

Report Part Title: RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGIOUS GATHERINGS IN INDONESIA

Report Title: RELIGIOUS "SUPER-SPREADERS" IN INDONESIA:

Report Subtitle: MANAGING THE RISK OF STIGMATISATION

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Published by: Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (2020)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25413.4>

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Both the Tablighis and GBI have stopped missionary work and mass gatherings in Indonesia for now and are fully compliant with government restrictions. The label of “super-spreader”, however, may endure long after those restrictions are lifted.

II. RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGIOUS GATHERINGS IN INDONESIA

Indonesia’s major religious councils – the Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI), Indonesian Council of Churches (Persekutuan Gereja Indonesia, PGI), Catholic Bishops Conference (Konferensi Wali Gereja Indonesia, KWI) and others – tried to provide guidance for their followers in addressing the pandemic. Their task was not made easier by a government that was sluggish and contradictory in its response to the pandemic, with policies that were too little, too late or on again, off again, with different ministers and advisers pulling in different directions.² Indonesia finally acknowledged its first case on 2 March 2020, long after most of its neighbours.³

For the first two weeks of March, the general message from the councils was that anyone who felt ill or had a cough should stay home but public worship was fine as long as basic hygiene procedures were followed. This was also the message of a circular issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs on 13 March, the same day that President Jokowi established a Covid-19 Task Force. There were no warnings to avoid mass religious meetings.

The first fatwa from the MUI on 16 March, a day after President Jokowi exhorted Indonesians to “work at home, study at home, worship at home,” did not ban mosque activities.⁴ It said that people exposed to the virus were required to self-isolate and were forbidden to take part in group activities like Friday prayers or religious discussion groups where they might infect others. Healthy people in high risk areas were *permitted* to stay home and not attend Friday prayers or other mosque-based activities such as *tarawih*, the evening prayers during Ramadan. People in low risk areas were still *required* to attend Friday prayers.⁵ The problem was that Indonesia had not done any mapping of high risk and low risk areas, so no one was sure what the criteria were.⁶ Assessing risk by the number of positive Covid-19 cases was misleading because there had been so little testing. Local MUIs thus applied the fatwa as they saw fit. The South Sumatra provincial MUI said Friday prayers at mosques could continue, while the MUI in

² For a good analysis of why the government was so slow to respond, see Marcus Mietzner, “Populist Anti-Scientism, Religious Polarisation and Institutionalised Corruption: How Indonesia’s Democratic Decline Shaped its COVID-19 Response,” April 2020 [forthcoming]. Throughout late January and most of February, Indonesia took few preventive measures, even as it was clear the virus had arrived in Southeast Asia. As of mid-February, it had reported no cases but also had done almost no testing, despite thousands of tourists from China, including from Wuhan, then the epicentre of the pandemic.

³ A team of Reuters journalists did two detailed investigative articles, looking at how the number of burials had risen in Jakarta. “Exclusive: Jump in Jakarta funerals raises fears of unreported coronavirus deaths,” Reuters, 4 April 2020; “Burial numbers in Jakarta indicate coronavirus toll is higher than officially reported,” Reuters, 1 May 2020. The findings were questioned in a Jakarta Post article, Meilanie Buitenzorgy, “Behind Jakarta’s recent ‘spike’ in burials, Jakarta Post, 13 May 2020. The author argued that restrictions on travel were preventing people taking their deceased relatives back home for funerals and this accounted for the apparent rise, but some analysts raised questions about this explanation as well.

⁴ A link to a video of the president’s statement can be found in “Pernyataan Jokowi Serukan Warga untuk Kerja, Belajar dan Ibadah di Rumah,” *compass.tv*, 15 March 2020.

⁵ Majelis Ulama Indonesia, “Fatwa No 14 Tahun 2020 – Penyelenggaraan Ibadah dalam Situasi Terjadi Wabah Covid-19”, *mui.or.id*, 17 March 2020.

⁶ “Jusuf Kalla Nilai Fatwa MUI Terkait Covid-10 Mutlak Diperhatikan,” *kompas.com*, 17 March 2020.

Palembang, the provincial capital, banned all mosque activity.⁷ With little monitoring and no sanctions, many local mosques continued to operate as usual, even in areas where formal restrictions were in place.⁸

On 20 March, Habib Rizieq, the influential leader of the hardline Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) posted a video from his self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia in which he urged all Muslims to abide by the MUI fatwa and Muslims in Jakarta to avoid mosque activities. This was not only because Jakarta was clearly the epicentre of the virus, but also because it was important to prevent slanderous accusations (*fitnah*):

It's not that we fear Corona, we trust in Allah, but we must avoid slander. We have to avoid having someone at the mosque get ill and then have the mosque be accused of spreading the virus because it continued to hold Friday prayers.⁹

In his urging his followers in Jakarta to stay at home, he was supporting a political ally, Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan, who had been urging the central government to impose a lockdown. He was also undoubtedly influenced by the decision of the Saudi government the same day to suspend prayers at the main mosques in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina as a measure to prevent the spread of the virus.¹⁰

For the Protestant community, the trajectory was much the same: an exhortation on 16 March from PGI to stay at home and attend worship services on line and gradual moves to close churches for Sunday services.¹¹ Many Christians from different denominations insisted on going to church anyway, believing God would protect them. The deaths of two GBI pastors from the virus on 21 and 22 March became a turning point, though, and thereafter some of the holdouts shifted to online services.¹² On 28 March, leaders of all major religious communities gathered at the media centre of the Covid-19 Task Force and publicly urged their followers to worship from home.¹³

The first legal measure at a national level restricting public religious activities did not come until 31 March, when President Jokowi announced that Indonesia would apply Large-Scale Social Restrictions (Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar, PSBB) to address the virus.¹⁴ The regulations required local authorities to gather data on Covid-19 cases and where there was evidence of a rising number of infections or deaths, they could apply to the Ministry for PSBB status. This would involve, among other

⁷ "MUI Sumsel dan Palembang Beda Pendapat Soal Shalat Jum'at," buananeews.com, 27 March 2020.

⁸ "Virus corona dan ramadan: Mengapa salat berjemaah di masjid masih digelar, walau MUI dan ormas Islam mengimbau salat di rumah?," bbc.com, 27 April 2020.

⁹ "HRS Minta Jemaah Jakarta Ikuti Fatwa Salat Jumat MUI: Cegah Fitnah Corona", detik.com, 20 March 2020.

¹⁰ "Saudi Arabia bans prayers at mosques over coronavirus fears," aljazeera.com, 20 March 2020. This was in addition to other measures already in places beginning in late February, such as suspending the *umroh* pilgrimage, cancelling international flights and gradually halting other mosque activities.

¹¹ "Imbauan Majelis Perkerja Harian Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia (MPH-PGI)", 16 March 2020, available at pgi.or.id.

¹² IPAC interviews with contacts in Christian community, 8 April 2020.

¹³ "Imbauan Para Pemuka Agama Untuk Beribadah Dari Rumah," tzuchi.or.id, 30 March 2020.

¹⁴ A regulation to this effect from the Health Ministry was subsequently issued on 3 April (Peraturan Menteri Kesehatan Republik Indonesia Nomor 9 Tahun 2020 tentang Pedoman Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar Dalam Rangka Percepatan Penanganan Corona Virus Disease 2019), hukor.kemkes.go.id, 3 April 2020.

things, shutting schools and workplaces, limiting religious activities at houses of worship, and limiting social and cultural activities in public.¹⁵ Jakarta formally applied PSBB measures on 9 April.¹⁶ It took three more weeks to impose light penalties for violators -- fines of up to Rp250,000 (about USD \$17.45), for example, for anyone gathering in a group of more than five people.¹⁷ In West Java, PSBB measures went into force on 15 April and only applied in the districts adjoining Jakarta: Bogor city, Bogor district, Depok and Bekasi. They did not apply in Bandung.

Thus the organisations that became super-spreaders were violating no regulation when a GBI church held a meeting for some 170 people at a hotel in Lembang, just outside Bandung or when Jemaah Tabligh was planning its mammoth gathering (*ijtima*) of 10,000 men in Gowa for 19-23 March – although it should have been clear to the latter by mid-March that any gathering of that size in the midst of a pandemic was a very, very bad idea.

III. JEMAAH TABLIGH AND ITS TWO FACTIONS

Anyone mapping out the religious groups in Indonesia that would be most susceptible to infection would have put the Tablighis high on the list for several reasons. As noted, they take pride in gathering in large numbers in meetings called *ijtima*. Their annual meeting in Dhaka, Bangladesh is the second largest gathering of Muslims in the world, topped only by the pilgrimage to Mecca. As missionaries, they require their members to travel outside their own communities to preach for a certain number of days per month and months per year in a practice known as *khuruj*, with extensive mixing of members from South and Southeast Asia. Mosques are the focal point of Tablighi activities, but they are also the places where members on *khuruj* from other areas sleep and pray. As of early May 2020, some 1,400 Indonesian Tablighis on *khuruj* were stranded overseas, unable to return because of Covid-19 lockdowns and travel restrictions, and dozens of foreign Tablighis were stranded in Indonesia, with many infections in both groups.¹⁸

A. Who Are the Tablighis?

Tabligh-e Jamaat began as an Islamic revivalist movement in northwestern India in 1926. From the beginning it was non-violent and apolitical, focusing on individual piety and bringing Muslims back to a “purer” practice of Islam.¹⁹ At the same time, it was criticised by other puritan Muslims, including Salafis, for its “limited” interpretation of *tauhid* (oneness of God); reliance on disputed *hadith* (traditions of the Prophet); recognition of some Sufi orders; and elevation of *khuruj* over other religious obligations. Thus, even though the Tablighis adopted similar dress to Salafis, including white robes and turbans or

¹⁵ “Indonesia’s Strategy to Combat COVID-19: What we know so far,” *thejakartapost.com*, 3 April 2020. Jakarta’s governor, who long had been pressing for more stringent measures, complained that the procedures outlined for getting approval from the Ministry for putting PSBB measures in place would waste valuable time while quick action was vital.

¹⁶ Gubernur Provinsi Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta, “Peraturan Gubernur Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta Nomor 33 Tahun 2020 tentang Pelaksanaan Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar dalam Penanganan Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19)”, 9 April 2020. Available at corona.jakarta.go.id.

¹⁷ Gubernur Provinsi Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta, “Peraturan Gubernur Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta Nomor 41 Tahun 2020 tentang Pengenaan Sanksi Terhadap Pelanggaran Pelaksanaan Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar dalam Penanganan Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19)”, 30 April 2020. Available at corona.jakarta.go.id.

¹⁸ “Ada 1,456 WNI Ikuti Tabligh Akbar di Luar Negeri,” *Media Indonesia*, 1 April 2020. Some 30 Indonesian tablighis in Manila were due to be repatriated on 15 May 2020.

¹⁹ Ambroon Agha, “Is Tablighi Jamaat a Variant of Islam?,” *Outlook (India)*, 9 May 2020.