# An Examination of Spiritual Practices during the Movement Control Order (MCO) and their Long-Term Impacts on Behavior

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## ABSTRACT

The pandemic significantly affected Malaysia's economy, resulting in a GDP decline of 17.1%. A survey indicated that 67.8% of enterprises saw no sales during the Movement Control Order (MCO), with 92.8% of them being small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This study examines the spiritual activities of UTHM Muslims following the MCO, emphasizing personal and ethical impacts. Participants consisted of UTHM staff, interviewed mostly two years after the stay-at-home order (March 2020) and one year following the conclusion of the MCO (ending May 17, 2021). The results indicated that participants aged 31-40 exhibited a substantially higher interest in online lectures (0.43) compared to other age groups (0.18). Senior officers favored online seminars over their counterparts at other grade levels. Male individuals participated more in family religious activities (mean 0.46) than female participants (0.21). Age, number of offspring, and educational level did not significantly influence familial religious practices. Self-reflection religious activities were minimal during and after the MCO, with merely 25% of participants engaging in frequent practice. The MCO enhanced individual resilience and awareness of expanded charitable capacities via online lectures, electronic donations, and social media initiatives. Family interactions resumed normally following the MCO.

**Keywords-** Spritual Practices, Movement Control Order, Long Term, Impact, Behaviour

## INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has adversely impacted Malaysia's economy. Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP) has decreased by 17.1%. A recent poll indicated that 67.8% of enterprises experienced no sales during the MC, with 92.8% of these entities classified as SMEs. Most businesses must depend on their savings for sustenance and are projected to have a survival time of less than six months. Nearly fifty percent of the workforce were unemployed, and 35.5% of those remaining faced a decrease in income. The pandemic has also affected Malaysia socially. Frontline workers experienced burnout due to job expectations, resulting in psychological tiredness and ultimately diminished work performance (Nienhaus and Hod 2020). Between 18 March and 30 April 2020, 526 investigative files were initiated about domestic violence in Malaysia.

This study seeks to investigate the impact of the spiritual practices of UTHM Muslims on personal development and morality following the MCO. Numerous previous academics have demonstrated the correlation between religion, personality, and morality. A study by Batmaz and Meral (2022) is included among them. Hasan Batmaz demonstrated a correlation between an individual's religious values and psychological resilience to stress induced by the pandemic. Pirutinsky et al. (2020) similarly observed that individuals with robust religious convictions exhibited greater resilience in preserving mental health during the pandemic. Comparable findings were also reported by Sharma and Singh (2019), Kowalczyk et al. (2020), and Schnabel and Schieman (2021). This suggests a relationship between an individual's religious values and their mental health.

But those analyses were done using samples from other countries, and there have never been any studies done with samples from Malaysia again. Moreover, these previous studies assess the overall level of religiosity and do not examine the specific aspects of certain Muslim practices. Every religious practice affects a person in a different way. Prayer of repentance and prayer of *istiharah* are two ways to talk to God about your problems and weaknesses. Night prayers, donating to the poor, and fasting are more about being more independent and sacrificing for Allah. Additionally, congregational prayer, reading the Al-Quran with the family, reciting Tahlil in the mosque, and attending Majlis and lectures online are more social and activity-based forms of worship. Each of these rituals affects a Muslim's religious and spiritual beliefs in a distinct way, and of course, it also affects their morality and personality.

Upon the issuance of the Movement Control Order by the National Security Council, congregational prayers at mosques and suraus were restricted, and religious activities that did not adhere to the Standard Operating Procedure were prohibited. This transforms certain religious practices into a digital format, with religious services conducted individually or at home. This transforms certain religious behaviors from a communal format, such as reciting Yasin and participating in collective prayers, to a digital format conducted at home, however some traditions, such night prayers, remain inherently individual. The practice of worship is intrinsically linked to an individual's spiritual value; thus, it can be posited that the transition from communal worship to digital and home-based forms will also affect an individual's spiritual value. This will consequently influence the character and demeanor of a Muslim.

This study intends to examine the spiritual activities of UTHM Muslims with their families during the Movement Control Order (MCO) and the subsequent effects on personality and morals following the conclusion of the MCO.

**Theoretical Framework**

There are four main elements in this study, namely

i.   Existing Situation of the Respondent

The respondent's present status is the same as when the data was collected. Age, gender, marital status, work title, and grade level position all play a role in this current predicament. This item was selected based on prior research demonstrating that age, gender, marital status, job description, and position exert distinct psychological influences on managing stress and challenges during the pandemic (Bodecka et al. 2021; Liu et al. 2021).

ii.   Spiritual Practices

Spiritual practice will act as a strategy (coping strategy) or meditating role (meditating role) against the problems faced during the PKP. Spiritual practice is the practice of worship done by the respondent. Spiritual practices in affecting the morals and personality of a Muslim, whether in the form of It is divided into 4 forms of spiritual practice, namely:

a.   Discipline in spiritual practice

Discipline in spiritual practice includes early prayer and fasting.

b.   Solitary practice

Private practice includes night prayer, *istiharah* prayer and Dhuha prayer.

c.   Family practice

The practice with the family is the practice of praying in congregation, the practice of reading Yassin or Tahlil in congregation.

d.   Spiritual Practices Online

Spiritual practice online is like listening to lectures online.

iii.   Sources of problems as a result of the MCO.

The current situation of the respondent will have a different effect will be dealt with when. Individuals will use spiritual practice as a strategy to manage problems and use it as a tool to calm the mind. Every problem that arises during the PKP will give a different response to each individual. There are four sources of problems when the MCO is implemented.

a. Life threatening.

Life-threatening crises, such as natural disasters and pandemic outbreaks, trigger long-term fear and concern about the health effects of the resulting crisis. Accordingly, life threats trigger severe anxiety due to the awareness by individuals that their death is inevitable (Vítor Alexandre Coelho, George G Bear, and Patrícia Brás, 2020).

b. Basic psychological needs.

Movement control orders may hinder psychological well-being by preventing individuals from pursuing specific goals related to basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy and social relatedness. As a result, people may experience goal obstacles or, which can increase their psychological vulnerability (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

c. Livelihood and financial concerns.

Dealing with real or perceived lack of resources is demanding and may inhibit optimal cognitive functioning. Empirical research shows that lack of resources affects the decision-making process and reduces the function of executive control. Therefore, there is a clear need for humans to find sustenance, find income, and support themselves and their families( Anandi Mani et al.,2013, Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir,2014).

iv.   Moral and Personal Effects.

The existing situation of the respondent, the source of the problem, and the use of spiritual practice as a problem management strategy or the role of meditation will be used to see the effect on two things, namely the respondent's character and personality.

a.   Morality means the nature embedded in the soul, which produces an unnecessary response to the consideration of thought. This means that morality is first of all a constant, unchanging and repeated response in the same form. Both morals are actions without further consideration, i.e. without external influences such as partner pressure, or parental advice (Abuddin Nata, 2018).

b.   Personality is the characteristic of a person who has been integrated with himself to be his character. Individuals are evaluated with considerations in interacting, achievements in life, autonomy in decision-making, security awareness.

## METHODOLOGY

### Respondent

Participants were sourced from the personnel of Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia. The majority of interviews were conducted approximately two years following the stay-at-home order issued in March 2020 and one year after the movement control order concluded on May 17, 2021. The purpose of that phase was to guarantee that the impacts of the pandemic and the movement control order were sustainable rather than immediate and transient consequences of the control measures. Participants were solicited by email, text

messaging, and snowball sampling methods. The sole criterion for participation is that the responder was employed as staff at Tun Hussein Onn University at the time of data collection.

## Procedure

All interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams and recorded. The recordings were then transcribed using Malaya-Speech, an artificial intelligence-based transcription service, and verified for accuracy manually. Participation is voluntary, and participants are not compensated.

## Data collection

A semi-structured interview was designed with the aim of assessing the impact of the MCO on staff morale and personality quantitatively and qualitatively. In addition, the interview aims to identify the coping strategy and mediating role of spiritual practices in facing the problems that arise during the Movement Control Order. The first respondents were asked whether their attitudes and personalities had become better, worse, or remained the same because of the PANDEMIC outbreak. Feedback on the pandemic and the impact of MOC on attitudes and behavior was elicited using a 5-point scale: 0 (Very Negative), 1 (Negative), 2 (None), 3 (Positive), and 4 (Very Positive). Second, for those who show moral and personal changes during the pandemic and movement control orders, we question the coping strategies and reasons behind those changes. Third, we then study the changes in moral and personal through the PKP problems faced by the respondents, namely life threats, basic psychological needs, and financial concerns. Next, how respondents use spiritual practices in overcoming the above problems is identified.

# RESULT

## Impact of MCO On Religious Activities

During the survey, 118 responses were received, out of which 118 (93.22%) consented and were complete in all respects. The respondents' ages range from 21 years old to 60 years old and above. Responses consist of 49 male participants (41.53%) and 61 female participants (51.69%). The majority of the responses are from married couples, with 93 responses (78.81%), with 13 responses from single participants (2.54%) and 3 from divorced participants (11.01%). Among married and divorced responses, more than half of participants have more than 3 children, with a number of 63 responses (53.39%), followed by not more than 2 children at 29 responses (24.57%). None of the participants are below 21 years old or above 60 years old, since all the respondents are from University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia's staff (Table 1).During the survey, 118 responses were received, out of which 118 (93.22%) consented and were complete in all respects. The respondents' ages range from 21 years old to 60 years old and above. Responses consist of 49 male participants (41.53%) and 61 female participants (51.69%). The majority of the responses are from married couples, with 93 responses (78.81%), with 13 responses from single participants (2.54%) and 3 from divorced participants (11.01%). Among married and divorced responses, more than half of participants have more than 3 children, with a number of 63 responses (53.39%), followed by not more than 2 children at 29 responses (24.57%). None of the participants are below 21 years old or above 60 years old, since all the respondents are from University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia's staff (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of the Collected Data

| Variable | | Frequency (N=118) | Percent (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 49 | 41.5254237 |
| | Female | 61 | 51.6949153 |
| Marriage Status | Married | 93 | 78.8135593 |
| | Single | 13 | 11.0169492 |

|  |  |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | Divorced | 3 | 2.54237288 |
| Age (Years) | 20 Years Old and Below | 0 | 0 |
|  | 21 - 30 Years | 15 | 12.7118644 |
|  | 31 - 40 Years | 42 | 35.5932203 |
|  | 41 - 50 Years | 43 | 36.440678 |
|  | 51 - 60 Years | 10 | 8.47457627 |
|  | 61 Years old and Above | 0 | 0 |
| Number of Children | No Children | 18 | 15.2542373 |
|  | Not more than 2 | 29 | 24.5762712 |
|  | 3 and above | 63 | 53.3898305 |
| Gred Level | Assistant Officer (26-11) | 24 | 20.3389831 |
|  | Associate Officer (27-40) | 27 | 22.8813559 |
|  | Officer ( 41-48) | 26 | 22.0338983 |
|  | Senior Executive (51-Jusa) | 33 | 27.9661017 |

In the realm of Ibadah, the majority of participants perceive discipline as adherence to prayer times, whether for themselves or their families. Male participants exhibited a 10% higher level of discipline than female participants. The age and number of youngsters in this study do not indicate any variation in punishment regarding Ibadah. The grade level significantly influenced discipline in Ibadah, with Assistant Officers and Senior Officers exhibiting 10% greater discipline than Associate Officers and Officers. This aligns with Hasna's findings (2003). The Movement Control Order has restricted attendance at Islamic lectures, resulting in an increase in participation in online lectures. Our study revealed that individuals aged 31-40 exhibit a considerably greater interest (0.43) in attending online lectures compared to their counterparts of other age groups (0.18). Senior officers favor online lectures more than their counterparts at other grade levels. This aligns with the findings of Katoch and Rana (2023). Male individuals allocate more time to religious activities with their families than female participants, with a mean value of 0.46 for males compared to 0.21 for females. Nonetheless, age range, number of children, and grade level exert no substantial influence on a family's religious practices. This is documented in a study by Kasielska-Trojan et al. (2022). Participation in self-reflection religious activities is minimal during and following the MCO period. Across all categories, around 25 percent of participants have regularly engaged in self-reflective religious activities, including *Taubat* and *Dhuha* prayers. This, however, contradicts the findings of.

Table 2: Frequency of Religious Activities at Home by Type

| No | Theme | Variable | Frequnecy | | Percent (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Discipline In Ibadah | **Do you pray five times at early of stipulated time?** | Frequently | 97 | 88.18182 |
|  |  |  | Seldomly | 0 | 0 |
|  |  |  | Sometime | 13 | 11.81818 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Do you practice fasting on Monday and Thursday?** | Frequently | 33 | 30 |
| | | | Seldomly | 34 | 30.90909 |
| | | | Sometime | 43 | 39.09091 |
| | | **Do you make sure your family members perform the five daily prayers at the beginning of time?** | Frequently | 97 | 88.18182 |
| | | | Seldomly | 5 | 4.545455 |
| | | | Sometime | 8 | 7.272727 |
| 2 | Online Learning | **Do you follow religious lectures online?** | Frequently | 70 | 63.63636 |
| | | | Seldomly | 12 | 10.90909 |
| | | | Sometime | 28 | 25.45455 |
| 3 | Family Activities | **Do you hold a knowledge ceremony or tazkirah with your family?** | Frequently | 30 | 27.27273 |
| | | | Seldomly | 44 | 40 |
| | | | Sometime | 36 | 32.72727 |
| | | **Do you pray five times in congregation?** | Frequently | 71 | 64.54545 |
| | | | Seldomly | 14 | 12.72727 |
| | | | Sometime | 25 | 22.72727 |
| | | **Are you an imam for congregational prayers with your family?** | Frequently | 46 | 41.81818 |
| | | | Seldomly | 52 | 47.27273 |
| | | | Sometime | 12 | 10.90909 |
| | | **Do you read the Quran with your family?** | Frequently | 71 | 64.54545 |
| | | | Seldomly | 17 | 15.45455 |
| | | | Sometime | 22 | 20 |
| | | **Do you have tahlil with your family?** | Frequently | 33 | 30 |
| | | | Seldomly | 42 | 38.18182 |
| | | | Sometime | 35 | 31.81818 |
| 4 | Self Reflection | **Do you perform Sunat Dhuha prayer?** | Frequently | 55 | 50 |
| | | | Seldomly | 27 | 24.54545 |
| | | | Sometime | 28 | 25.45455 |
| | | **Do you perform the Sunat** | Frequently | 50 | 45.45455 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Tahajjud prayer? | Seldomly | 33 | 30 |
| | | Sometime | 27 | 24.54545 |
| | Have you ever read a prayer to avoid plagues, plagues and so on? | Frequently | 80 | 72.72727 |
| | | Seldomly | 10 | 9.090909 |
| | | Sometime | 20 | 18.18182 |

## Impact of MCO On Attitude And Behaviour

### Painful Experience During MCO Increase Resilience.

The Movement Control Order affects many people in Malaysia. The *tabligh* group was one of the first groups to be blamed for spreading the virus in Malaysia. From February 27 to March 1, 2020, a group of Muslims named *tabligh* conducted a religious conference that 14,500 people went to. 674 of them (4.74%) later tested positive for the virus. The percentage is little compared to the number of confirmed cases linked to a Chinese traveler, but the harm to the *tabligh* group's reputation has been very bad. Nevertheless, as one of our respondents is an active member of the *tabligh*, the group is handling the situation well and coming up with peaceful ways to respond. The *tabligh* organization has provided a stimulus package for individuals with confirmed cases related to the religious conference. This package includes financial assistance throughout the quarantine period and compensation for those whose work was adversely affected by the economic downturn. *The tabligh* then expands their *da'wah* and charitable activity outside the borders of their hometown to include things like internet lectures, flood relief efforts, and wired donations. *Tabligh* groups show that they have a lot of support from other members of their organization, which can help them overcome a stigma that used to make them look bad and make them look better. The study also shows that *tabligh* people are more resilient when they go through an unpleasant experience.

### Extended Reach of Charity Network Through Digitalization

*Before the MCO, our charity works only reach people that close to us, and people we know. However, during MCO, we found out that we actually have a longer rearch of charity work through digital network. Our charity work also does not limit to donation, it is more in variety and wider in reach.*

One respondent emphasized the aforementioned statement, which we saw as an enhancement in the respondent's attitude and behavior during the Movement Control Order. The restrictions on mobility during the movement control order have constrained charitable activities; nonetheless, with digitalization, these initiatives have evolved into diverse formats and expanded their impact. One of our respondents, through digitization, is able to discover and assist immigrants stranded in Malaysia without employment or healthcare support, residing deep within the forest. These immigrants are unemployed, as the majority are engaged in blue-collar occupations, such as farming and construction. During the Movement Control Order, particularly the initial phase, the majority of blue-collar jobs were temporarily suspended, resulting in this immigrant being unemployed. A number of them reside deep within the farm, distant from any healthcare services, and lacking financial resources, they are unable to access this remote healthcare. One of our respondents was able to identify these immigrants and assist in organizing a fund and a group of volunteers to provide financial assistance and healthcare support. Awareness of this initiative, facilitated by digitalization, enhances volunteer participation and amplifies the collection of online donations. The movement control order has shown that it enhances an individual's charitable outreach, indicating an improvement in their attitudes and behaviors towards others.

### Impact toward Family Interaction

It has been shown that communal spiritual activities like congregational prayer and reading the Quran in a group can make family interactions better. Parents must set an example since when they are home with their

kids, they are always watching how they act. The parent also grew more involved in things like schoolwork, problems with the teacher, and punishment in *ibadah*.

*I see the practice of worshiping with the family during the MCO as a positive thing. During the PKP I was able to pray together with my children and husband, I was able to teach recitation and read the Quran*

However, after movement restrictions end, so does the family interaction among parent, spouse, and children. During MCO, time is spent towards being together with the family. However, after MCO ended, time is being spent on school and work and not together inside the house.

## CONCLUSIONS

The influence of MCO on an individual's attitude and behavior towards others is analyzed. MCO is found to enhance an individual's resilience, especially when that individual is engaged in a dynamic organization. MCO has also been shown to enhance awareness of the potential for extended charitable outreach, whether through online lectures, electronic donations, or social media volunteer efforts. However, regarding familial interactions, it has been seen that conditions have returned to normal following the MCO. This is due to parents, spouses, and children no longer having the privilege of being together during the MCO.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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