

# PERSPECTIVE

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## Covid-19, Islamic Civil Society and State Capacity in Indonesia

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Islamic civil society organizations (*ormas*) should be able to play an important role in fighting COVID-19 because a large majority in the Muslim community do refer to their judgements and opinions.
- While the narrative on COVID-19 among Indonesian Muslims is diverse, they generally agree that the pandemic is dangerous. In this context, mainstream Islamic organisations like the Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah and Majelis Ulama Indonesia have adopted a rational pragmatic approach in telling their followers to obey the authorities' guidelines on social distancing.
- However, some Islamic teachers have complicated the situation with their conspiracy theories, including the notion that Covid-19 was a Zionist or Christian imperialist tool.
- Ultimately, the efficacy of Islamic civil society organizations was severely limited by the Indonesian state's weak capacity to act on the issue.

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## INTRODUCTION

While COVID-19 had been hitting many countries in the Asia Pacific region since January 2020, it was only on 2 March that President Jokowi Widodo announced Indonesia's first case. The delay in the government's announcement demonstrates the country's complex religious, social and political configuration. On the one hand, it showed the government's unreadiness; and on the other hand, the panic within society, with unhelpful responses by the religious elite in the country worsening the situation.

This Perspective evaluates the role of Islamic civil society organizations, and the capacity of the state in coping with the COVID-19 outbreak. Islamic civil society organizations in this regard could play a significant role, given their position as the Islamic community's reference point not only on religious matters, but on social and political issues as well. I examine how Islamic civil society organizations generate responses and activities from the pandemic, and consider the persuasiveness of statements issued by important Muslim figures on COVID-19. Moreover, the capacity of the Indonesian state in dealing with the situation is also taken into account.

## THE NARRATIVE OF INDONESIAN MUSLIMS ON COVID-19

In Islam, there is a body of narratives discussing pandemics in its various form. In the Quran, the term *tha'un* is usually translated as a pandemic.<sup>1</sup> During the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, pandemics happened a few times and several advisories were given on how to deal with them. Solutions included declaring pandemic-affected areas as isolation centres. There were also classical Muslim scholars who wrote on pandemics. For example, Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalani (d. 852/1449) wrote *Badhl al-ma'un fi faḍl at-tha'un* (Making the Effort to Surpass Plagues) and Ibn al-Wardi (d. 749/1349) wrote *Risalat an-naba' an al-waba'* (A Message about Pandemics).

In Indonesia, the current narrative on the COVID-19 pandemic is a stimulating one. Indonesian Muslims began to actively discuss the issue already when the outbreak first happened in Wuhan (China). Among the first to respond was Ustadz Abdul Somad (UAS), who stated that COVID-19 are soldiers of God (*jundu l-lah*) sent to China to defend Uyghur Muslims from oppression.<sup>2</sup> UAS argued that his statement was derived from an interpretation of the Quranic verses, referring to Muhammad Abduh—a leading Egyptian reformist—who interpreted the word *ababil* (the birds of *Ababil*) in the Quran (105:3) to mean a pandemic. Although UAS later revised his interpretation (after getting much criticism), his narrative affirms views held by some Indonesian Muslims.

Interestingly, it was not only the conservatives who downplayed the threat. Those considered moderates too were partly to blame. For example, Habib Luthfi bin Yahya, a respected *sufi* guru who has millions of followers across the country, initially argued that Covid-19 should not polarize Indonesian Muslims. On 20 March 2020, he organized the Pengajian Kliwonan—a routine event that gathers thousands of people from Central Java, East Java and West Java at this house in Pekalongan, Central Java.<sup>3</sup> He wanted to send a

message to the Muslim public that the pandemic should not stop them from “moving.”<sup>4</sup> He did not desire the slowing down of economic activities with everyone staying at home. However, Habib Luthfi later changed his mind and supported the Indonesian government’s policy of social distancing and partial lockdown.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, the stance taken by mainstream Islamic civil society organizations has been unequivocal from the beginning. They were firm in considering the dangers of COVID-19. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) urged its members to follow the authority’s guidance.<sup>6</sup> It instructed its followers to recite the *qunut nazilah*—a special prayer to get rid of dangerous pandemics—after their daily prayers.<sup>7</sup> NU asked its followers to demonstrate effort (*ikhthiar*) and to pray to God at the same time. LAZIS-NU (Institute of Philanthropy of NU) also introduced the program “NU Peduli COVID-19” (NU care for COVID-19) to support those impacted by COVID-19.<sup>8</sup> Muhammadiyah also seriously considered the information shared by the World Health Organization’s (WHO) on the COVID-19.<sup>9</sup> It asked its followers to face the COVID-19 realistically and take necessary preventive measures and protocols.<sup>10</sup> Muhammadiyah provides its sixty five hospitals to become reference hospitals for patients tested positive of COVID-19.<sup>11</sup> The second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia also helps those impacted by COVID-19 through the social donations collected by LAZIS-MU (the Institute of Muhammadiyah Philanthropy).<sup>12</sup> MUI (Ulama Council of Indonesia) also followed in Muhammadiyah’s footsteps, arguing that some practical measures related to this virus should be obeyed.<sup>13</sup> However, MUI also emphasized that religious guidance was highly needed as well.<sup>14</sup> Although the prescriptions provided by the three organizations are much related to religion, their position to seek guidance from health authorities was helpful in tackling the pandemic realistically.

### *Fatwas on Social Distancing*<sup>15</sup>

NU then issued a fatwa on what steps should be taken when facing the COVID-19 crisis. It persuaded Muslims to be proportional and calm, and to not panic. Fear is only to God, it stated, but precautions and prevention should also be taken by Muslims as human beings. The fatwa also stated that the government of Indonesia should “be present” in providing quick and correct policies. Regarding congregational rituals like Friday prayers and the five daily prayers in public mosques, NU stated that during such a pandemic, Muslims could forego them. And those who had been tested positive with COVID-19 would be banned from attending any congregational prayers, and must stay at home.<sup>16</sup>

MUI also issued a fatwa, asking Indonesian Muslims to avoid Friday and daily collective prayers in affected regions or areas. MUI also banned those who were already infected with COVID-19 from participating in congregational prayers.<sup>17</sup> However, it advised Muslims living in areas where COVID-19 was under control to perform the Friday prayer.

In the same vein, Muhammadiyah introduced a *Maklumat* (important announcement) which stressed the postponing of all activities that involve many people. It also encouraged increased usage of information technology. It argued that the Friday prayer and daily collective prayer can be conducted as usual; but for those who are sick, or in emergency situations, the Friday prayer can be replaced with the mid-day prayer (*zuhur*) and the daily

collective prayer can be done at home. Muhammadiyah also persuaded its members to avoid affected areas.

All these fatwas, however, did not consider the weak capacity of both the central and provincial governments in conducting mass and rapid testing. Therefore the definition of “under controlled” and “uncontrolled” areas or “red” or “white” zones—which formed the basis of the fatwas—remained ambiguous.

Apart from domesticating congregational prayers, two important issues persist: fasting during the month of *Ramadan* and the *Eidul fitri* celebration. Both religious events would pose a difficult challenge for both the government and Islamic civil society organizations. Muhammadiyah and NU already published Islamic legal advisories telling their members not to perform the *tarawih* (congregational prayers during Ramadhan) in mosques.<sup>18</sup> The *tarawih* prayer potentially gathers people in one location, and this may serve as fertile space for the transmission of infectious diseases. The *Eidul fitri* poses an even bigger challenge. There are two crucial activities associated with the celebration that mobilize people to meet and gather. The first is the *mudik lebaran* (return to the village) and the second, *halal bi al-halal* (visiting each other). The *mudik lebaran* involves a mass movement of people, from the big cities –mostly from Jakarta – to their hometowns after Ramadan.<sup>19</sup> Although this is more a cultural than a religious event, for Indonesian Muslims, the *mudik lebaran* is akin to a religious obligation. In this regard, the majority of Indonesian people, and not only the Muslims, perform the *mudik lebaran*. The *halal bi halal* can potentially spread COVID-19 fast because part of the custom is for people to shake hands in order to seek forgiveness.

However, NU, Muhammadiyah and MUI encouraging their members to obey the government, though important, is limited in impact. Much depends on whether the government’s position on the steps to be taken to tackle the situation is consistent. As it is, the ministers’ statement on the *mudik lebaran*, for instance, is inconsistent.<sup>20</sup>

## CONSPIRACY THEORY

A number of leaders in several other Islamic organizations insisted that the Friday prayer and congregational daily prayers in mosques could proceed as per normal. They rejected the fatwas issued by the mainstream Islamic organizations, and reduced the whole COVID-19 issue as a “conspiracy”. In a way, conspiracy theories during pandemics are not alien to Indonesia. During the outbreak of the Spanish flu (1918-1920), some believed it was created by the pharmaceutical industry. This happened also with the Zika virus (2015-2016) that hit America and Brazil, which was associated with the intrigue of the global elite.<sup>21</sup> For COVID-19, some claimed it to be a global Judeo-Christian plot to destroy Islam. Kyai Najih Maemun Zubair from the prestigious traditionalist *pesantren* al-Anwar, Sarang, Central Java, harshly criticized MUI and NU for suspending the Friday prayer. Besides employing arguments from Islamic jurisprudence, he blamed it on Zionism and its wish to keep the world population under five hundred million people. COVID-19, Najih proclaimed, was a virus produced by Zionists to kill Muslims.<sup>22</sup> In addition, he accused Islamic organizations which prohibited congregational prayers in mosques as part of Zionism. He urged King

Salman of Saudi Arabia and the Crown Prince to allow the *hajj* (pilgrimage) in Mecca, scheduled to be in July and August, to continue. Najih stated that the kingdom would undergo a decline if the *hajj* is cancelled.

Furthermore, Najih stated that the COVID-19 outbreak could not be categorized as a pandemic. In his perspective, pandemics that justify ritual dispensation (Arabic: *rukhsah*) should kill at least a hundred thousand people, and in Indonesia, mortality rates had remained very low. Therefore, it could not be termed a pandemic. In short, Najih concluded that the COVID-19 is a new form of imperialism exercised by the WHO, US, China and many others who are the enemy of Islam.<sup>23</sup> Kyai Najih's influence among conservative groups like *NU Garis Lurus* and also former Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) is strong, and his opinion seemed to entice them. Felix Siauw (former HIT backer) for instance supported the MUI fatwa cancelling Friday prayers.<sup>24</sup>

Although Kyai Najih's opinion seems awkward, there are Islamic preachers and ordinary Muslims who apply conspiracy theories when trying to understand the COVID-19.<sup>25</sup> For instance, FPI (Islam's Defenders Front) activists associate the outbreak in Indonesia with their leader, Rizieq Shihab's fate. Rizieq had been living in Mecca as a political refugee. He is believed by FPI members to be in possession of the anti-COVID-19 vaccine; and therefore, the government should allow him to come back.<sup>26</sup> Conspiracy theories are well accepted by Indonesian Muslims who do not believe in scientific and rational explanations for the outbreak. They also feel that their religion is always under attack by Judeo-Christianity. Fortunately, most NU, Muhammadiyah and MUI leaders combine both rational and religious explanations when commenting on the COVID-19 outbreak.

## STATE CAPACITY

All in all, mainstream Islamic organizations like NU, Muhammadiyah and MUI and also Muslim figures such as Quraish Shihab, Habib Luthfi, Abdul Somad, A'a Gym, Rizieq Shihab and many others have responded rationally and objectively to the crisis.<sup>27</sup> So far, they have agreed to work closely with the government. The problem here is the weak capacity of the Jokowi regime, evidenced in its inability to provide timely health aid and infrastructure, its sluggish response to the crisis, and its ambiguous policies. In addition, since the early warning given by WHO to Indonesia, Minister of National Health Terawan Agus Putranto had denied the dangers by saying that Covid-19 was like any other flu, and the remedies included self-cure, and there was really no need to wear masks for non-infected people.<sup>28</sup> Terawan grew more confident with his misleading opinion on the COVID-19 because Jokowi also stated his confidence in his government's capacity to tackle the virus. Jokowi convinced Indonesians that the country had hundreds of hospitals ready to fight COVID-19.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, this statement was groundless and reflected an overconfident leadership. In fact, as the number of infected people increased, places for treatment remained very limited. Infected individuals have had a difficult time getting access to hospitals. The government has also not been ready with medical devices, test-kits, and most importantly, safe protocol for medical doctors.

Although Jokowi finally decided on a comprehensive policy to fight COVID-19, called *Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar* (PSPB), it was a little late. Jokowi seemed inward-looking throughout the episode, accompanied by incompetent staff who ignored the deadly danger of COVID-19. The inner circles of Jokowi have been worried about the way in which the governor of Jakarta, Anies Baswedan, has been dealing with COVID-19 in Jakarta, in contradistinction from the policy of central government. Anies Baswedan proposed a total lockdown for Jakarta against Jokowi's wishes. The President did not want it for fear of the economically detrimental effects for the country as a whole. This contestation delayed the decision making, and brought dire consequences, mostly to the poor.

In short, the role of Islamic civil society organizations would be very effective in helping the government fight COVID-19 if the state were only more effective and possessed strong capacity.

## CONCLUSION

Islamic civil society organizations in Indonesia seemed prepared to tackle the COVID-19. Adaptation to a new danger—the Coronavirus—was done quickly by Islamic civil society organizations and Muslim figures such as NU, Muhammadiyah, MUI, Habib Luthfi, Abdul Somad and others. However, the alacrity and full encouragement of Islamic civil society organizations to participate in fighting against the COVID-19 lost significance against the background of a state that acted incompetently. To be sure, Islamic civil society organizations only play their role at the discursive level, the state is the main actor at the enforcement level. This holds true on most economic and social issues.

Islamic civil society organizations remain limited to religious and cultural issues. With their current capacity however, they should be able to work hand in hand with the government in outreach efforts. Muhammadiyah and NU have developed capacities through hospital and philanthropic efforts, for example, but these will need to be advanced and expanded.

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<sup>1</sup> Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, *Defence against the Plague: Criterion for the Elect of God* (Surrey, 2015). The author of this book is the founder of the Ahmadiyyah sect. The book was originally written in the Urdu language, and was published in 1902. In 2015, it was translated into English. See also <https://quran-m.com/الهدى-النبوي-في-التعامل-مع-الطاعون-وال>, viewed on 9 April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tagar.id/uas-corona-tentara-allah-lindungi-muslim-uyghur>, <https://indopolitika.com/uas-muslim-uyghur-dilindungi-tentara-allah-swt-dari-virus-namanya-tentara-corona/>, viewed on 17 March 2020.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nu.or.id/post/read/118014/habib-luthfi---jangan-karena-corona-timbul-pemisah-antarkita->, viewed on 28 March 2020.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQjO8qMfkpk>, viewed on 6 April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnIBko0CLa8>, viewed on 6 April 2020.

<sup>6</sup> On the role of Nahdlatul Ulama, see Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009);

Greg Fealy and Greg Barton, eds., *Nahdlatul Ulama, Traditional Islam and Modernity in Indonesia* (Melbourne: Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> This Qunut Nazilah is only recommended in times of difficulty.

<sup>8</sup> [https://nucare.id/program/gerakan\\_sejuta\\_masker\\_cegah\\_corona](https://nucare.id/program/gerakan_sejuta_masker_cegah_corona), viewed on 19 April 2020.

<sup>9</sup> On Muhammadiyah see Syarifuddin Jurdi, ed., *Satu Abad Muhammadiyah* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2010); Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises Over the Banyan Tree: A Study of the Muhammadiyah Movement in a Central Javanese Town, C. 1910-2010* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012); Majelis Tarjih dan Tajdid Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, *Himpunan Putusan Tarjih Muhammadiyah* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> See Surat Maklumat Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah No. 02/MLM/1.0/H/2020 tentang Wabah Corona Virus Disease 2019.

<sup>11</sup> <https://mediaindonesia.com/read/detail/304838-65-rumah-sakit-muhammadiyahaisiyah-jadi-rujukan-covid-19>, viewed on 19 April 2020.

<sup>12</sup> <https://lazismu.org/program/405/donasi/>, viewed on 19 April 2020.

<sup>13</sup> On MUI see Syafiq Hasyim, "Majelis Ulama Indonesia and Pluralism in Indonesia," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 41, no. 4–5 (2015): 487–495.; Muhammad Atho Mudzhar, *Fatwa of the Council of Indonesian Ulama: A Study of Islamic Legal Thought in Indonesia 1975-1988* (Jakarta: INIS, 1993); Moch Nur Ichwan, "'Ulamā', State and Politics: Majelis Ulama Indonesia after Suharto," *Islamic Law and Society* 12, no. 1 (2005): 45–72.

<sup>14</sup> See Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia Nomor: 14 Tahun 2020 tentang Penyelenggaraan Ibadah dalam Situasi Terjadi Wabah COVID-19.

<sup>15</sup> Fatwas are Islamic legal opinions but are not legally binding. See Wael B. Hallaq, "Ifta' and Ijtihad in Sunni Legal Theory: A Development Account," in *Islamic Legal Interpretation, Muftis and Their Fatwas*, ed. Muhammad Khalid Masud, Brinkley Messick, and David S Powers (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); MK Masud, BM Messick, and DS Powers, *Islamic Legal Interpretation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> This fatwa was issued by the Provincial Branch of Nahdlatul Ulama East Java on 17 March 2020.

<sup>17</sup> MUI Fatwa No.14/2020 was signed on 16 March 2020, one day before the Nahdlatul Ulama fatwa.

<sup>18</sup> <http://m.muhammadiyah.or.id/id/news-18721-detail-hari-libur-agama-di-tahun-wabah-pelajaran-dari-persyarikatan-muhammadiyah.html>, <https://www.wartaekonomi.co.id/read279696/pbnu-ingatkan-masyarakat-umat-muslim-salat-tarawih-dan-ied-di-rumah-saja>, viewed on 6 April 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Komaruddin Hidayat, *Indahnya Mudik Lebaran - Penjara-Penjara Kehidupan* (Jakarta: Naura Elite, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> <https://money.kompas.com/read/2020/04/03/105550826/simpang-siur-larangan-mudik-lebaran-2020-akhirnya-terjawab?page=all>, viewed on 6 April 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Steve Taylor, *The Psychology of Pandemics: Preparing for the Next Global Outbreak of Infectious Disease* (New Castle: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2019), 64.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUX08oZdzzA>, watched on 29 March 2020. Najih Maemun is the son of the very charismatic ulama, Maemun Zubair but his position on many Islamic issues different from those held by his father. Kyai Maemun Zubair is a well-known moderate ulama, while many of Najih's statements place him in opposition to his father.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUX08oZdzzA>, watched on 29 March 2020.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.wartaekonomi.co.id/read277249/ribut-ribut-fatwa-mui-felix-jangan-anggap-salat-jemaah-saat-ini-lebih-beriman-ulama-lebih-tahu>, viewed on 6 April 2020.

<sup>25</sup> <https://republika.co.id/berita/q6w1x4318/corona-teori-konspirasi-dan-qunut-nazilah>, viewed on 1 April 2020.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQ5BSmv2ne8>, viewed on April 2020.

<sup>27</sup> <https://kabar24.bisnis.com/read/20200325/15/1217763/habib-rizieq-shihab-minta-umat-islam-jihad-melawan-virus-corona>, viewed on 2 April 2020.

<sup>28</sup> <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4922176/menkes-kematian-gegara-flu-lebih-tinggi-kenapa-heboh-corona-luar-biasa>, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4922126/menkes-corona-bukan-barang-menakutkan-saya-confident-banget-kok>, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4192142/menkes-yang-sehat-tak-usah-pakai-masker>, viewed on 2 April 2020.

<sup>29</sup> <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4942814/ratusan-rs-tni-polri-bumn-dan-swasta-siap-rawat-pasien-corona>, <https://manado.tribunnews.com/2020/03/02/terkait-virus-corona-jokowi-pastikan-indonesia-miliki-ratusan-rumah-sakit-dengan-standar-yang-baik>, viewed 2 April 2020.

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