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Loose or Lose: Relaxation of Religious Services in Indonesia During COVID-19?

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Massive outbreak of an emerging respiratory disease so-called the COVID-19 continues to take place in Indonesia. Recently, the country even reported almost 700 positive cases in a single day, making the total cases into 15,438.¹ This is an unprecedented trend since President Joko Widodo announced its first kind at the beginning of March 2020. Although the majority of cases are still largely concentrated in Java,² regions outside the most populated island currently also witness gradual local transmission of COVID-19. Those regions with largest cases, including South Sulawesi (5th), West Nusa Tenggara (7th), Bali (8th), Papua (9th), and West Sumatera (10th).³ Against this worrying situation, the government surprisingly expressed its interest to loosen large-scale restrictions for several sectors.

¹ Data per May 13, 2020, could be accessed in “Peta Sebaran,” Gugus Tugas Percepatan Penanganan COVID-19, <https://covid19.go.id/peta-sebaran>

² Around 63.1% of the total COVID-19 case per May 13, 2020 reported in 6 provinces across Java.

³ South Sulawesi (747 cases), West Nusa Tenggara (339 cases), Bali (328 cases), Papua (322 cases), West Sumatera (319 cases), could be accessed in “Peta Sebaran,” Gugus Tugas Percepatan Penanganan COVID-19, May 13, 2020, <https://covid19.go.id/peta-sebaran>

Among the most controversial one is re-enabling places of worship to do on-site religious services. This article would like to argue that the idea is not only non-urgent, but also misleading.

Discourses: Where it Begins?

There is no discourse emerges without a unique context behind it. The idea of loosening restrictions for places of worships is not an exception. It originally appeared during a virtual meeting between the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Members of the Parliament (MPs) on May 11, 2020. As recorded by its minute of the meeting, both parties explicitly agreed to *‘consider easing restrictions for praying in Mosques and other places of worship, particularly for non-red-zones area, while also paying attention to the COVID-19 protocol’*.⁴

Two major factors at least account for the emergence of this recommendation: economics and political. With regard to the former, some ministries earlier loudly announced its plan to relax the prevailing large-scale restriction. A rigid version of its kind was deemed as not applicable in the context of Indonesia taking into account its fiscal capacity and economic situations.⁵ Adding to that, there was a news leak at the onset of May, outlining the government’s plan to relax restrictions for business-to-business as well as industries start from June 2020.⁶ This somehow led to the second factor in which many politicians and MPs criticized the COVID-19 management for not being impartial. On the one hand, they saw a lot of non-essential malls are continuously crowded by people, whereas mosques are prohibited from opening its services.⁷ This political pressure eventually paved the way for such point being raised.

Fairness, Rationality, and Novel Cases

Fairness in COVID-19 management becomes too narrow if its indicator merely depends on which sectors are allowed to open. Fairness in this context should also be accompanied by rationality at least in a sense of being rational enough to acknowledge that novel cases emerged following close contacts in the places of worship. Let’s start with what happened in the capital recently. In May 11, Jakarta just reported one unique case where an *Imam*, who led the religious service in a local mosque, infected by coronavirus.⁸ As he continued to perform the service while has already been exposed, more than 20 people who made contact with him during the service now being required to proceed with swab tests and self-quarantine. Alas, that is not the only one. West Nusa Tenggara⁹, Jambi,¹⁰ and South Sulawesi¹¹ previously had recorded a similar case. These regions respectively noted a stubborn follower who

⁴ “Raker Virtual Menag Bersama DPR Hasilkan Tiga Kesimpulan,” Kementerian Agama Wilayah Yogyakarta, May 11, 2020, <https://diy.kemenag.go.id/6218-raker-virtual-menag-bersama-dpr-hasilkan-tiga-kesimpulan-.html>

⁵ “Mahfud MD: Pemerintah Wacanakan Relaksasi PSBB, Sentra Ekonomi Boleh Beroperasi,” *Bisnis.com*, April 30, <https://kabar24.bisnis.com/read/20200430/15/1234913/mahfud-md-pemerintah-wacanakan-relaksasi-psbb-sentra-ekonomi-boleh-beroperasi>

⁶ “Terungkap! Skenario Pemerintah Pasca COVID-19, Mal Buka Juni,” *CNBC Indonesia*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20200508032628-4-156979/terungkap-skenario-pemerintah-pasca-covid-19-mal-buka-juni>

⁷ “Kritik Pemerintah, DPR: Mal Tetap Buka Tapi Masjid Ditutup,” *Global Riau*, May 12, 2020, <http://globalriau.com/nasional/Kritik-Pemerintah--DPR---Mal-Tetap-Buka-tapi-Masjid-Ditutup>

⁸ “Imam Tarawih di Musala Baitul Muslimin Tambora Tertular COVID-19 dari Cucunya,” *Liputan 6*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4250947/imam-tarawih-di-musala-baitul-muslimin-tambora-tertular-covid-19-dari-cucunya>

⁹ “Pasien Positif COVID-19 yang Videonya Viral Tolak Diisolasi Nekat Shalat Tarawih,” *Kompas*, April 30, 2020, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/30/08003661/pasien-positif-covid-19-yang-videonya-viral-tolak-diisolasi-nekat-shalat?page=all>

¹⁰ “Rapid Test Positif, Warga Jambi Masih Jadi Imam di Masjid,” *CNN Indonesia*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200426024720-20-497316/rapid-test-positif-warga-jambi-masih-jadi-imam-di-masjid>

¹¹ “Salah Satu Pasien Positif Corona di Parepare Pernah Tarawih di Masjid,” *Sindo*, May 1, 2020, <https://makassar.sindonews.com/read/13721/713/salah-satu-pasien-positif-corona-di-parepare-pernah-tarawih-di-masjid-1588313103>

continued to join massive *Tarawih* service despite the order given to avoid such large-scale religious gatherings.

Instead of decreasing, this controversial trend sadly now occurs across other regions as well. East Java is in the next order. Six followers of *Tarawih* service performed by a local mosque, showed positive result during the COVID-19 rapid test.¹² Riau Archipelago¹³ and Central Java¹⁴ also followed shortly. Both regions respectively reported cases where a family diagnosed as positive COVID-19 after joining *Tarawih* service in a local mosque. Whereas Riau Archipelago has been officially named its local family case as a new COVID-19 cluster, Central Java is still wrapping up the epidemiological tracing across its local family case. The latter region is in the stage of confirming whether or not this family acted as the super spreader for seven other local positive cases.¹⁵

Along with those aforementioned provinces, three regions in Sumatera lately also reported a similar phenomenon—Lampung, Bangka Belitung, and West Sumatera. In the case of Lampung, it was found that a nearby local mosque is the merely source of COVID-19 infection for a positive patient as he never had histories to go outside the city and only left his home for joining religious services.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Bangka Belitung discovered two new reactive COVID-19 samples among 42 followers of *Tarawih* service in its Grand Mosque shortly after concluding a random rapid testing.¹⁷ Nothing much different, the newest case in West Sumatera also presents a bold reminder where a resident who regularly joined public religious services in a local mosque was found as positive COVID-19 without any clinical symptom.¹⁸ As this is the first case for that particular suburb in West Sumatera, it should alarm officials that being in so-called ‘green-zone’ does not really mean that the area is free of COVID-19.

Like it or not, choosing to not ease restrictions for places of worship at least according to this emerging trend is a fair decision. Fair for medical workers who are occupied of taking care the existing COVID-19 patients. Fair for other believers who are willingly to pray at their respective homes. Fair for the rest government officials who persistently do the tracing process and distributing social assistance among the people. It is also a rational choice since the novel cases revealed that even the current implementation of the restriction is still far from perfect particularly in the part of its monitoring. It should not be surprising that more regions would come up with the same phenomenon in the coming days.

Missing its Ingredient

Before thinking of easing the large-scale restriction for places of worship, one should also look at whether the essential ingredient—clear communication—has been inserted during its implementation. Clear communication here is defined as the ability of responsible officials to persuade people that

¹² “Hasil Rapid Test Enam Orang Jamaah Tarawih di Sidoarjo Reaktif,” Antara Sulawesi Tengah, May 7, 2020, <https://sulteng.antaranews.com/berita/119643/hasil-rapid-test-enam-orang-jamaah-tarawih-di-sidoarjo-reaktif>

¹³ “Batam Identifikasi Klaster Baru COVID-19 dari Jamaah Tarawih,” CNN Indonesia, May 8, 2020, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200508105801-20-501242/batam-identifikasi-klaster-baru-covid-19-dari-jamaah-tarawih>

¹⁴ “Satu Keluarga Reaktif Corona Usai Salat Tarawih di Masjid,” Nusantara TV, May 13, 2020, <https://nasional.nusantaratv.com/daerah/satu-keluarga-reaktif-corona-usai-salat-tarawih-di-masjid>

¹⁵ “Pasien Positif Corona Joyotakan Solo Jadi Super Spreader, 7 Kontak Eratnya Reaktif Rapid Test,” Solo Pos, May 13, 2020, <https://www.solopos.com/pasien-positif-corona-joyotakan-solo-jadi-super-spreader-7-kontak-eratnya-reaktif-rapid-test-1061012>

¹⁶ “Cuma Bolak-Balik Salat di Masjid dan Rumah, Ketua Gerindra Lampung Tertular Corona,” Nusantara TV, May 13, 2020, <https://nasional.nusantaratv.com/daerah/cuma-bolak-balik-salat-di-masjid-dan-rumah-ketua-gerindra-lampung-tertular-corona>

¹⁷ “Lakukan Rapid Test, Dua Jamaah Masjid Reaktif Corona,” Sindo, May 14, 2020, <https://sumsel.sindonews.com/read/29401/720/lakukan-rapid-test-dua-jamaah-masjid-reaktif-corona-1589468712>

¹⁸ “Jamaah Salat Tarawih Positif COVID, Masjid Al-Hijrah di Kota Padang Ditutup,” Suara, May 14, 2020, <https://www.suara.com/news/2020/05/14/102434/jamaah-salat-tarawih-positif-covid-masjid-al-hijrah-di-kota-padang-ditutup>

praying at home in the current situation is necessary no matter what, and it would not undermine the quality of the pray as well. Learning from the emerging cases as indicated in the previous section, it seems that this ingredient has been missing.

Adding to that, another proof of evidence that becomes apparent is the inconsistency of messages conveyed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. For instance, the Vice Minister said that places of worship could continue its services as usual as long as it adheres to the COVID-19 protocol, located in the regions that have less COVID-19 cases, and should have communicated the plan with the respective local government at its initial proposal.¹⁹ This is clearly opposite of what has been campaigned by President Joko Widodo since the beginning that people should continue to work, to study, and to pray at home to slow down the outbreak of COVID-19.²⁰ Based on the latest observation, President has yet revised his point particularly regarding praying at home.

The statement expressed by the Vice Minister regrettably disregards the fact that some people continue to deliberately violate the restriction using whatever means they got. Many attempts to fool officials happened in regions with large COVID-19 positive cases. Makassar of South Sulawesi is one example. A local mosque in this city was found intentionally turning off the lights inside to cover up religious services that they were doing.²¹ Bekasi of West Java is another example. Local officials discovered that some mosques silenced their speakers to avoid inspections while hosting massive praying.²² Against the discreet actions, certain regions witnessed extremely clear violations of the restriction.

One example once occurred in West Lombok of West Nusa Tenggara. A crowd of residents protested the closure of a mosque in their neighbourhood following the rise of COVID-19 cases in its province.²³ The similar incident also took place in Pare-Pare of South Sulawesi. Some residents engaged in an intense debate with local officials after attempting to insist joining *Tarawih* services with a lot of people despite the announcement that has already been made available at the gate of the mosque.²⁴ Both cases later settled when police officers tapped in to mediate the discussion. Therefore, it is not wrong to assume that the clear communication yet to take place properly at the last mile.

The mentioned statement apparently also disregards the fact that some local governments do not exhibit good leadership when it comes to the restrictions for places of worship. Take a look upon the case of Indragiri Hulu — Riau where its regent insisted to pray at mosque even though the provincial government had already ordered the whole jurisdiction to pray at home following the status of 'COVID-19 red zone' given to this province.²⁵ This is sending the wrong and confusing signal at least to the community. It seems forgetting that asymptomatic COVID-19 cases are everywhere. Bolaang Mongondow Timur—North Sulawesi might present another interesting example. Whereas the

¹⁹ "Wamenag Setuju Masjid Tak Perlu Ditutup Seluruhnya di Tengah Wabah," Kompas, May 11, 2020, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/05/11/19265191/wamenag-setuju-masjid-tak-perlu-ditutup-seluruhnya-di-tengah-wabah>

²⁰ "Jokowi: Kerja dari Rumah, Belajar dari Rumah, Ibadah di Rumah Perlu Digencarkan," Kompas, March 16, 2020, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/03/16/15454571/jokowi-kerja-dari-rumah-belajar-dari-rumah-ibadah-di-rumah-perlu-digencarkan>

²¹ "PSBB di Makassar, Lampu Masjid Dimatikan Saat Shalat Berjamaah," Kompas, April 26, 2020, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/26/18122681/psbb-di-makassar-lampu-masjid-dimatikan-saat-shalat-berjamaah>

²² "Kasatpol PP Bekasi: Warga yang Shalat Tarawih di Masjid Biasa Tak Pakai Speaker," Kompas, April 29, 2020, <https://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2020/04/29/15491691/kasatpol-pp-bekasi-warga-yang-shalat-tarawih-di-masjid-biasa-tak-pakai>

²³ "Warga Demo Masjid Ditutup untuk Tarawih dan Jumatan, Polisi Ajak Dialog," Detik, May 1, 2020, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4998650/warga-demo-masjid-ditutup-untuk-tarawih-dan-jumatan-polisi-ajak-dialog>

²⁴ "Ngotot Shalat Tarawih Berjamaah di Masjid, Warga Cekcok dengan Petugas," Kompas, May 3, 2020, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/05/03/21325981/ngotot-shalat-tarawih-berjamaah-di-masjid-warga-cekcok-dengan-petugas>

²⁵ "Riau Zona Merah COVID-19, Bupati Inhu Justru Salat Tarawih," Kumparan, April 28, 2020, <https://kumparan.com/selasarriau/riau-zona-merah-covid-19-bupati-inhu-justru-salat-tarawih-ke-mesjid-1tjN8pMFmPH/full>

national government has not officially revised its restriction for places of worship, the regent of this area suddenly announced resumption of religious services quoting a raw discourse during the Meeting between the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Members of Parliament.²⁶ This phenomenon once again strongly holds the importance of clear communication about the prevailing restriction for places of worship. It indeed serves as a good reminder that the government should be careful in initiating discourses. Otherwise, we would bear undesirable cost such as the continuing rise of COVID-19 cases.

Final Stake: Loose or Lose?

We should really be considerate about revising the restriction for places of worship. Time is not on our side. We are now at the stage of choosing between to make it loose or to lose our war against COVID-19. As explained throughout the article, it is safe to say that the current implementation of restriction is nowhere near such perfection. Two fundamental ingredients—clear communication and effective regular monitoring—even are not there. Instead of easing the restriction, what we should do during the ongoing growing COVID-19 curve is intensifying random inspections as well as rapid testing in the places of worship, enhancing the enforcement of law on health quarantine to any party who violates it there, and also doubling virtual training on religious matters. At this critical juncture, a true adherence would show their unwavering support to all attempts in mitigating the outbreak. Only a stubborn ignorance who attempts to undermine these hard works.

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²⁶ “Ini Alasan Bupati Boltim Sehan Perbolehkan Tempat Ibadah Buka,” *Tribun Boltim*, May 14, 2020, <https://manado.tribunnews.com/2020/05/14/ini-alasan-bupati-boltim-sehan-perbolehkan-tempat-ibadah-buka>