

Why Closing the Mosque: Resistance of the Indonesia's Muslim Community to the Government PPKM Policy During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. The closure of mosques policy has become the most controversial issue during COVID-19 prevention in Indonesia. This government policy to prevent the massive transmission of COVID-19 has been considered ignoring some Muslim communities' religious values and religious understanding. This study explores the Indonesian Muslim community's pros and cons perceptions during PPKM (Enforcement of Community Activity Restrictions) implementation. It employs a qualitative descriptive approach to collect data, using observation and interviews to answer the research questions in this study. The literature study was conducted to seek data analysis concepts. This study finds various contradicted forms in understanding Islamic teachings among Muslim society during PPKM Implementation. The controversy occurs due to three factors: textual religious beliefs, habits, and the worship spirit of the Muslim community in the mosque. This condition reinforces the argument of the Muslim community, who often compares mosque closures with other places that have potential transmission of COVID-19. This condition inhibits government efforts in handling the spread of COVID-19 due to the dualism of public religious understanding, which tends to show sustenance and resistance to the implemented policy during the PPKM. Thus, an accommodative and persuasive approach involving the government, religious leaders, and community leaders is needed to handle the spread and transmission of the COVID-19 pandemic effectively.

Keywords: Mosque Closure; Resistance; Muslim Community; PPKM Policy; COVID-19

1 Introduction

The PPKM (Enforcement of Community Activity Restrictions) policy implemented to overcome the spread of COVID-19 has raised various community resistances. Restrictions on community socio-economic activities to the closing of worship places as stated in the Minister of Religion No. SE 17 of 2021 received the most intensive rejection during the PPKM policy. The Muslim community felt pressured due to restrictions on worship activities in mosques (Darmawan et al. 2020). The Task Force for the Acceleration of Handling COVID-19 stated that since March 2020, the government had made a multilevel, national to regional restriction policy (covid19.go.id). The policies implementations still show various forms of violations in the community, which have implications for the high rate of COVID-19 transmission in Indonesia (Pabbajah et al. 2020). The COVID-19 task force data, August 7, 2021, show that 3.6 million people confirmed positive COVID-19 (<https://covid19.go.id/>), even in early August 2021, Indonesia recorded the highest death case in the world due to COVID-19 (www.cnnindonesia.com). Thus, this paper presents public resistance to the PPKM policy has implications for the delay in handling COVID-19 in Indonesia.

Existing studies on community resistance concerning government policies during the COVID-19 pandemic tend to show three perspectives. First, studies seek the forms of community resistance to policies implemented during the pandemic (Harjudin 2020; Kurniawan, Yumna, and Tantri 2020; Edwards et al. 2021; Hyland et al. 2021). Second, religious responses and religious rituals during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bentzen 2020; Al Eid and Arnout 2020; Indriya 2020), the need for religious leaders and religious organizations roles to be accommodated in handling COVID-19 (Mushodiq and Imron 2020; Pabbajah et al. 2020). Third, the government policies impact multiple aspects of community survival, such as education and teaching (Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh, and Althunibat 2020; Anon 2020; Suni Astini 2020; Tria 2020), economic activities (Baldwin and Mauro 2020; Fernandes 2020; Gupta et al. 2020; Ozili and Arun 2020; Susilawati, Falefi, and Purwoko 2020), and psychological impacts (Corrigan 2020; Huang and Zhao 2020). Furthermore, Abdullah (2020) stated that PPKM policy causes fear and psychological trauma to the community.

This paper aims to complete the existing studies by focusing on the community resistance to the mosque's closure due to the PPKM policy implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, three questions were asked as the focus of this study. First, what are the forms of community resistance to the mosque's closure during the implementation of PPKM. Second, what factors do encourage Muslim community resistance due to the implementation of PPKM. Third, how does the ongoing community resistance imply the handling of COVID-19 imposed by the government. These three questions are discussed sequentially in this paper.

This paper argues that public resistance will always be side-by-side with the intensity of government policies in handling COVID-19. The mosques closure refusal is considered the most controversial issue during the COVID-19 handling policy. It happens due to restrictions to the prohibition of worship activities in the mosques. At the same time, the Muslim community has a habit of worshiping in the mosque, driven by a high religious spirit. Besides, diverse religious understandings encourage the emergence of resistance. Community resistance is considered hampering the government's efforts in handling the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

2 Findings, Analysis, and Discussion

2.1 The Forms of Muslim Community Resistance Due to the Mosques Closure Policy

Due to the mosques' closure policy, several forms of resistance appear. First, Muslims still pray at the mosque, including the five daily prayers, Friday prayer, and other worship activities. Second, some people do not obey the health protocols set in praying, keeping no praying distance, and no wearing masks. Third, resistance is expressed in the form of statements or invitations to pray in the mosque. Accordingly, the mosque is a holy place. The mosque is the house of Allah, so there is no need to be afraid of COVID-19. Fourth, conveying aspirations through demonstrations, either through social media or directly by attaching banners, as a form of protest against the mosque's closure. These four forms of resistance tend to be carried out in the Muslim community to reject the mosque closure policy. A research informant stated that *"I strongly reject the contents of the policy listed in point 4 regarding the closure of mosques, because mosques do not have a major contribution to the transmission and spread of COVID-19 in Indonesia"* (Interview, 2021).

This assumption raises various resistances to support the argument that a mosque is not a place to spread COVID-19. Meanwhile, many other public places such as markets, shopping centers, and tourist objects are still operating. These places have the potential to become centers of the spread of COVID-19 as the informant's stated that *"Why mosques must be closed, while other public places are not, such as markets, shopping centers, and tourist objects. It is unfair where many infected COVID-19 in those public places"* (Interview, 2021).

Those statements represent the Muslim community response that is resistant to government policies. People tend to compare the policy of restricting activities in mosques with economic activities in the market, which respond differently (Jaya 2020). It proves that the Muslims community tends to compare activities in the market and the mosque.

2.2 Factors Encouraging Resistance to the Restrictions of Praying in Mosques

A mosque for Muslims functions as a means or place for conducting religious rituals and socio-religious activities. A mosque is the center of religious rituals and socialization of Muslims (Kessler 2015). A mosque is not restricted to praying, places to perform rituals, or the social and political dimensions of the Muslim community. Instead, it serves as a symbol of ownership and identity. A mosque is a central institution for the Muslim identity (Abdel-Hady 2010). In a pandemic situation, it is necessary to obey government policies so that mosques do not become places to spread COVID-19. Thus, the government and the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) are more recommended and prioritized following the authorities' policies. Although the policy is not mandatory, it is recommended to minimize the transmission and the spread of COVID-19 (Hasibuan and Yusram 2020).

Praying in the mosque is a long-standing habit practiced by Muslims around the world. A mosque functions as a place of praying and as a center for socio-religious activities. A Muslim has various reasons to pray at the mosque, even though the COVID-19 situation is still ongoing. COVID-19 does not dampen the Muslims' desire to pray at the mosque for at least three factors. First, a textual understanding of Islamic teaching; for example, praying in the mosque has more reward than home. Praying in the mosque is conducted to keep in touch with other Muslims. These two things are the main factors for a Muslim to pray in the mosque as stated by the informant's that *"Actually, we are praying in the mosque because it has much more rewards than praying at home"* (Interview, 2021).

Second, social media and electronic media information about COVID-19 influence public perceptions. The two media are a means of producing and consuming public knowledge. Discussions about COVID-19 have spread rapidly on the Internet and quickly become the focus of world attention (Zhao and Xu 2020). Social media is rapidly becoming the fastest

communication tool for creating, disseminating and consuming COVID-19 information (Tsao et al. 2021). The spread of health protocol misinformation promotes mispractices that increase the spread of the virus and ultimately result in poor physical and mental health outcomes among individuals (Tasnim, Hossain, and Mazumder 2020). Thus, intensive and comprehensive socialization is needed to build public knowledge to avoid hoaxes. Integrated socialization, central to regional levels as well as national to local levels, is required.

Third, the public considers that the government is slow to handle the COVID-19 pandemic, which is less sensitive to reality. It harms various life sectors of society. The government policy in determining priorities for evidence-based interventions becomes substantial (Saputra and Salma 2020). Thus, COVID-19 policies socialization has not been appropriately conveyed. It causes targets-achieved experiencing obstacles, moreover resistances. It indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic creates an urgent need for governments to address these limitations (Mali, Yerramsetti, and Manoharan 2020). As a result, the government implemented the Large-Scale Social Restriction (PSBB) policy to reduce the spread of COVID-19. However, people whose livelihoods are in the informal sector find difficulties in fulfilling their daily needs. Therefore, the government should be more concerned about the lives of lower-class people (Nasruddin and Haq 2020). It means that local governments in making policies need to be synchronized with the central and regional government's policies (Nurfurqon 2020). In other words, the policies taken should not overlap between the center, the regions, and the local interests of each area.

The policy is a strategic decision that needs to be taken in response to the conditions experienced by each region. Deni et al. (2020) define public policy as a decision to bind many people at a strategic level made by public authorities. Thus, public policy deals with laws, regulations, governance mechanisms, and general management guidelines to assist the government (Andriansyah, Taufiqurokhman, and Wekke 2019). The lens of public authority reveals micropolitical practices carried out by non-state and state actors in the bureaucracy, judiciary, politics, markets, and others who use "remote control" (te Lintelo 2017). Based on the legal awareness concept, the disobedience of street vendors to the law is not only a coping mechanism to participate in the economic system but also a weapon for the weak to voice their ideas and opinions about the injustice of the political and economic system in which they live (Vargas and Urinboyev 2015). As a result, ideology polarization becomes one of the participation conflict sources in a country, which brings government-trust decrease (Jubba et al. 2019). Correspondingly, in Croatia, participation in the informal economy results from the asymmetry between the norms, values, and beliefs of citizens (informal institutions), codified laws and regulations (formal institutions) (Williams and Franic 2016).

2.3 Implications of Resistance to Handling COVID-19

James Scott uses the concept of resistance to see community resistance (Pabbajah 2020). Scott (2017) divides the resistance into two parts; public transcript and hidden transcript. In this context, resistance means a protest to changes that occur and are not under religious values (Sumbulah 2014) or the religious practice, which is different from mainstream perspectives (Pabbajah et al. 2019). Likewise, the prayer response in the mosque policies needs to be handled well during the pandemic (Jubba 2021). The relationship between "the weak" and "the strong" is actually in an unequal power relationship, so "the weak" as the lower structure tries to balance their relationship through resistance for being not to be oppressed (Broadhurst et al. 2015; Green and Ward 2012; Roy 2011a, 2011b).

Resistance also has implications for hampering efforts to deal with COVID-19 as a whole. This paper shows at least three implications. First, the increase of intense community resistance impacts the delayed handling of COVID-19. The existence of resistance is reinforced by the differences in way and perspective between the central and local governments in handling the spread of COVID-19, which tend to lead to conflict in the community (Fakhruroji et al., 2019). The problem is that the government finds it difficult to convince and make people aware of the importance of obeying health protocols during a pandemic. Instead, what seems dominant is the resistance due to public distrust with various pandemic policies (Harjudin 2020).

Second, the resistance to the PPKM policy to suppress the spread of the COVID-19 resulted in its spread massively. The previous discussion shows that public non-compliance with the PPKM policy limiting praying activities in mosques has terrible implications for the expected Covid-19 suppression efforts. Although various efforts were implemented, such as religious approaches through Islamic religious educators, the spread of COVID-19 still grows massively. It proves that cooperation and the awareness of all parties are needed (Sugara and Ulfa 2021). In other words, resistance to the PPKM policy only raises new problems in handling the spread of COVID-19.

Third, the resistance to the PPKM policy implies the worsening image of mosques in particular and Islam in general, which seems not to care about the spread of COVID-19. The mosque as a holy place for Muslims seems to reject the policy of the common good. In contrast, Islam teaches to prioritize the benefit of humans as a whole, beyond the interests of groups and religions (Hannan and Muhaimin 2020; Harisah 2020). Resistance also shows the weakness of religious authority due to Muslim figures who do not believe in COVID-19 and consider it a conspiracy. It is a form of deauthorization of the ulama as the role model of the Muslims (Pabbajah et al. 2020). Those resistance implications hinder the government's efforts in dealing with COVID-19 and result in the waning of harmonization relations of communities horizontally (see appendix).

3 Conclusion

The PPKM policy still raises various controversial responses in the community. The high level of COVID-19 spread proves disobedience of health protocols in many places. This paper shows public resistance to PPKM policies regarding restrictions to mosques closure. Three essential findings of this study confirming resistance. First, the emergence of various forms of resistance, such as praying in the mosque and other socio-religious activities by ignoring health protocols. Second, factors encouraging resistance to the restrictions of praying in mosques are driven by the habit of Muslims praying at a mosque to get more rewards. Third, the implications of resistance at least impact the delayed handling of COVID-19. The spread of COVID-19 is increasingly widespread with high intensity. It proves the weakness of religious authority.

This paper relies on the theory of resistance as an analytical perspective to answer research questions and explain the community's condition in responding to government policies during the COVID-19. The limitation of this paper lies in the minor source of informant and study focus. It focuses on discovering forms, factors, and implications of the resistance of the Muslim community to the mosque's closure subjectively. It does not represent the objective conditions of the diversity of Indonesian people's responses to the policies implemented.

Therefore, this paper recommends a further study with a contextual concept approach supported by comprehensive data.

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