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Jakarta Post – Religion and COVID-19 mitigation

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One of the difficult challenges in efforts to combat the spread of COVID-19 is the counterproductive attitude exhibited by some religious communities. Although the government has called on the public to stay put and avoid the crowds (physical distancing), some religious groups still intend to hold gatherings involving many people. The Ijtima Jamaat Tabligh in Asia conference in Gowa, South Sulawesi, showed the difficulties the government faces in dealing with religious communities.

The government almost failed to cancel the event, which was predicted to be attended by 25,000 participants. The organizers were reluctant to call off the planned gathering and said they were more afraid of God than COVID-19. Although the event was finally canceled, 8,695 participants had arrived at the site. Ironically, the police refused to disperse the gathering despite the absence of a permit, and only planned to localize the activity, for fear disbandment would do more harm than good.

The government's indecisiveness in dealing with religious communities who defy the threat of COVID-19 transmission was also obvious in the ordination of the bishop of Ruteng in East Nusa Tenggara, Mgr. Siprianus Hormat. Manggarai Regent Deno Kamelus said the local government encountered difficulties in canceling the event because it had been scheduled several months in advance. As a result, the ordination Mass proceeded with thousands of people and a number of regional heads and government officials in East Nusa Tenggara present.

Apart from the two cases, social media content and messages ignoring the government's calls for physical distancing have been rife. By using religious arguments, they remind believers to fear only Allah and to flock to places of worship. In Bandung, West Java, a group of people removed an official notice regarding the temporary suspension of Friday prayers and five-time daily congregational prayers at a mosque.

The people were angry and thought that the *takmir* (mosque management) was more afraid of Governor Ridwan Kamil than of Allah. Another viral video showed a middle-aged man angry at the *takmir* for locking the mosque. He even claimed the suspension was the work of the now-defunct Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).

Why is it difficult for some religious communities to work together to combat COVID-19? One of the reasons is religious understanding, which tends to be fatalistic and deterministic. They assume everything happens by God's will and has been well arranged by Him. Life and death are part of a destiny that need not be feared. Fear of something outside of God, including COVID-19, is considered a deviation from the faith.

In fact, resistance from religious communities to calls for physical distancing has not only happened in Indonesia. In other parts of the world, the phenomenon has complicated the efforts of local governments to deal with the spread of COVID-19. The Orthodox Jewish community in New York, United States, for example, continues to hold wedding ceremonies that gather hundreds of people, despite the local government's ban on crowds.

In the Indonesian context, the fatalism and determinism of religious understanding can be complicated further when fueled by political sentiments spurred by the wounds that remain from the 2019 election. Groups that remain unable to accept the results of the presidential election have extra reasons to reject the government's call. The refusal to close the mosque in Bandung because of the COVID-19 outbreak reflected this political ill will against the government.

That said, the government cannot ignore the factor of religion in its handling of COVID-19. In fact, religion greatly influences community perspectives and attitudes toward the emergency. Unfortunately, in the context of COVID-19 mitigation, religious communities are the most vulnerable to virus transmission. Daily worship that sees many people gather at one site and pilgrimage rituals pave the way for virus transmission. Therefore, involving religious organizations in mitigating this pandemic is imperative.

There are two main reasons why the government must cooperate with mass organizations. First, religious groups, especially large ones like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, have strong authority to rectify the incorrect religious understanding of disaster management. Religious leaders from these organizations, both structural and cultural, can fend off fatalistic understandings in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak. Traditional clerics can exercise their religious authority to explain to the community what must be done in dealing with COVID-19 from a religious perspective.

Clerics are often more effective than civil servants in conveying the government's messages to the community. By using religious idioms that are well known to the public, clerics can communicate with their congregants about why a religious ritual can be performed in their respective homes for greater benefit. This kind of religious cultural approach will enable the religious community to understand and accept the government's call for physical distancing.

Second, apart from religious authority, these mass organizations also have multilevel structures, from the national level to the grassroots throughout the archipelago. This multilevel structure with a national network is what the government needs in its disaster mitigation efforts. In addition, the organizations also have autonomous bodies, which can work independently to support the duties and functions of their umbrella organizations.

The NU has strong female wings, Muslimat and Fatayat, student wings, PMII and IPNU-IPPNU, and the youth wing Anshor, while Muhammadiyah has women's wings Aisyiyah and Nasyiatul Aisyiyah, student wing IMM and youth wing Muhammadiyah Youth.

Both the NU and Muhammadiyah also have supporting social institutions, universities, schools and especially hospitals with very wide networks. They also have their own disaster mitigation centers.

Other religious organizations also have significant power and influence in society. Other Islamic mass organizations such as the Indonesian Ulema Council, Al-Irshad, Al-Washliyah and Mathla'ul Anwar play pivotal roles in society. It is likewise with non-Islamic religious organizations such as the Indonesian Communion of Churches (PGI), the Indonesian Bishops' Conference (KWI), Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia (PHDI), Representatives of Indonesian Buddhists (Walubi) and others. The government should partner with these organizations to work together to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering the great potential possessed by these religious organizations, the first step the government has to take is to invite the groups' leaders to sit together and discuss strategies as well as to gather inputs related to disaster management. Some religious organizations have taken the initiative to educate their followers by, for example, announcing the closure of mosques and calling on people to worship at home.

But there is much more these religious organizations can do to help mitigate COVID-19. These groups must be provided with a comprehensive explanation of mitigation strategies, including what the government has done and not yet done in dealing with the plague. From there, religious leaders can provide insights about what they can contribute, with all the resources they have at hand.

Remember, this pandemic can develop beyond the government's control, so it requires all forces and elements of society to fight together.

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