studied MUI so far, as mentioned in the previous discussion, that Muslims who are served and intended by MUI are a group of Muslims who have a religious viewpoint or religious thought that is in accordance with the ideological movement and religious thought of MUI.

Furthermore, every fatwa issued by the MUI is a legal decision that, in its creation, is based on Sharia principles issued by the National Sharia Council in the MUI (abbreviated as DSN-MUI). In AD/ART, it is explained that in terms of the implementation of every fatwa made by the MUI fatwa commission is based on the implementation guidelines decided by DSN-MUI. This guideline is made in the form of a more detailed explanation and elaboration of a fatwa. This means that the MUI through DSN makes guidelines that guide and facilitate how a fatwa is implemented both by the central MUI in the capital city of Jakarta and by the regional MUI in provinces, districts, and sub-districts. The coordinated way of working of the central and regional MUI, districts, and sub-districts has facilitated the implementation of a fatwa issued by the central MUI at the regional level to the grassroots community.

To become a DSN-MUI administrator who has the authority to discuss and supervise the implementation of religious fatwas in Indonesia is not easy, because it must meet a number of conditions. As explained in the organization's AD/ART that to become administrators of DSN-MUI are people who have the capacity of religious knowledge, namely scholars, practitioners, experts, and people who have authority in fields related to *muamalah* fiqh, finance, business, and sharia finance.

In addition, DSN-MUI also has the authority and task of drafting an initial draft of a fatwa that will be issued by the MUI. As explained in the AD/ART, every fatwa issued by the MUI related to certain issues is first reviewed and prepared by the DSN-MUI's daily management. However, according to Mudzhar (1993) That, specifically, in terms of the preparation of fatwas, is carried out by the fatwa commission in this organization called MUI. This fatwa commission is the one who negotiates, discusses, and issues MUI fatwas related to issues related to Islamic law faced by the community and the state.

The first step in compiling a religious fatwa is to draft a fatwa based on studies conducted by scholars in DSN-MUI with the MUI fatwa commission. Then, after a draft fatwa is completed, it will be brought to a plenary meeting to be discussed and determined together with the MUI fatwa commission. The plenary meeting to discuss, change, determine or revoke a fatwa issued by the MUI was organized by DSN-MUI. In fact, in this plenary meeting, the MUI also decided on the strategic policies of the DSN-MUI. The MUI fatwa commission tasked with issuing a religious fatwa product is filled with scholars. This commission consists of the general chairman, who is currently held by Prof.

Dr. H. Hasanuddin AF, under whom there are seven vice chairmen, consisting of Muslim scholars (kyaïs) and scholars. In addition, in this fatwa commission, there is also a general secretary assisted by seven deputy secretaries, and 55 members consisting of Muslim Kyaïs and scholars. In essence, the members of the MUI fatwa commission are many, consisting of various scientific backgrounds, ranging from religious experts (kiai pondok pesantren) to Muslim scholars who are lecturers in higher education.

In plenary sessions conducted by fatwa commissions, including DSN-MUI, they are generally held as needed. This means that the plenary meeting activities organized by DSN-MUI are carried out according to the needs of the organization. There is no exact time when DSN-MUI and/or the fatwa commission will hold a plenary meeting to discuss a product of Islamic law in the form of fatwas or advice. If the MUI is asked by Muslims for their opinion on an issue related to Islamic law, or is asked by the government for consideration in the form of Islamic legal products such as fatwas or religious advice, then the fatwa commission will hold plenary meetings to decide on an issue that will eventually become a legal product in the form of a MUI fatwa. According to Mudzhar's study (1993) the MUI in order to issue a fatwa is usually only needed for one session.

The fatwas issued by the MUI are usually intended to unite Muslims and provide advice to the government on religious law to be considered in formulating their policies (Mudzhar, 1993). For example, in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, the MUI has issued a series of fatwas starting from the procedures for worship during the Covid-19 pandemic, one of which is to take Friday prayers at mosques in congregation in areas that are categorized as red zones; and the MUI fatwa on the purity and halalness of the Sinovac vaccine that will be given to the Indonesian people. The fatwa was issued through a series of discussions and ijtihad of the ulama in the MUI body in order to safeguard the benefits of humanity and stay away from the greater danger posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the issuance of the fatwa has the purpose of being a consideration and, at the same time, giving legitimacy to the social restriction policy in the form of PSBB (large-scale social restrictions) to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at that time. This related discussion will be further elaborated in the discussion of the next chapter.

4.3 Strategic Religious Authority in Pandemic Response: The Role of MUI in Indonesia's COVID-19 Management

In socio-religious analysis, the Covid-19 pandemic is not only a problem of a virus that threatens human life because of its deadly attack, and it is also not a problem of threatening the health system, but also related to the problem of religious responsibility in helping the state solve the problems of life faced by mankind Thurston (2020). According to the secretary of the MUI Fatwa Commission, M. Asrorun Ni'am Sholeh, many Islamic countries in the world, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, also provide great support for the implementation of *social distancing* policies and/or health protocols during the Covid-19 pandemic because of the various impacts it has on the health, economic, social, cultural and political systems. The same thing is also done by Indonesia as a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, and also concentrates on efforts to encourage the implementation of policies related to people's lives, including in terms of the implementation of worship, by paying attention to health protocols during the Covid-19 pandemic. The government's efforts to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus like this in order to run successfully require strong support and involvement of religions and religious leaders. However, the problem is, as has

happened in many Muslim-majority countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Malaysia, Indonesia has limited religious activities or religious leaders involved in the community regarding the implementation of *social distancing* policies (Shaleh, 2020). In this context, the Indonesian Ulema Council takes an important role by issuing a number of strategic policies and fatwas in assisting and supporting the Indonesian government's *social distancing* policy in order to control the spread of COVID-19.

This study finds that as an institution that has a fatwa authority in Indonesia, the Indonesian Ulema Council in the past two years has actively taken an important role in its involvement in tackling the spread of the COVID-19 virus, both directly and indirectly. Among the strategies and real roles carried out by MUI, both at the central and regional levels, is to synergize with the government in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic. The most important effort made by MUI is to become a medium for state policy communication in handling the COVID-19 virus so that it can be accepted and understood by the wider Muslim community in Indonesia. In addition, the MUI issued a number of fatwas that gave legitimacy to the government's policies to control the COVID-19 pandemic. MUI also educates the Muslim community regarding the dangers posed by the virus and provides an explanation of how the Muslim community should deal with the threat of the coronavirus when carrying out activities in groups due to worship.

Another important role carried out by the MUI is in the form of field actions in order to help the government handle the COVID-19 pandemic. These field actions manifested in the form of organizing a series of workshops and socialization related to efforts to increase the awareness of Muslims in facing the dangers of the COVID-19 virus. In this context, the MUI also formed a Task Force for Pandemic Mitigation of the COVID-19 Outbreak. Among the tasks of this task force is to collaborate with various government institutions and elements of civil society in overcoming the COVID-19 disaster. For example, the MUI Covid-19 Task Force collaborates with the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPb) in order to carry out fatwa-based Covid-19 pandemic management in 34 provinces in Indonesia. This Covid-19 virus countermeasure activity is in the form of workshops, seminars, and socialization directly to the general public (MUI Admin, 2020).

The field actions carried out by the MUI in the series of activities above have a number of important objectives. Among the objectives are as follows: increasing public knowledge and awareness regarding the dangers of the Covid-19 virus; encouraging Muslims to make MUI fatwas as the main reference in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic; increasing knowledge and awareness of the benefits of the Covid-19 vaccine to protect human lives from illness or even death due to being infected with the Covid-19 virus (*hifzul nafs*); increasing awareness and obedience of the Muslim community to comply with health protocols in houses of worship; and finally, strengthening the literacy of Muslims in responding to hoax content and negative narratives related to Covid-19 spread by irresponsible parties through social media and communication media such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and other media such as (MUI Admin, 2020).

In addition to carrying out actions in the field in the form of building cooperation with the government in overcoming the Covid-19 disaster to hold a series of educational activities, socialization, and seminars as mentioned above, MUI in the two years of the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia also issued a number of religious fatwas that were used as the main guide and reference for the government and Muslims in Indonesia (Nur, 2021). Based on an investigation on the central

MUI website, the author found that there were at least 12 (twelve) fatwas issued by the MUI related to its efforts to help the government and the community deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. Among the fatwas are as following:

1. Fatwa Number 14 of 2020 concerning the Implementation of Worship in the Situation of the Covid-19 Outbreak.
2. Fatwa Number 17 of 2020 concerning Guidelines for Kaifiat Prayer for Health Workers Who Wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) When Treating and Handling COVID-19 Patients.
3. Fatwa Number 18 of 2020 concerning Guidelines for the Management of Bodies (Tajhiz Al-Jana'iz) of Muslims Infected with Covid-19.
4. Fatwa Number 23 of 2020 concerning the Utilization of Zakat, Infaq, and Shadaqah Assets for the Prevention of the COVID-19 Outbreak and Its Impact.
5. Fatwa Number 28 of 2020 concerning Guidelines for Kaifiat Takbir and Eid Al-Fitr Prayer During COVID-19.
6. Fatwa Number 31 of 2020 concerning the Implementation of Friday Prayers and Congregations to Prevent the Transmission of COVID-19.
7. Fatwa Number 36 of 2020 concerning Eid al-Adha Prayer and Slaughter of Sacrificial Animals During the Covid-19 Outbreak.
8. Fatwa Number 23 of 2021 concerning the Law on Swab Tests for the Detection of COVID-19 During Fasting.
9. Fatwa Number 24 of 2021 concerning Guidelines for the Implementation of Worship in the Month of Ramadan and Shawwal 1442 H, which is still in the Covid-19 Pandemic.
10. Fatwa Number 2 of 2021 concerning Covid-19 Vaccine Products from Sinovac Life Sciences Co., Ltd., China and PT. Bio Farma (Persero).
11. Fatwa Number 13 of 2021 concerning the Law on Covid-19 Vaccines While Fasting.
12. Fatwa Number 14 of 2021 concerning the Law on the Use of the Covid-19 Vaccine for Astrazeneca Products.

Whether it is acknowledged or not that the existence of the fatwas issued by the MUI mentioned above has helped the government and Muslims in handling Covid-19. The MUI fatwa related to the Covid-19 pandemic above has an important and significant role in encouraging social change in the community in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. In this regard, M. Asrorun Ni'am Shaleh explained that MUI has an important and strategic position for Muslims in Indonesia. In the case of handling Covid-19, the MUI for two years has played an important role in bridging the interests of the government and the community, especially in helping to communicate, persuade, and legitimize government policies related to social distancing and vaccination programs, both through field actions and fatwas on Covid-19. This is all done so that people want to follow the government's appeal. In this case, MUI has a position and takes a cooperative role with the government in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic and becoming a legitimate religious authority institution in front of the government and Muslims (MUI Editor, 2021).

M. Asrorun Ni'am, secretary of the MUI Fatwa Council, conveyed related to the MUI's participation in assisting the government in handling the Covid-19 pandemic in a seminar entitled "Rising from Covid-19 and Joint Action Based on Islamic Values and MUI Fatwa" held on October 7, 2021, as follows: "The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) places itself in its service as a *khadimul ummah* (servant of the ummah). And because of its position, all organizational activities within the MUI through its organizational devices direct its services for the benefit of serving the people."

From what was conveyed by one of the MUI chairmen above, he emphasized what the author had mentioned earlier, that MUI's efforts to help the government deal with the COVID-19 pandemic were none other than to serve Muslims. This is the main priority carried out by the MUI. This means that fatwas related to the COVID-19 pandemic are aimed at saving Muslims in Indonesia from the dangers posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This action confirms MUI's commitment to transform the organization after the 1998 reform from the previous one being a government servant (*khodim al hukama*) to changing to a Muslim servant (*khodim al-ummah*). The attack of the coronavirus or COVID-19 on Muslims is a strong impetus for the MUI to serve Muslims in facing disasters. This is where the participation of the MUI as a religious authority in Indonesia becomes important.

Thus, it can be explained that the Covid-19 pandemic is a dangerous virus that not only requires handling from medical experts, but also requires the maximum and important participation of scholars who have the authority to make fatwas such as those in religious organizations labeled as the MUI government, as well as community organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. In the context of Indonesia, where the majority of Muslims are, it is the ulama who must play an important role in maintaining human life and safety from a religious perspective. Various fatwas issued by scholars in the MUI body as religious authorities explain from upstream to downstream how efforts to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic should and ideally be carried out (Nur, 2021). This means that overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic is not only the responsibility of the government, but also a shared responsibility, especially the ulama or gama, who have an important position in the living space of the Muslim community in Indonesia. Up to this point, it is clear how the contribution of religious institutions, such as the MUI, has an important and large contribution in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from prevention to cure. Up to this point, it can also be known that in the context of a country with a religious majority, religion has a strategic role in relation to the development process in a country, so that it is clearly known how the relationship between religion and the state manifests.

4.4 State Recognition of MUI's Strategic Role in COVID-19 Crisis Governance

MUI, as one of the religious authorities in Islam, has an organizational apparatus at the lowest level in Indonesia. In addition to being at the central, national level, MUI organizations also exist at the provincial, district, and sub-district levels. Therefore, organizationally, MUI is an organization that has a strategic position to assist the government in overcoming critical conditions and needs support from the Indonesian people at large. In the case of the crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of MUI is widely recognized by the central and regional governments in helping to provide socialization, education, and awareness to Muslims in many regions to support *social distancing* and vaccination policies, especially through fieldwork and fatwas. This is as conveyed by Muhajir Effendy, Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Culture (Coordinating Minister for Human

Development and Culture), as published on the official website of the Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Culture as follows:

"Muhadjir invites the MUI to cooperate with the government in terms of handling COVID-19. According to him, MUI has an organizational apparatus at the lowest level. That way, there is a great opportunity for the MUI to help and take part in the government's COVID-19 handling programs. MUI is one of the strategic organizations owned by the Indonesian nation. Especially when it is in a critical situation and needs encouragement and support from religious elements, especially Muslims, then MUI is always at the forefront. The role of the MUI is to vaccinate, provide social assistance, and, especially, socialization and tabayyun to provide clear explanations of various issues. Especially negative issues, issues that are counterproductive to our plan of measures to deal with Covid-19, so that the public is not affected by untrue news." (Novrizaldi, 2021).

From the statement of the coordinating minister for PMK above, it is clearly implied that the MUI's position in the context of handling the COVID-19 pandemic is urgently needed by the government. This means that as an institution that has authority in the field of religion, because there are many Muslim scholars, *zu'ama*, and scholars, MUI is considered by the government in the context of state development. Likewise, in the context of the implementation of worship during the COVID-19 pandemic and the vaccination program, which initially made the general public feel confused, the existence of MU fatwas helped a lot to solve the problem of confusion experienced by the community.

The government, through the national Covid-19 Task Force, said that the existence of the MUI is urgently needed by the government and the people of Indonesia. The fatwas issued by the MUI have become a reference for the government in issuing policies to prioritize public safety. In this regard, as released in the news published on the Covid-19 Task Force website, namely: <https://covid19.go.id/>, the vice president of Indonesia, Prof. Ma'ruf Amin, emphasized that in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, the government has involved the MUI since the beginning of the Covid-19 virus entering Indonesia.

As explained by the government, as represented by the vice president's statement during a dialogue with the spokesperson for the Covid-19 Handling Task Force, dr. Reisa Brotoasmoro, on October 16, 2020, and posted on the Presidential Secretary's YouTube channel, stated that the MUI has played an important role in helping the government handle the COVID-19 pandemic. The government admits that there are many MUI fatwas that are used as references by the government and the people in Indonesia. For example, the MUI fatwa in regulating the procedures for Friday prayers, Eid al-Fitr prayers, and Eid al-Adha prayers has been followed by the government and the wider community to stay away from crowding so that there is no transmission of the COVID-19 virus. The MUI also issued a fatwa on the procedure for worship for medical personnel who use hazmat suits. This fatwa, in the government's view, is very helpful for Muslim medical workers in Indonesia. In addition, in order to help the Indonesian government overcome the socio-economic impact caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the MUI also issued a fatwa, as mentioned in the previous chapter, related to the payment of zakat that can be used to overcome the pandemic, the procedures for worship for medical personnel who use hazmat suits (Covid-19 Task Force Communication Team, 2020).

The important position of the MUI for the government in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic is also shown by the involvement of the MUI in the vaccination program. This involvement has taken place since the beginning of the vaccination program for the community issued by the Indonesian government under the leadership of Joko Widodo and Ma'ruf Amin. This is as conveyed by the vice president, Ma'ruf Amin, as follows:

"For vaccines, I have asked (MUI) to be involved starting from planning, procurement of vaccines, then consideration of vaccine halalness, audits at vaccine factories, including visits to vaccine facilities in the PRC (People's Republic of China). Then also continue to socialize with the community in the context of vaccination," (Presidential Secretary, YouTube, October 16, 2020).

Even on the issue of the halalness of the COVID-19 vaccine, Vice President Ma'aruf Amin also emphasized that the vaccine that will be given to the community must have a halal certificate from an institution that has religious authority, in this case, the Indonesian Ulema Council. This means that in this case, the government places the MUI as a legitimate organization as a religious authority to issue a fatwa and provide legality for a product that will be given by the community as halal, including related to vaccines (Covid-19 Task Force Communication Team, 2020).

Then, politically and legally, the MUI, through its fatwas, also has an important role in helping the government overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. The government recognizes the position of the MUI as a religious authority that has the capacity to issue fatwas related to religious affairs and provide theological legitimacy for state policies to be followed by the community, especially Muslims who are the majority in Indonesia. Therefore, a number of fatwas and MUI advice are used as a reference for the government in making policies to handle and prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus in Indonesia (Sholeh, 2020). In fact, as mentioned earlier, the MUI itself was also asked by the government to synergize in handling the COVID-19 pandemic in the form of making a study on the vaccination program provided by the community. The study, then, gave birth to two MUI fatwas on the legality of religious law (shari'i), the use of a number of Vaccine products provided by the government to the community to prevent or stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The two MUI fatwas are as follows: 1) MUI fatwa Number 2 of 2021 concerning Covid-19 Vaccine Products from Sinovac Life Sciences Co., Ltd., China, and PT. Bio Farma (Persero); and 2) Fatwa Number 14 of 2021 concerning the legal status of the use of vaccines produced by Astra-Zeneca. The issuance of the MUI fatwa regarding the vaccine material has increased public trust in the country, and its impact has encouraged public enthusiasm to vaccinate (Khoiri & Adelina Nasution, 2022).

From the above explanation, politically legal, the author argues that the role and position of the MUI, especially through its fatwas, is recognized by the government in helping to encourage development and overcome crisis problems faced by the state and its children, in this context is the state policy to handle the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia. Thus, theoretically, if referring to the theory of Herzog et al. (2020) *Religion as a multi-level phenomenon explains that MUI, through its field actions and fatwas*, at the macro level, is accepted and has a strategic position as a religious authority and has a fairly close and cooperative relationship with the state.

In order to strengthen the author's argument above, the author presents a number of data points that show how fatwas and advice issued by the MUI have received positive appreciation from

the government in the context of making regulations and legislation. Among them is MUI fatwa Number 14 of 2020 concerning the Implementation of Worship in the Situation of the Covid-19 Outbreak, which was issued before the government issued a *social distancing policy* called PSBB on April 24, 2020. In the fatwa, the MUI in the third part, namely the recommendation, encourages the government to implement a tightening policy on the entry and exit of people and goods from and to Indonesia in order to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and the Indonesian people are required to obey it. Here are more details:

"The government is obliged to impose super strict restrictions on the entry and exit of people and goods into and from Indonesia, except for medical personnel, basic necessities, and emergency needs. Muslims are obliged to support and obey government policies that isolate and treat people exposed to Covid-10 so that the spread of the virus can be prevented."

The MUI's appeal through Fatwa Number 14 of 2020, in turn, was followed and/or used as a reference by the government in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic, namely the first issuance of a *social distancing policy* in the form of PSBB and a number of other derivative policies. Among them is a ban for foreigners who will enter or transit through Indonesian territory. The ban is enshrined in the Regulation of the Minister of Law and Human Rights Number 11 of 2020 concerning the Temporary Prohibition of Foreigners from Entering the State Territory of the Republic of Indonesia. However, in the regulation, there are exceptions for the following six types of foreigners, namely foreigners who hold limited residence permits and permanent residence permits; foreigners holding diplomatic visas and service visas; foreigners holding diplomatic residence permits and official residence permits; food aid and medical support personnel based on humanitarian reasons; crew of means of transportation both sea, air, and land; as well as foreigners who will work on national strategic projects. Then, foreigners who fall into the exemption are people who must meet a number of requirements before being allowed to enter Indonesian territory. The requirements in question are to have a health certificate in English issued by health authorities from each country; have been in a region or country that is free of Covid-19 for 14 days; and a statement of willingness to be quarantined for 14 days, implemented by the Government of Indonesia (Sahbani, 2020).

The MUI's appeal through its fatwa was later followed by the issuance of the Circular Letter of the Minister of Religion Number SE.15 of 2020 concerning Guidelines for the Implementation of Religious Activities in Places of Worship in the Context of Realizing a Productive and Safe Society during the COVID-19 Pandemic which was issued on May 29, 2020. The Circular Letter of the Minister of Religion is addressed to the Minister of Home Affairs, the Minister of Health, the Chairman of the Task Force for the Acceleration of Handling Covid-19, the Commander of the TNI, the Chief of the National Police, the Head of BIN, the Governor, the Regent and Mayor, the Leader of the Religious Assembly, the Head of the Regional Office of the Provincial Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Head of the Technical Implementation Unit, and the Management and Management of Places of Worship in Indonesia (Sholeh, 2020).

Then on May 30, 2020, one day after that, following a Circular Letter from the Executive Board of the Indonesian Mosque Council. The circular was signed by the Chairman of the Mosque Council, Jusuf Kalla, and the Secretary General, Imam Addaruqutni. The circular letter is clearly and firmly a follow-up to Circular Letter Number 15 of 2020 issued by the Minister of Religion and MUI Fatwa

Number 14 of 2020, which all concern the implementation of religious activities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tempo, 2020).

According to Sholeh (2020), indirectly, the Indonesian government also gave another positive response to the recommendations contained in the MUI fatwa Number 14 of 2020 by issuing Government Regulation in Lieu of Law Number 1 of 2020 concerning State Financial Policy and Financial System Stability in Handling the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic and/or in the Context of Facing Threats that Endanger Economic and/or System Stability National Finance.

By listening to the data that the author explained above, it shows that at the macro level, if referring to the theory of religion as a multi-level phenomenon, the MUI has a strategic position in the midst of the government's efforts to handle the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that as a religious authority, the position of the MUI is recognized, not just as an institution that gives legitimacy to state development policies such as the New Order era, but on the contrary, the MUI as a servant of Muslims is used as a reference by the government in making decisions and/or policies in overcoming the spread of Covid-19 in order to save the lives of the Indonesian people. In this context, according to the secretary of the MUI Fatwa Commission, M. Asroun Ni'am Sholeh, the role and position of the MUI through its fatwas on Covid-19 can end the bad stigma about the political role of religious *actors*. In addition, MUI fatwas also show the increasing role of ulama (Kyai) from cultural brokers to actors of Islamic legal science (Islamic legal science). This is evidenced by the positive response from the government by introducing a number of regulations and policies that refer to and/or refer to fatwas issued by the MUI in the context of handling COVID-19 in Indonesia (Sholeh, 2020: 293).

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) played a pivotal role in supporting the government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic as a non-natural disaster. MUI's fatwas served not only as theological guidance but also as instruments of social regulation that aligned religious practices with public health protocols. At the macro level, MUI's fatwas legitimized government policies and helped shape national narratives on responsible religious behavior. At the meso level, major Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah adopted and disseminated these fatwas, reinforcing collective religious compliance. At the micro level, grassroots clerics and mosque leaders implemented MUI guidance, fostering local trust and reducing resistance. The findings underscore that religious authority in Indonesia is not merely symbolic but actively engaged in crisis governance and public communication, bridging the gap between state regulations and community norms in times of national emergency.

This research contributes significantly to the growing body of literature on religion and state relations in times of crisis, particularly within the context of new democracies with high religiosity such as Indonesia. It advances the theoretical discourse by applying the concept of religion as a multi-level phenomenon, illustrating how a religious institution like MUI operates across macro, meso, and micro spheres. The study also broadens the understanding of fatwas beyond legalistic doctrine by framing them as dynamic social tools that mediate between government authority and religious norms. Furthermore, the study provides empirical evidence that challenges the often-assumed binary between secular governance and religious institutions. By highlighting the cooperative and strategic positioning of MUI during the pandemic, the research presents a nuanced model of how

religious legitimacy can enhance state capacity and societal resilience. It positions religious authority as a partner in development, rather than a counterbalance to state power.

Future research should explore comparative analyses between different religious authorities within Indonesia or across Muslim-majority countries to assess variations in religious-state collaboration during crises. It would also be valuable to conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term impact of MUI fatwas on religious behavior and public trust in both religious and governmental institutions. Another promising direction is to examine the digital dissemination of fatwas and their reception among younger Muslim generations, who may respond differently compared to older, more institutionally connected populations. Methodologically, future studies could integrate mixed methods approaches to quantify behavioral changes and correlate them with exposure to religious messaging. Finally, scholars might investigate how religious authority engages in other domains of non-natural disasters, such as climate change or digital misinformation, to understand the broader scope of religious influence in contemporary governance and civic life.

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