

Are Friday Khutbahs Fit for Purpose?



Dr. Md. Mahmudul Hasan

28 September, 2022

The congregational Friday noon prayer is mandatory for Muslim males. Many Muslim women also attend it voluntarily where there are facilities available for them.

In countries where Friday is not part of the weekend, Muslims take a break from work or shut the doors of businesses to participate in the weekly prayer.

It has continued to gather momentum over centuries without showing any sign of diminishing, even though comparable practices among other religious groups seem to have been on the wane.

The *khutbah* (sermon) is an integral part of the Friday prayer service. Both the *khutbah* and the ritual prayer

are almost equally important, as it is incumbent upon the mass to listen to the *khutbah* with due attention and then pray in congregation.

Opportunity to Impart Knowledge

Given that large crowds attend masjids on Fridays, the *khutbah* is a godsend opportunity to spread awareness and impart knowledge to the community. It is perhaps the only source of education for those Muslims who cannot afford to receive it in other ways.

In that sense, the institution of Friday congregation is a testament to the egalitarian instinct of Islam as a religion which recognizes and facilitates the fundamental right to education.

As the *khutbah* can be used to help the mass connect with the divine, it can also be a means to talk about prevailing social issues and to draw people's attention to them. On that premise, this essay seeks to discuss if masjid imams and *khatibs* make the best use of the educational potential of the *khutbah*. The illustrative anecdotes below may be helpful.

Khutbah and Social Illnesses

Once I saw a Muslim man smoking in a family car. The doors were locked, and his wife and young children were inside. Such people smoke in cars and houses, putting their health and that of their family members at risk. Children's exposure to cigarette smoke in the family environment can lead to their poor health and eventual adoption of the habit of smoking.

On another occasion, I was traveling back home with my family from a long trip. It was a holiday season, and the highways were congested. The journey took longer than we had anticipated. By the time we reached home it was about 2:30 am. We saw a few early teens hanging around the vicinity of our residential area and smoking. Unfortunately, such scenarios are not rare in society.

In the instances mentioned above, the carelessness and irresponsibility of parents who smoke, or let their children do so, cannot be overlooked. I have listened to thousands of Jumu'ah (Friday) *khutbahs* in masjid but none of them touched on the menace of smoking.

Smoking is only one problem that I have mentioned as an example. People are involved in a multitude of social ills. Many of them who attend Friday prayers are involved in corruption or are perpetrators of social injustices. *Khutbahs* can be used to remind people of the consequences of such wrong practices from a religious perspective, and imams and *khatibs* should be empowered to discuss such issues in masjid.

Routine Topics

Drawing on my experiences of listening to *khutbahs* in different countries, I can say that most *khutbahs* are calendar-based and their topics predictable. They are generally about the importance of certain rituals and mystical practices and how these can lead the devout to paradise.

People in the congregation do not find much guidance on how to manage their day-to-day interactions or how to uphold social justice which is the core of Islamic teachings.

For the lack of relevance of the *khutbah* to their lives, many in the congregation pass their time in a state of drowsiness. Modern technology has now given many others an alternative: they take out mobile phones to surf the Internet or log on to social networking sites while sitting in the congregation.

Creativity Needed

It is no doubt a kind of misdemeanour not to concentrate on the *khutbah*. But isn't it also important that imams and *khatibs* make efforts to hold the attention of the congregation by discussing issues that really matter in people's lives?

Based on formulaic texts and utterances, most *khutbahs* are way over the head of the congregation. Repeating them does not require much creativity, talent or critical thinking on the part of the imams and *khatibs*.

Such *khutbah* manuals – which are read like catechism from the pulpit – have firmly entrenched in Muslim societies.

Sadly, not many imams and *khatibs* rise above the mediocrity in the content of their *khutbahs*. Barring some commendable exceptions, the intellectual content of a *khutbah* of a university masjid is not necessarily much different from the one that is delivered at an ordinary masjid.

Since the formulaic *khutbahs* they deliver do not require much research, many imams exhibit symptoms of lethargy and intellectual impotence. They often enjoy the generosity lavished on them by ordinary Muslims and do not conduct proper research to prepare their *khutbahs*. As a result, their *khutbahs* are dry, formulaic, abstract and devoid of insight.

Imams' Role and Responsibility

Given the complex and dynamic challenges that Islam and Muslims are facing today, imams are supposed to be most active in finding solutions to multiple problems – both social and intellectual. If they are involved in intellectual pursuits and knowledge creation and dissemination, their *khutbahs* will likely be rich in content and relevant to contemporary life.

Masjids are central to Muslim societies; therefore, vibrant Muslim communities cannot be envisioned without intellectually competent imams whose *khutbahs* should be a reflection of their scholarly *rigour* and multi-dimensional knowledge. In facilitating this to happen, the role of masjid management committee members is crucial, but that is a subject for another discussion.

About Dr. Md. Mahmudul Hasan

Dr. Md. Mahmudul Hasan is with the Department of English Language and Literature at International Islamic University Malaysia. You can reach him at mmhasan@iium.edu.my