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Construction of Pilgrim Framework-Information Seeking Based on New Norm Selection Criteria of Hajj

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Abstract

The pilgrimage quota for each country is 0.1% of the total population. The demand to perform Hajj increases yearly and demands more quotas, but it is limited due to providing exemplary services and maintaining comfort for pilgrims. The selection process is challenging and informative. Upon registration, the Malaysian waiting period was between 89 and 116 years. With COVID-19 and the new norm, the waiting period will be much longer, making things worse and more ridiculous. This paper explains and proposes constructing a proper framework for fulfilling the need and selecting future candidates for Hajj in Malaysia.

Keywords: Islamic pilgrim, information seeking, hajj selection, coronavirus

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1.0 Introduction

Ibadah is one of the essential components in Islamic teachings, other than aqidah (belief) and akhlaq (moral). Its importance is determined by the purpose of the creation of humans, namely, to be devoted to Allah. Ibadah is very important in fulfilling quality of life as it can control individual behavior, gain peace of mind, control emotions, and become increasingly diligent in ibadah (Hamjah et al., 2015). Hajj is one of the ibadah and one of the Five Pillars of Islam, alongside Shahadah, Salat, Zakat, and Sawm, or fasting of Ramadan. The COVID-19 pandemic affected the 2020 Hajj (pilgrimage), where millions of Muslims from around the world visit Mecca and Medina every year during the Hajj season for a week. Over 2,400,000 pilgrims attended Hajj in 2019. Due to the highly contagious nature of COVID-19 in crowded places, various international travel restrictions, and social distancing recommendations, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah advised Muslims to postpone their pilgrimage until the pandemic was mitigated (BBC News, 2020). However, in June 2020, the Ministry opened Hajj to people of all nationalities residing in Saudi Arabia, with foreigners still banned from attending to ensure pilgrims' safety and prevent the transmission of COVID-19 (Alkhshali & Register, 2020; Saudi Press Agency, 2020).

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2.0 Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing global pandemic caused by coronavirus disease 2019. The virus outbreak was first noted in Wuhan, China, in early December 2019. On January 30, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organisation and was declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020. The transmission of COVID-19 occurs mainly through personal contact with a carrier of the virus, which makes it highly contagious in small spaces where human connection is inevitable. COVID-19 can be transmitted through contaminated objects touched or coughed on by an infected person (World Health Organisation, 2020). This paper aims to propose a pilgrim framework-based selection criteria for hajj in Malaysia.

2.1 Historical cancellations of Hajj

Hajj (pilgrimage) has been canceled 40 times in the history of Islam due to disease outbreaks, political disagreements, and battles (Chitwood, 2020). In 930-940 CE (318-328 AH), Hajj was canceled due to the Qarmatian attack, which led to the murder of 30,000 pilgrims and the looting of the Black Stone (The Islamic Information, 2020; The Muslim Vibe, 2020). In 1831, Hajj was suspended after the arrival of Indian pilgrims in Mecca led to the outbreak of a new plague, which is claimed to have killed more than half of the pilgrims in Mecca. The first cholera outbreak in Mecca occurred in 1846, killing over 15,000 and causing a citywide plague until 1850. A second cholera outbreak happened in 1858, leading to pilgrims being quarantined inside Hajj camps in Egypt (Chitwood, 2020; ArabiaWeather, 2020).

2.2 Hajj 2020-2022

Saudi Arabia closed the two holy sites of Mecca and Medina to halt the spread of the virus but reopened them in early March. Later, measures were taken by the Saudi government to mitigate an outbreak of COVID-19, such as imposing a 24-hour curfew in Mecca and Medina (Gulfnews, 2020; Reuters, 2020). Saudi authorities banned foreign visitors for the second consecutive year and limited the pilgrimage to 60,000. It also imposed a condition that participants between 18 and 65 be vaccinated and without chronic diseases (Al Jazeera, 2021; National Public Radio, 2021). Saudi authorities announced that Hajj will reopen in 2022. The essential requirement for pilgrims would be to be "immune" (vaccinated against COVID-19). The lifting of precautionary measures includes the abolishment of social and physical distancing in all masjids across the kingdom, abolishing mandatory quarantine and PCR tests, and removing the 10-day waiting period between Umrah visa permits. The government has also lifted flight suspensions from 17 countries, including Afghanistan, South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique, Malawi, Mauritius, Zambia, Madagascar, Angola, Seychelles, Comoros, Nigeria, and Ethiopia (Muhammad Mussa, 2022).

2.3 Pilgrim selection

Saudi Arabia announced that Hajj would be held for a limited number of pilgrims who resided within the country due to the high risk of COVID-19 (Al Arabiya News, 2020; AlKhaleej Today, 2020). The Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah imposed restrictions on the type of pilgrims who could attend Hajj in 2020; only healthy Saudi residents between the ages of 20 and 50 with no COVID-19 symptoms were allowed to participate (Alkhshali & Register, 2020; Henley & Harriet, 2020; Middle East Monitor, 2020). Participants had first to apply online, and preference was given to those who had yet to attend in the past (Euronews, 2020). Pilgrims were chosen from the COVID-19 recovery database; 70% were non-Saudi residents. Only ten thousand pilgrims were expected, as opposed to over two million in previous years (BBC News, 2020).

2.4 Safety Measures Based on New Norm

The Saudi Ministry of Health reported taking serious measures during the Hajj 2020. Pilgrims who were not infected with the virus were required to quarantine themselves in hotel rooms or at their homes for a week before arriving in Mecca to perform Hajj. Inside the mosque, pilgrims were asked to maintain a safe social distance of two meters and were separated into groups of 20 individuals who were accompanied by a guide through their whole Hajj performance (Al Arabiya News, 2020).

2.5 Malaysia reactions

On June 11, 2020, Malaysia announced it was barring pilgrims from attending Hajj 2020 out of concern over the danger of COVID-19 and the high spreadability of the virus in crowded places (Reuters, 2020; BenarNews, 2020). Table 1 shows the Hajj Data and Statistics on the increased cost of performing Hajj from 2013 to 2021. The hajj were then postponed in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19.

Table 1. Hajj Data & Statistic

Year	Actual cost (RM)	Hajj Cost Per pilgrims (RM)	Subsidy TH Per pilgrim (RM)	Total Cost Subsidy TH (RM)
2021M / 1442H	2021M / 1442H		Hajj postpones	
2020M / 1441H	2020M / 1441H		Hajj postpones	
2019M / 1440H	2019M / 1440H	22,900	9,980	12,920
2018M / 1439H	2018M / 1439H	22,450	9,980	12,470
2017M / 1438H	2017M / 1438H	19,550	9,980	9,570

2016M / 1437H	2016M / 1437H	18,890	9,980	8,910
2015M / 1436H	2015M / 1436H	17,270	9,980	7,290
2014M / 1435H	2014M / 1435H	16,155	9,980	6,175
2013M / 1434H	2013M / 1434H	15,555	9,980	5,575

Source: Tabung Haji, (2021)

2.6 Waiting period

Tabung Haji (TH) aims to reduce the waiting period for haj pilgrimage registration to 50 years in the future, compared to the current period of 89 years. Previously, the quota was 102 years, but now it is down to 89 years. This means a child born today and registered with TH can perform hajj when they reach 50 (The Sun Daily, 2017). Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Malaysia, Mujahid Yusof Rawa will look for ways to shorten the waiting period for its depositors to perform the hajj. Some will have to wait up to 100 years (Malaysiakini, 2019). Deputy Minister of the Prime Minister's Department Malaysia, Fuziah Salleh said that based on the current list, those who registered in July would have to wait 116 years (Daim & Mohamed Radhi, 2019). Table 2 shows the increased number of depositors aiming to perform hajj from 2014 to 2018.

Table 2. Number of Depositors

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
	0	0	0	0	0
	1	1	1	1	1
	8	7	6	5	4
Number of Depositors (Million People)	9.21	9.27	9.08	8.85	8.61

Source: Tabung Haji, (2021)

3.0 Selection Criteria

The Deputy Minister Malaysia proposes to shorten the waiting period, including giving priority to first-timers and the elderly (Daim & Mohamed Radhi, 2019). The Prime Minister Malaysia got the additional haj quota, 10,000 additional quotas for haj (The Star, 2021). TH depositors who register for Hajj will be allocated a year to perform Hajj based on the date and time of Hajj registration. This means that all TH depositors registered for Hajj can be selected to perform Hajj at the turn of the allocation year (Tabung Haji, 2021). TH has introduced an open Hajj registration system based on "first come, first served". For Hajj 1443H/2022, priority is given to pilgrims whose turn to perform Hajj is in 2020 and 2021, and whose Hajj pilgrimage is postponed in that year. Any future decisions will be made considering the age limit, safety, health, and current conditions. TH will update the Hajj pilgrimage criteria for the Hajj season upon receiving official information from the Government of Saudi Arabia (Tabung Haji, 2021). In 2022, the Saudi Arabian Government has set a 14,306 pilgrims' quota for Malaysia. The latest figure is merely 45 percent of the usual annual quota of 31,600 individuals in the previous years. Several requirements for the Hajj pilgrims, such as being below the age of 65, having no chronic diseases, having a COVID-19 vaccination certificate, and showing a negative Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) swab test within 72 hours of the departure date (Admin, 2022).

3.1 Other criteria to perform hajj

All Malaysians in the country are not allowed to perform Hajj this year (2021), even with a furada visa, which is issued straight from the Saudi Arabian government and does not involve the Hajj quota of a country. Hajj packages are offered by travel agencies licensed with a *Pengelola Jemaah Haji* (PJH) license by TH (Tabung Haji, 2021).

3.2 Other Appeals

If Depositors are not selected to perform hajj, they can make only one (1) appeal per Hajj season (Tabung Haji, 2021). The categories of appeal are as follows:-

- i. The husband is a mahram to the chosen wife
- ii. A man as a mahram to a selected woman (44 years and below)
- iii. Wife accompanying a chosen husband
- iv. A man as a mahram to a selected woman (45 years and above)
- v. The wife accompanying the husband and the chosen other wife
- vi. Future Pilgrims with disabilities
- vii. Muallaf Future Pilgrims
- viii. An elderly Future Pilgrims (75 years and above)
- ix. Previously Registered Future Pilgrims

4.0 Methodology

Phase 1: Background and Analysis. Knowledge acquisition to observe factors of learning and unlearning processes and criteria for Hajj pilgrim selection. Review and analyze relevant approaches, processes, similarities, differences, strengths, weaknesses, and strategies of the current Hajj selection.

Phase 2: Data Acquisition and Analysis. Focus group questions will be prepared based on the findings in Phase 1. It is a qualitative approach. An online interview with the focus group will be conducted. The agencies include *Persatuan Agensi Pelancongan Umrah & Haji* (PAPUH), Tabung Haji (TH), and Hajj Organizers (*Pengelola Jemaah Haji* - PJH). Data analysis will begin with domain and criteria analysis and inclusively with coding.

Phase 3: Development of Hajj Pilgrim Framework-Based Selection Criteria. Exploring the criteria and factors by reflecting requirements from phases 1 and 2. Selection of criteria will be done. Overall design construction framework for Hajj pilgrim selection.

Phase 4: Framework Evaluation. The framework will be evaluated and validated based on the Malaysia scenario.

Phase 5: Writing Article

4.1 Research Framework

The framework will look at the demand and supply of places for pilgrimage and the selection criteria to fulfill the opportunity to perform Hajj in their lifetime. What are the key factors to consider to ensure that vital faith-based needs are not violated? This final proposed framework will facilitate and strengthen the execution of the strategy of the new norm.

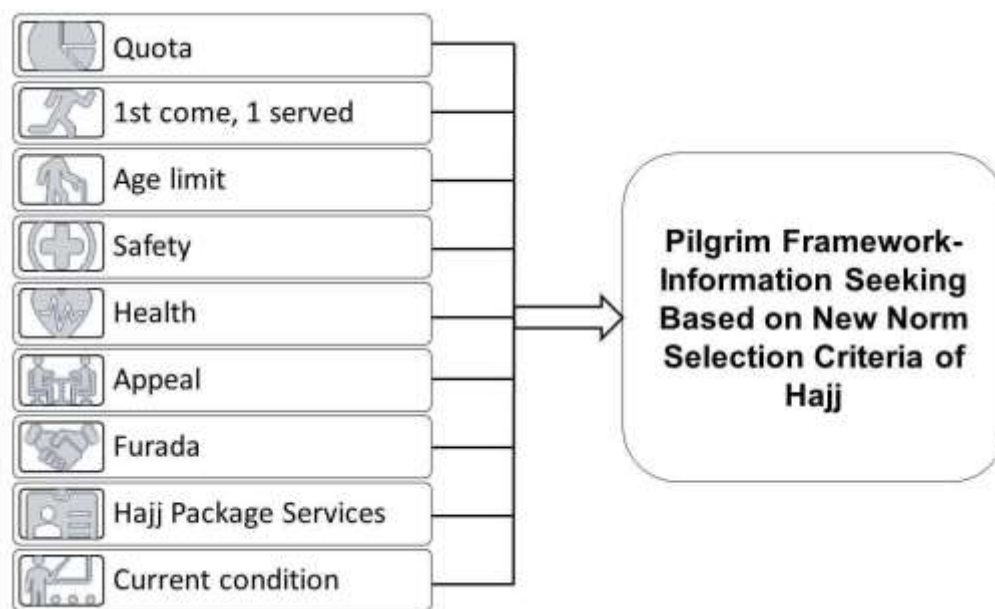


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework for the Construction of Pilgrim Framework-Information Seeking Based on New Norm Selection Criteria of Hajj

5.0 Conclusion

With close relationships between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, with political commitment and will, as well as professional leadership, it is hoped that Lembaga Tabung Haji will continuously look for ways to shorten the waiting period for its depositors to perform the hajj. It is a very positive remark and assurance that Saudi Arabia always welcomes Malaysian pilgrims known for being well-behaved, well-disciplined, and "less problematic". Malaysians must also be patient, as a few pilgrims were allowed to perform hajj due to the global pandemic. Malaysia will always strive to get the additional Hajj quota. With these pilgrim framework-based selection criteria, it is hoped that this will reduce the waiting time for Malaysians to perform the pilgrimage.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

- i. Government/policy maker – Malaysia & Saudi Arabia, including 56 OIC Countries worldwide.
- ii. Stakeholders – Tabung Haji, Muassasah, Hajj Organizers (*Pengelola Jemaah Haji* - PJH), Banking and Financial institution, insurance company, health institutions, hotels, transportation and logistics, food and beverages. Training and retraining of staff, research, consultations, persistent monitoring and evaluation, strict compliance and evaluation.

iii. Individual – TH Depositors can plan their hajj based on the information from the framework.

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