

Communicating Islam under Crisis: Institutional Trust and Religious Authority during Public Controversies in Contemporary Muslim Societies

Nur Setiawati¹

¹ Fakultas Agama, Universitas Muslim Indonesia, Indonesia

Correspondence: nursetiawati@umi.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Research on Islamic responses to public crises has examined fatwas, health communication, state regulation, and digital religion, but rarely explains how institutional trust and religious authority are negotiated together when official guidance becomes controversial. This study examined how Islamic institutions projected trustworthiness and defended religious authority during COVID-19 controversies in Indonesia, Turkey, and Egypt. It used a qualitative comparative design based on document analysis of fatwas, sermons, worship guidelines, public statements, and vaccination rulings issued by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia, Diyanet, Al Azhar, and Dar al Ifta between March 2020 and December 2021. The findings showed that credibility depended less on formal status than on visible coordination between medical expertise and religious reasoning. Trustworthiness was stronger when institutions explained changes in worship, offered practical alternatives, and preserved visible judgment while cooperating with the state. Controversy did not simply weaken authority but changed the conditions under which it had to be defended. The study identified dual legitimacy translation, authority distance, and authority collateralisation as mechanisms explaining how Islamic institutions converted medical knowledge into religious guidance while managing political and reputational risk.



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INTRODUCTION

When governments closed mosques, limited funeral attendance, and urged vaccination, Muslim publics were not confronting health rules alone. They were also being asked to accept new judgments about worship, danger, and religious responsibility while medical knowledge was still developing. Islamic institutions had to decide whether such measures could be defended in religious terms, but that was only part of the difficulty. They also had to show why their own judgment deserved confidence. Its credibility had to be demonstrated in public, not merely presumed internally. Ordinary institutional prestige became less secure once public anxiety, political distrust, and competing online interpretations entered the same communicative space. A fatwa or sermon no longer functioned simply as a statement of doctrine. It arranged the relationship between expert knowledge, moral obligation, state power, and human vulnerability. That arrangement could be accepted, resisted, or reinterpreted by audiences who did not necessarily distinguish between religious endorsement and political obedience. Crisis communication therefore exposed a question that often remains hidden in calmer periods. Who may define responsible Muslim conduct when evidence is unsettled, policy is controversial, and religious authority itself is under public scrutiny? (Han et al., 2021; Su et al., 2022)

Compliance offers no reliable answer to that question. People may follow restrictions because they fear sanctions, wish to protect relatives, or lack any practical alternative. None of these responses proves trust in the institution supporting the policy. Trust is closer to a judgment about whether an institution can handle unfamiliar evidence, apply its principles consistently, recognize public hardship, and preserve moral independence while cooperating with government. These qualities do not appear in

isolation or carry equal weight in every controversy. Competence without care can sound bureaucratic. Care without credible knowledge can appear irresponsible. Political access may improve coordination, yet the same access can weaken confidence when institutional reasoning is not made visible. (Falcone et al., 2020; Mansoor, 2021)

The media environment complicates this further. National councils and religious bureaucracies now speak beside local scholars, activists, physicians, mass organizations, and digital preachers. Some have little formal standing, yet they respond faster and sound closer to everyday experience. Their messages are also easier to circulate, quote, and detach from their original setting. Authority has not simply moved online. Its recognition now depends partly on visibility, immediacy, and communicative intimacy, which can challenge institutions whose procedures are slower and whose language is more formal. (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023; Saputra et al., 2021)

Indonesia, Turkey, and Egypt reveal different versions of this tension. The Majelis Ulama Indonesia works within a plural religious field where large Islamic organizations and local networks retain independent influence. Turkey's Diyanet can circulate coordinated guidance through an extensive bureaucracy, although that reach binds its credibility to public perceptions of government and its political record. In Egypt, Al Azhar and Dar al Ifta draw on long scholarly traditions while operating through a layered division of religious functions. These cases do not stand for the entire Muslim world. Their value lies in the institutional contrast they provide and in the way each structure distributes communicative power when guidance becomes politically sensitive.

The pandemic makes the comparison especially useful because the disputes were concrete (Wildman et al., 2020). Mosque access, congregational prayer, Ramadan, burial, and vaccination required institutions to connect changing medical advice with established obligations (Al-Astewani, 2021). Research has examined many parts of this process, though rarely within one analytical frame. Studies of fatwa methodology often ask whether rulings are doctrinally defensible, leaving the production of trust largely unexamined. Public health research tends to treat religious leaders as channels for improving compliance, which can obscure disagreement over who may speak for Islam (Barmania & Reiss, 2021). Work on digital religion explains the growing influence of online actors but often gives less attention to institutional procedure. Political studies clarify relations between religious bodies and the state, yet communication is frequently treated as a secondary expression of those relations rather than a site where legitimacy is made or lost (Kadir, 2025). The central weakness is therefore not a lack of scholarship. It is the absence of an account that explains how uncertain scientific knowledge becomes religious guidance, how cooperation with the state is presented to Muslim publics, and why the same institutional endorsement may strengthen authority in one setting while damaging it in another.

This study addresses that problem through a comparative analysis of institutional communication in Indonesia, Turkey, and Egypt. It argues that Islamic institutions perform a dual act of translation rather than merely endorsing policy. Scientific knowledge is turned into reasons that can be understood as religiously binding, while Islamic norms are reformulated into guidance that can operate within public policy. The process depends on visible reasoning, credible use of expertise, and enough institutional distance to prevent cooperation from appearing as political absorption. Authority distance names that space. Authority collateralization describes the reputational risk institutions assume when they lend moral legitimacy to contested policy. The article asks how institutional settings shape the consolidation, delegation, and fragmentation of religious authority during public controversy.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative comparative design based on document analysis. It examined how the Majelis Ulama Indonesia, the Diyanet, Al Azhar, and Dar al Ifta communicated religious guidance during public controversies associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The cases were selected purposively because they represent different institutional settings and provide sufficient publicly accessible material for comparison. Indonesia has a plural field of religious authority, Turkey has a more centralized religious bureaucracy, and Egypt has several institutions with different scholarly and administrative roles. These institutional differences provided the basis for comparing how religious messages were produced, justified, and communicated. Comparative qualitative research is useful when systematic cross-case interpretation must remain sensitive to contextual differences (Wagenaar et al., 2022). Concepts of crisis communication, institutional trust, legitimacy, and religious authority were

used as the analytical framework. The study did not seek to measure public trust or establish a causal relationship between institutional messages and public behaviour.

The unit of analysis was an individual institutional communication document (Dalglish et al., 2020). The primary data consisted of fatwas, sermons, worship guidelines, public statements, and vaccination rulings published between March 2020 and December 2021. Documents were collected from the official websites and accessible archives of the four institutions. Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books. Purposive sampling was used to select documents whose publisher and date could be verified, whose full text was accessible, and whose content directly addressed religious guidance, public health restrictions, vaccination, mosque policy, or institutional justification (Campbell et al., 2020).

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The first stage identified recurring themes concerning danger, religious obligation, public responsibility, expert knowledge, and relations with the state. The second stage compared these themes with the operational concepts used in this study, including epistemic competence, normative integrity, pastoral responsiveness, epistemic delegation, authority distance, and authority collateralization. The analysis was first conducted within each institutional case and then followed by cross-case comparison to identify similarities and differences across the three countries. Official statements were checked against academic studies and independent reports when such sources were available. Theme development remained iterative, and material that did not fit the dominant pattern was retained rather than discarded (Byrne, 2022). Since the study relied on published documents, its conclusions concern communicated trustworthiness and institutional claims to religious authority rather than direct measurements of public trust, individual belief, or behavioural compliance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Translating Medical Risk into Religious Obligation

A vaccine may be religiously acceptable and still require a separate medical judgment about safety. The same problem appeared when mosques were closed or funeral practices were altered. Physicians and public health agencies could describe infection, transmission, and the risks created by gathering, but they could not determine the religious status of Friday prayer or burial obligations. Islamic institutions entered at that point. Their role was to decide what medical evidence meant for religious conduct. This division of responsibility appears across the Indonesian, Turkish, and Egyptian documents, although it was not always explained with equal clarity. When the boundary was visible, the institution could show why outside expertise was necessary and where its own authority began. When it was blurred, state policy and medical advice could appear to receive religious force without independent evaluation. The difference matters because communicated trustworthiness depends not only on the conclusion but also on whether the reasoning behind it can be followed. A decisive ruling may still look unconvincing when the evidentiary path remains hidden or when institutional competence is stretched beyond its proper field. (Yezli & Khan, 2021)

The Indonesian material makes the distinction unusually clear. MUI did not treat halal status and medical safety as one judgment. Its ruling on Sinovac addressed purity and permissibility, while safety remained dependent on competent medical authorities. This arrangement limited MUI's claim to biomedical knowledge without weakening its religious role. The AstraZeneca ruling was more difficult. MUI identified a religious problem in the production process, yet allowed use because vaccination was considered urgent, alternatives were limited, and health authorities warned of the consequences of delay. The ruling therefore preserved the original concern while allowing emergency use (Kadir, 2026b). That position was legally defensible within Islamic reasoning, but it was communicatively demanding. People had to understand why a product could remain problematic at one level and still become permitted in practice. The institution's credibility therefore rested on whether it clearly explained how necessity, scarcity, and medical risk changed the practical ruling without erasing the religious objection. It also had to prevent temporary permission from being read as a reversal of its earlier moral assessment. (Amin et al., 2024)

This distinction was not a minor technical detail. A halal ruling could easily be mistaken for proof of medical safety, while regulatory approval could be read as sufficient religious authorization. The Indonesian case shows that institutional limits may support credibility only when they are explained in terms that non-specialist audiences can follow. Otherwise, the separation of authority remains visible

to jurists and regulators but unclear to the wider public, especially when technical language obscures who made which specific institutional judgment. (Kurniawan et al., 2022)

Diyanet operated within a more centralized structure. Its early statements linked warnings about transmission and crowded spaces to the protection of life and the duty not to expose others to harm. Suspending congregational prayer was presented as a religiously responsible response rather than a mere administrative order. The national mosque network gave Diyanet speed and consistency, yet the same structure made its relation to government harder to separate. Health policy and religious guidance moved closely together. This supported coordination, but it left less room for audiences to see where administrative instruction ended and independent religious judgment began when official communication offered little account of internal deliberation. (Altınordu, 2021)

In Egypt, medical consultation carried a different institutional weight. Al Azhar used the protection of life to support distancing, staying at home, and suspending collective worship when specialists considered gathering dangerous. Dar al Ifta was more explicit about the boundary of competence. Medical advice, it argued, should come from qualified specialists, while jurists determined how such advice affected worship. Its discussion of spaced prayer rows followed that sequence. Infection control established the practical problem, then jurisprudential reasoning assessed whether modified alignment remained acceptable. The documents therefore presented specialization as part of responsible religious judgment rather than as a concession to secular knowledge or institutional weakness. (Muslimin et al., 2021)

The cases converged on the need for expert knowledge, but they organized it differently. MUI separated religious status from medical approval and used necessity to resolve the tension. Diyanet incorporated health advice into a centralized bureaucracy whose messages supported state measures. Al Azhar and Dar al Ifta divided scholarly endorsement from specific legal explanation (Kadir, 2026a). None of these models automatically created trust. What mattered was whether audiences could see who established the facts, who interpreted their religious consequences, and whether the final guidance resulted from evaluation rather than imitation. Access to experts was not enough. The route by which expertise entered religious reasoning had to remain visible. (Taufiq et al., 2025)

What emerges is a form of epistemic delegation. Religious institutions accepted medical authority over transmission and prevention while retaining responsibility for the religious consequences. Delegation worked best when its limits were stated openly. It became less convincing when administrative decisions acquired religious weight without visible assessment. Medical risk became a moral reason for restraint, while protection of life became guidance that public authorities could apply. This dual translation does not prove that Muslim publics trusted these institutions. It shows how institutions tried to appear worthy of trust by acknowledging limits, carefully coordinating knowledge, and explaining why temporary changes in worship remained religiously defensible. (Dahlan et al., 2021)

2. Institutional Trust between Pastoral Care and Political Proximity

Closing a mosque did not remove the need for prayer, reassurance, or communal belonging. It changed the way those needs could be met. MUI directed worshippers in areas of serious transmission to pray at home and later issued guidance for Ramadan and Eid. Diyanet moved parts of its religious programming to television, radio, and digital platforms. Dar al Ifta explained that a person prevented from attending the mosque for a legitimate health reason could still receive the reward associated with congregational worship. These responses did more than attach gentle language to restrictive policy. They tried to preserve religious meaning when familiar practices were no longer possible. A prohibition may be legally clear while remaining difficult to live with, especially when worship is tied to routine, place, and social presence. Pastoral responsiveness therefore appeared in the provision of practical alternatives and in the effort to prevent temporary withdrawal from being understood as religious abandonment. This did not establish that audiences trusted the institutions involved. It showed how those institutions tried to make compliance religiously intelligible without dismissing what worshippers had lost. (Piwko, 2021)

The usefulness of such guidance depended on its level of detail. Dar al Ifta did not simply advise people to remain at home. It clarified that Friday prayer should not be recreated privately and that the noon prayer should be performed instead. Diyanet's Ramadan broadcasts retained recitation, preaching, and family religious conversation, although they could not reproduce the social experience of communal worship. Details of this kind reduced uncertainty when general policy entered daily religious practice.

Care did not replace legal reasoning. It became visible when institutions anticipated the practical questions created by their own restrictions and offered answers that ordinary households could use.

Indonesia presented a less uniform setting. MUI could issue a national fatwa, but local scholars, mosque committees, and large Islamic organisations retained influence over practice. Fatwa Number 14 adjusted worship guidance according to local transmission and individual exposure rather than imposing one rule everywhere. That flexibility was reasonable in a geographically uneven crisis, though it required careful explanation. Different local assessments could produce different practices in nearby communities. MUI could provide a common legal frame, yet it could not fully determine how that frame would be interpreted, combined with other guidance, or applied by local religious authorities during a rapidly changing emergency. (Regus et al., 2022)

Diyanet's national reach created another balance. Sermons linked precaution with cleanliness, patience, prayer, and the duty not to expose others to harm. Local offices then moved parts of Ramadan life into broadcasts, recorded recitations, online conversations, and telephone contact. The network made the response coherent and widely available. Even so, the same administrative reach reduced the visible distance between religious judgment and government policy. Diyanet operated within a state religious bureaucracy whose messages closely followed official measures. This does not mean that its guidance lacked religious reasoning, nor does it prove that audiences understood it as political instruction. The documents, however, offered little access to internal disagreement, consultation, or revision. Coordination was therefore easier to see than independent deliberation. The institution's communicative strength also produced reputational exposure because the authority of its pastoral message remained connected to the credibility of the administrative policy it supported. That tension was structural, not accidental, and it could not be resolved merely by adding religious language to government instruction or repeating official claims through sermons. (Aksoy, 2023)

Egyptian institutions combined restriction with a more explicit language of reassurance. Al Azhar described staying at home as a religious responsibility while encouraging solidarity and family contact without physical gathering. Dar al Ifta explained the religious value of compliance in more specific terms. A person prevented by a legitimate excuse could retain the reward linked to mosque attendance, whereas gathering outside closed mosques was treated as harm rather than devotion. The distinction preserved the purpose of worship while rejecting a form that endangered others. It also allowed restraint to be presented as a moral choice rather than mere submission to policy.

Changes in policy tested normative integrity more directly than the initial restrictions. Reopening did not necessarily contradict closure because risk levels, medical knowledge, and administrative capacity could change. The problem appeared when institutions altered their position without explaining what had changed. Across the cases, the more defensible messages retained the same concern with preventing harm while adjusting the rule to new conditions. Consistency therefore did not require one unchanging decision. It required a stable standard for revision and enough explanation for that standard to remain understandable in public, particularly when reopening occurred unevenly and health advice continued to change across different regions. (Azwar & Rinaldi, 2024)

Care and political proximity created different risks. MUI's plural setting left room for disagreement, though coordination remained uneven. Diyanet gained coherence through bureaucracy, but that coherence increased exposure to perceptions of state alignment. Al Azhar and Dar al Ifta could preserve symbolic independence through differentiated scholarly roles while supporting restrictions. None of these arrangements guaranteed trust. Authority distance meant the visible ability to cooperate without surrendering judgment. Where care, explanation, and independent reasoning appeared together, the documents offered a stronger basis for trustworthiness, although actual trust remained beyond this study.

3. Public Controversy and the Redistribution of Religious Authority

Disagreement became most consequential when it challenged who could legitimately define responsible Muslim conduct. A dispute over mosque closure or vaccination could begin with medical facts, then move into jurisprudence, political trust, or suspicion about institutional motives. Indonesian debates exposed this overlap. Resistance to restrictions was sometimes framed as defence of faith, while disagreement inside the MUI network over AstraZeneca showed that recognised authorities could reach different conclusions without rejecting vaccination itself. In Egypt, Al Azhar and Dar al Ifta treated public prayer gatherings, rumours, and unauthorised medical claims as risks to life rather than ordinary differences of opinion. Diyanet faced another problem because its religious guidance moved closely

with government policy. Formal mandate still mattered in all three settings, yet it no longer settled the issue. Institutions had to show why their procedures, expertise, and legal reasoning deserved greater weight than competing interpretations. Repeated clarification did not mean that authority had disappeared. It meant that authority had become more openly exposed to public scrutiny, especially when silence or delay created room for alternative explanations. (Hamdi, 2022; Svenbro & Wester, 2023)

MUI's clarification of the AstraZeneca ruling had to address two questions at once. The central body considered the production process religiously problematic, while the East Java branch relied on a different juristic reading of material transformation. This was not a clash between qualified authority and obvious misinformation. It was disagreement within an established institutional network. MUI defended its position by explaining method, necessity, and the limited scope of emergency permission. The response improved procedural clarity, although it did not remove the possibility that non-specialist audiences would find the distinction difficult to follow. The clarification therefore defended authority through visible reasoning rather than enforced institutional uniformity. (Faidah, 2022)

Several recognised sources of guidance remained active in Indonesia. That plurality could support correction and local adaptation, but it also made final authority less obvious when national fatwas, local scholars, organisations, and digital preachers entered the same dispute. Fragmentation did not arise simply because different views existed. It became more likely when rival conclusions circulated without a clear account of jurisdiction, method, or evidence, particularly when brief claims travelled faster than institutional explanations through public media. The problem was explaining why they differed. (Tabaika et al., 2025)

Diyanet's centralised structure reduced contradiction within the official religious system and allowed guidance to move quickly through mosques, sermons, and national channels. The same arrangement created another kind of exposure. Because its messages closely supported government measures, criticism of public policy could reach the institution even when its theological reasoning remained defensible. This does not prove that Diyanet lost legitimacy, nor does it establish that audiences treated every sermon as political instruction. The documents simply made coordination more visible than internal debate, independent review, or disagreement. As a result, the institution's authority became tied more closely to the credibility of the policy it helped justify. Cooperation was unavoidable during a health emergency, yet the public record offered limited evidence of the conditions under which Diyanet might qualify, revise, or oppose an official measure. Its communicative strength therefore carried reputational risk. Religious legitimacy supported state policy, while the institution accepted part of the controversy attached to that policy. The alignment was visible. The reasoning behind its limits was less so. That imbalance shaped its public vulnerability. (Aşkın, 2021)

Egyptian institutions worked through a different division of responsibility. Al Azhar defended broad religious principles, while Dar al Ifta addressed more specific legal and practical disputes. Their responses to outdoor congregations, denial of contagion, false remedies, and claims of divine punishment did not rest on official status alone. They explained why such interpretations could cause harm and why medical claims required qualified expertise. Correction was strongest when the danger of an alternative view was made intelligible. Labelling a position as deviant without explanation would have offered a weaker basis for authority. Institutional differentiation helped, but it still required coherence across their public interventions.

Digital circulation complicated every case, although the available data do not show which actor had the greatest influence. Official institutions no longer controlled when a controversy began, how a ruling was shortened, or which explanation reached audiences first. Studies of Islamic discourse on Instagram in Indonesia show that social media can become an arena where religious authority is actively contested and reconfigured (Syatar et al., 2024). Visibility therefore changed the conditions of contestation, but it did not establish competence. Formal status still mattered, yet it had to work alongside speed, accessibility, and public intelligibility. Faster messages cannot be assumed to have produced deeper trust. Nor can this study infer that accessibility consistently displaced scholarly qualification in practice.

No single outcome followed from these controversies. Authority became firmer when clarification exposed expertise, procedure, and legal reasoning to inspection. It fragmented when competing interpretations circulated without intelligible boundaries between their sources. It became collateralised when religious credibility was tied too closely to state policy. These patterns do not

measure public trust. Taken with the earlier findings, they show that religious authority under crisis required coordinated knowledge, visible care, and cooperation that did not erase institutional judgment. Crisis therefore forced Islamic institutions to explain how their authority was produced and limited. Formal mandate remained relevant, but durable authority depended on reasoning that could withstand public challenge. (Abdullah et al., 2023)

CONCLUSION

Institutional trust during public controversy was not produced by religious status alone. Across Indonesia, Turkey, and Egypt, Islamic institutions appeared more credible when they made the limits of their knowledge visible, explained how medical evidence entered religious reasoning, and offered guidance that recognised the disruption of worship and communal life. The comparison also showed that institutional structure shaped how this work was performed. MUI operated through a plural field that allowed adaptation but made coordination uneven. Diyanet communicated with greater consistency through a centralised bureaucracy, although this also tied its public position more closely to state policy. Al Azhar and Dar al Ifta relied on differentiated scholarly roles that strengthened legal explanation and moral reassurance. Controversy did not simply weaken authority. It changed the conditions under which authority had to be defended. Formal mandate remained important, but it was no longer enough when procedures, expertise, and political proximity were openly questioned.

The findings support the idea of dual legitimacy translation, through which medical knowledge was turned into religiously meaningful guidance while Islamic norms were reformulated for public crisis policy. Authority distance explains why cooperation with the state remained necessary but had to preserve visible institutional judgment. Authority collateralisation describes the reputational risk created when religious legitimacy became too closely attached to contested policy. These concepts do not show that public trust increased or declined because the study examined documents rather than audience responses. They identify how institutions projected trustworthiness and where their authority became vulnerable. Islamic crisis communication should therefore be understood not merely as the delivery of fatwas or official advice, but as a public process in which knowledge, care, political cooperation, and the right to interpret Islam are repeatedly tested.

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