

When Religious Conservatism Intertwines with Anti-Scientism: Friday Prayers in the Time of Corona in Semarang, Indonesia

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Abstract

This article discusses the implementation of Friday prayers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. By examining the contents of 67 Friday prayers' sermons from 67 mosques in Semarang, Central Java, in-depth interviews with '*ulamā*', and journalistic reports, we argue that, firstly, a growing trend of religious conservatism influenced the reasons behind the performance of Friday prayers. Secondly, most Islamic preachers, mosque administrators, and religious leaders ignored scientists' advice on appropriate COVID-19 health protocols. Finally, there was a sense of bewilderment at mosques, caused by poor communication and ambiguous messages from the government and Islamic mass organizations.

Keywords: Friday prayers; Covid-19 pandemic; religious conservatism; anti-scientism



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Introduction

After the fall of Suharto's New Order administration (1966-1998), the socio-political state of affairs of post-New Order Indonesia has been marked by the fascinating dynamics of democratization across the country. In recent years, however, Indonesia has been deeply affected by democratic decline,¹ a turn towards greater illiberalism,² and an increase of religious nationalism³ that are influencing the quality of democracy and the strength of civil society. In relation to the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the Indonesian government struggled with inconsistency to formulate and implement appropriate health, social welfare, and other policies. Meanwhile, at the grassroots level, average citizens were increasingly influenced by the views and behaviors of religious leaders, who were seen by many as role models in facing the pandemic, even though they often contradicted the appeals and prohibitions aimed at reducing the spread of COVID-19.

Prominent Islamic preachers demonstrated a range of different reactions to the COVID-19 protocols issued by scientists, the government, and '*ulamā*' (religious leaders) organizations, including the country's top Muslim clerical organization, the Indonesian Ulama Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI). On the one hand, some renowned puritan and conservative preachers were among those who actively propagated COVID-19 protocols, including Felix Siauw, Hanan Attaki, Adi Hidayat, and Salim Fillah of *Barisan Bangun Negeri* (Country Building Front, an urban-based Islamic movement focusing on socio-religious activism) Bachtiar Nasir; and Aa Gym. On the other hand, Habib Luthfi and Gus Baha, two respected and well-known traditional and moderate preachers of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, initially seemed to 'overlook' the appeals, although in a later phase they shifted

¹ Edward Aspinall, Fossati D, Muhtadi B and Warburton E, 2020, pp. 505–526; Thomas P. Power, 2018, pp. 307–338.

² David M. Bourchier, 2015; Rachael Diprose, *et al*, 2019, pp. 691–712.

³ David M. Bourchier, 2015, pp. 713–733.

their attitudes and supported the protocols. At the local level, the differences between prominent Islamic preachers frequently generated perplexities among lower-level preachers, mosque administrators, and other religious elite who found themselves caught in the midst of dissenting opinions, particularly in their decisions whether or not to hold and attend Friday congregational prayers.

This article discusses the persistence of Islamic preachers, mosque administrators, and religious leaders in holding and attending Friday prayers during the early stages of the pandemic despite prohibitions on social activities and appeals to follow COVID-19 health protocols from various parties. We investigate the reasons why they ignored these protocols, focusing on the early days of the pandemic (when it was only rumoured that the virus had arrived in Indonesia) until the first weeks after the official arrival of the virus in the country. We explore how men of religion responded to the spread of the pandemic as reflected in the Friday prayer sermons (*khutbah*). The retrieval of research data began on 28 February 2020 and continued every Friday until 3 April 2020 in 67 mosques located in nine of 16 randomly-chosen sub-districts in Semarang City, the capital of Central Java Province. At each mosque, we recorded the sermons, and subsequently examined their contents. In addition to the sermon transcripts, we interviewed the preachers (*khatib*) who delivered the sermons as well as several '*ulamā*' from different religious organizations who had issued *fatwā* (non-binding religious opinions) on the guidance of worship during the pandemic. Even though the mosque administrators of the 67 mosques in question continued to hold Friday prayers, not all sermons discussed the pandemic. We found that, in total, preachers from only 31 of the 67 mosques discussed the pandemic.

Deeply impacted by democratic regression, there are three primary areas which predetermined Indonesia's poor handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. These three areas are rising religious conservatism, increasing anti-scientism, and state actors' recurring poor communication performance and ambiguous messages. On the basis of materials

gathered from the field, along with a number of journalistic reports, we argue that, *firstly*, there is a growing religious conservatism in Indonesia that strongly influenced the reasons why Islamic preachers, mosque administrators, and religious elite continued to hold and attend Friday prayers during the pandemic. *Secondly*, these religious elites largely ignored circulated scientific advice on health protocols on the basis of religious grounds, indicating an increasing trend towards anti-scientism. *Thirdly*, there was a sense of bewilderment among religious figures at mosques, caused by poor communication and ambiguous messages from the government and Islamic organizations on health protocols, particularly at the local level. All in all, these ambiguous religious factors and bureaucratic shortcomings signify that anti-scientism and increasingly conservative forms of Islam have found channels in which they can emerge and spread in contemporary Indonesia in the midst of democratic decline.

In developing the argument, this article is organized into several substantive sections. The next section provides a review of the relevant scholarly literature and outlines the methodological approach that guides the study. We then examine Indonesia's national and local dynamics of the pandemic, situating the country's experience within its broader political and socio-religious contexts. The subsequent sections analyze three key thematic areas in greater depth, each illuminating different dimensions of the country's pandemic governance. Throughout the analysis, we contend that these dynamics cannot be understood in isolation from the context of ongoing democratic backsliding and the intensifying influence of conservative Islamic currents, both of which significantly shaped Indonesia's inadequate and uneven response to the COVID-19 crisis. The final section of the article presents the conclusion.

Literature Review

Extensive studies on the spread of COVID-19 based on mathematical models have been conducted in both high-income and low- and middle-income countries. Indeed, according to Rabajante (2020), the probability that Indonesia had experienced infection long before it was formally announced on 2 March 2020. This finding was confirmed by De Salazar et al. (2020), who found that according to mathematical modeling, the virus had arrived in Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia before the Indonesian government made it known to the people.

In this research, the underlying assumption is that when someone is infected with a virus, it is a biological event. However, in this work, the important correlation is not the spread the illness, but the spread between people even though they are aware that these risks exist. Indeed, how individuals infect other people and when that illness becomes a global pandemic is mostly due to human negligence in anticipating it.⁴ This research analyzes the correlation between religious, in particular Islamic, conservatism and anti-scientism.

Several studies show that anti-scientism is closely related to religious conservatism. Durant,⁵ Gauchat,⁶ and Ellison and Musick⁷ argue that religious conservatism is often correlated with an 'attitude' of anti-scientism. This means the more religious people are, the more anti-scientist they are. In this case, there is a kind of fear that science and modernity will endanger human nature, that they negatively affect human life and deviate from nature.

⁴ Romadhon, Dimas Iqbal. "Gagalnya Sistem Kesiapsiagaan Membawa Dunia pada Pandemi COVID-19." The Conversation, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/gagalnya-sistem-kesiapsiagaan-membawa-dunia-pada-pandemi-covid-19-137613>

⁵ Darrin Durant, "Who are you calling 'anti-science'? How science serves social and political agendas," The Conversation, July 31th, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/who-are-you-calling-anti-science-how-science-serves-social-and-political-agendas-74755>.

⁶ Gordon William Gauchat, 2008, pp. 337-357.

⁷ Christopher G. Ellison, and Musick MA, 1995, pp. 245–262.

Other scholars see anti-scientism in relation to government policy. Suhay (2017), for instance, considers that anti-scientism occurs when politicians and other political actors decide to discredit scientific conclusions or bend the science to support certain policy positions. In this case, politicians use science to justify the policies they design, 'manipulating' the methodological research findings of scientists.

In this article, anti-scientism is defined as tendencies among people who hold anti-scientific views and do not accept science as an objective method that can produce universal knowledge. Such individuals also believe that scientific reductionism is an inherently limited means of achieving an understanding of the complex world. In relation to religious conservatism, science is considered as an anti-spiritual and materialistic force that destroys traditional values, identity, and wisdom that support reason. The basis for anti-scientific sentiment is often religious belief with a literal interpretation of sacred texts. In this case, scientific theories that conflict with what is considered to be divinely-inspired 'science' are considered to be flawed (Holton, 1993; Miller et al., 2006).

In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-scientism can be applied to the government, the '*ulamā*', and the people. In terms of the government and '*ulamā*', they can be considered to have anti-scientific views if their policies and appeals to the public are produced without considering scientific research or attention is paid to scientists' advice only when the advice is treated as a justification for existing or forthcoming policies and appeals. In terms of the public, people can be considered to hold anti-scientism views if they, in addition to ignoring science, see science as a threat to their 'normal' lives.

Methodology

This study employs a multi-layered qualitative research design to examine the potential relationship between the use of Friday prayers as a

vehicle for political communication—particularly anti-scientism discourse—by puritanical-conservative Muslim preachers during the initial and most critical stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. The research commenced with an extensive nationwide literature review, with a specific focus on case studies relevant to the socioreligious dynamics of Semarang.

To investigate the strategic deployment of Friday sermons as instruments of political mass communication in opposition to the Indonesian government's science-based assessment of COVID-19 severity—despite formal restrictions on communal worship at the time—the study conducted a qualitative content analysis of 67 Friday prayer sermons (*khutbah*) delivered across nine mosques in Semarang. Data collection was undertaken through direct audio recordings, during which researchers participated as congregants (*jama'ah*). All recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim and systematically coded for thematic analysis.

Complementing the sermon analysis, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with *khaṭīb* and *'ulamā'* affiliated with two major Muslim organizations: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI). These interviews contextualize the ideological, institutional, and motivational factors shaping sermon content and to capture the perspectives of influential religious authorities on the use of Friday prayers as a site of political communication.

The integration of sermon transcripts and interviews enables a critical examination of the mechanisms through which Friday prayers functioned as a strategic communicative arena during the pandemic. By centering the insights of NU leadership and comparing them with observed sermon practices, the study elucidates the discursive, organizational, and political dynamics underpinning the propagation of puritanical-conservative narratives in Semarang during the pandemic's early phase.

The COVID-19 Outbreak

Asian countries managed the COVID-19 pandemic through a variety of approaches, some successfully and others less so. Arguably, Indonesia can be placed in the latter category. Indonesia was one of the slowest countries to respond to the pandemic and its overall management was poor. Wariness about the potential for a pandemic could have begun when news first emerged that a new virus had been found in China, as reported on 31 December 2019 by Deutsche Welle⁸ and Reuters⁹. This news was followed by reports that the virus had spread outside China on 20 January 2020 and arrived in Singapore on 23 January 2020, infecting hundreds of Singaporeans.¹⁰ However, although other Southeast Asian countries had begun to anticipate national outbreaks at this point, the Indonesian government was convinced that the virus would not reach the country.¹¹

At the end of January 2020, it was *Pikiran Rakyat*, a daily newspaper based in Bandung, which reported that the pandemic had reached Indonesia.¹² The news amplified the statements of Indonesian parliaments who voices their concerns over the credibility of the epidemiologists of the Eijkman Molecular Biological Institute (LBM Eijkman), a major Indonesian

⁸ Deutsche Welle, “*China investigates SARS-like virus as dozens struck by pneumonia.*” DW, December 31th, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/china-investigates-sars-like-virus-as-dozens-struck-by-pneumonia/a-51843861>.

⁹ Reuters, “*Chinese officials investigate cause of pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan.*” Reuters, December 31st, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-pneumonia/chinese-officials-investigate-cause-of-pneumonia-outbreak-in-wuhan-idUSKBN1YZ0GP>.

¹⁰ Zhaki Abdullah and Hidayah Salamat, “*Singapore confirms first case of Wuhan virus.*” Channel News Asia. January 23rd, 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/wuhan-virus-pneumonia-singapore-confirms-first-case-12312860>.

¹¹ Tim Lindsey and Tim Mann “*Indonesia was in denial over coronavirus. Now it may be facing a looming disaster*” The Conversation Indonesia, April 8, 2020 <https://theconversation.com/indonesia-was-in-denial-over-coronavirus-now-it-may-be-facing-a-looming-disaster-135436>

¹² Karima, Annisa, “*Pemerintah diminta optimalkan LBM Eijkman demi cegah penyebaran virus corona di Indonesia.*” *Pikiran Rakyat*, January 29th, 2020, <https://www.pikiran-rakyat.com/nasional/pr-01335177/pemerintah-diminta-optimalkan-lbm-eijkman-demi-cegah-penyebaran-virus-corona-di-indonesia>.

research institute, who stated that Indonesia was very likely to already be experiencing infections¹³.

If we look at the data, Indonesia is one of the countries with the worst handling of the pandemic, even when compared to other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Research conducted by the Deep Knowledge Group on the level of national security (in relation to the pandemic) placed Indonesia at number 97 out of the world's 100 safest countries, far below other ASEAN countries such as Singapore (4), Vietnam (2), Malaysia (30), Thailand (47), the Philippines (55), and Myanmar (83).¹⁴

Since the first case was officially identified in Indonesia on 2 March 2020, the number of COVID-19 patients continued to increase. In Semarang, by 17 April 2020, 46 medical workers at Kariadi Hospital were reported to be affected by COVID-19.¹⁵ In addition, the percentage of death in Semarang was in line with that of Central Java as a whole, with the mortality rate reaching 8.43 percent by July 2020,¹⁶ much higher than the national average of 5 percent and the global average of 4.72 percent.¹⁷

¹³ BBC Indonesia “Eijkman dilebur ke BRIN: Deteksi Covid-19 bisa ‘terganggu’, pengembangan vaksin Merah Putih juga ‘terhambat’” 4 Jenuari 2022

¹⁴Deep Knowledge Group, “*COVID-19 regional safety assessment*,” Deep Knowledge Group, 2020, <https://www.dkv.global/covid-regional-assessment>.

¹⁵ Warta Ekonomi, “*Miris! 46 tenaga medis RSUP Dr Kariadi Semarang positif corona gara-gara pasien bohong*,” Warta Ekonomi, April 17th, 2020, <https://www.wartaekonomi.co.id/read281610/miris-46-tenaga-medis-rsup-dr-kariadi-semarang-positif-corona-gara-gara-pasien-bohong>.

¹⁶ Eviyanti, “*Angka kematian akibat COVID-19 di Jawa Tengah melonjak, lampau angka nasional dalam satu bulan*,” Pikiran Rakyat, July 9th, 2020, <https://www.pikiran-rakyat.com/nasional/pr-01590963/angka-kematian-akibat-covid-19-di-jawa-tengah-melonjak-lampau-angka-nasional-dalam-satu-bulan>.

¹⁷ Ochi Amanaturrosyidah, “*Mortality rate due to Corona in Indonesia 5% higher than global*,” Kumparan, July 5th, 2020, https://kumparan.com/kumparannews/tingkat-kematian-akibat-corona-di-indonesia-5-lebih-tinggi-dari-global1tkGAAughyV/full?shareID=yfBSPOgyQEhV&utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=whatsapp&utm_source=kumMobile.

These circumstances highlight the outbreak of COVID-19 in Indonesia at the national level and the local level of Semarang. The next three sections focus on three areas that highly influenced the state's poor handling of the pandemic: rising religious conservatism, increasing anti-scientism, and recurring state actors' poor communication and ambiguous messages. Attention is focused on Semarang and the implementation of Friday prayers by mosque administrators, the sermons given by Islamic preachers, and the statements made by religious leaders.

Rising Religious Conservatism

Limited autonomous and strong civil society, frequent ethnic and religious violence, and prevalent corruption, clientelism, populism, and religious conservatism are among the crucial factors that have disrupted the quality of democratization in Indonesia. Populism and religious conservatism have become intertwined since the 2014 presidential elections which resulted in the election of Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo. The rising number and influence of supporters of these socio-political phenomena has led to some observers categorizing the country as more religiously conservative.¹⁸ One of the most critical incidents was the series of 2016-2017 demonstrations around the Jakarta gubernatorial elections by hard-liner Islamist groups that contributed to the defeat of the then-incumbent Chinese-Christian Governor of Jakarta, Basuki 'Ahok' Tjahaja Purnama.¹⁹

In this article, religious conservatism is defined as tendencies among certain religious individuals or groups which are characterized by a very strict and literal understanding and application of certain sacred texts, dogmas, or ideologies, as well as strong feelings about the importance of preserving distinctions between certain religious groups. These beliefs are

¹⁸ Michael Davis, 2002, pp. 12–32.; Hadiz Vedi R., 2019, pp. 271–290.; Martin Van Bruinessen, 2013.

¹⁹ Hadiz Vedi R., Loc. cit.; Marcus Mietzner, Muhtadi B and Halida R, 2018, pp. 159–187.; Marcus Mietzner and Muhtadi B, 2018, pp. 479–497.

considered to ultimately lead to the purity of religion and the desire to return to the ideal aspirations stated in the sacred texts. The rejection of the diversity of opinions as applied to established dogmas and ideologies as well as their interpretations, which are considered as basic religious guidelines, often occurs due to such conservative tendencies.²⁰ In relation to the pandemic, religious conservatism was one of the most notorious factors that hindered the efforts made by the government, scientists, and religious organizations in implementing health protocols, especially in relation to guidance on congregational worship.

As the capital city of Central Java Province, Semarang is one of Indonesia's major cities. The city has an area of 373.7 square kilometers and a 2017 population of 1,729,426 people. Islam is the majority religion, with 84.37 of the population identifying as Muslim.²¹ The large number of Muslims in Semarang has resulted a larger number of mosques and small mosques (*mushala*) than other places of worship, with 1,161 mosques and 1,151 *mushala* in 2015.²² In addition, there were 183 Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) with 8,977 pupils (*santri*) in 2019.²³ In terms of Muslim typology, based on research conducted by the Alvara Research Center in 2015, at least four categories of Muslims were documented in Semarang, including cultural-moderate (50.5 percent), cultural-conservative (19.1 percent), puritan-moderate (25.5 percent), and puritan-conservative (4.8 percent).²⁴

As in most other areas of Java, the Islamic aspects of Semarang are also colored by hybrid cultural practices that maintain local Islamic

²⁰ Bob Altemeyer and Hunsberger B, 1992, p. 113-133.; Bruce Hunsberger, 1995, pp. 113-129.; Jonas R. Kunst, Thomsen L and Sam DL, 2014, pp. 337-348.

²¹<http://satadata.semarangkota.go.id/adm/file/20180925121717JumlahPendudukMenurutKecamatanAndAgamaYangDianutdiKotaSemarang2017.pdf>

²²<https://jateng.bps.go.id/statictable/2016/08/19/1274/jumlah-tempat-peribadatan-menurut-kabupaten-kota-di-provinsi-jawa-tengah-2015.html>

²³ <https://ditpdPontren.kemenag.go.id/pdpp/statistik?id=33%205.%20Jumla>

²⁴ Alvara Research Center, "The Portrait of Urban Moslem: Gairah Religiusitas Masyarakat Kota," Alvara Research Center, 2015.

traditions, such as *dugderan* (religious festivities to welcome the holy month of Ramadan),²⁵ *nyadran* (annual religious activities manifested by a pilgrimage to the graves of ancestors before the holy month of Ramadan by bringing food),²⁶ and *suroan* (traditional ceremonies welcoming the Javanese new year).²⁷ In addition, based on people's preferences for Islamic organizations, most Semarang citizens feel close to NU (58.8 percent), and thus many Islamic traditions in Semarang are closely related to NU's religious rituals, such as *tahlilan* (prayers performed on six consecutive nights to facilitate a deceased person entering paradise) and *mauludan* (the observance of the birthday of Prophet Muhammad, commemorated in *Rabī' al-'Awwal*, the third month of the Islamic calendar).²⁸

Despite their cultural-moderate tendencies, their feeling of closeness to NU as the guardian of sacred tradition by maintaining the four *madhab* (Islamic schools of law) teachings, and their preferences in preserving hybrid religious traditions, many Muslims in Semarang showed a large degree of religious conservatism in terms of performing communal Friday prayers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on our findings, many preachers boldly stated that Friday prayers could not be performed at home. Some preachers even incorrectly pointed to Wuhan, where the pandemic is alleged to have first emerged, that Muslims in Wuhan were not affected by COVID-19. For instance:

Friday prayers are mandatory for Muslim men. Friday prayers cannot be performed at home. From the information I read, in Wuhan, China, the people protected from this disease are those who take refuge in the house of Allah. If we draw closer to Allah, Allah will help and protect us.²⁹

²⁵ Cahyono, 2018, p. 339-362.

²⁶ Kastolani and Yusof A, 2016, p. 51-74.

²⁷ Damar Safera and Huda MC, 2020, p. 66-79.

²⁸ <https://www.nu.or.id/post/read/52495/hasil-survei-588-muslim-kota-mengaku-nu>

²⁹ Sermon, 6 March 2020.

In Indonesia, many early statements about the pandemic from religious figures mentioned Wuhan. Among the first influential figures to take up the topic was Ustadz Abdul Somad, a renowned conservative preacher. He stated that coronaviruses are ‘soldiers of God’ sent to China to defend Uyghur Muslims from oppression.³⁰ Although he later shifted his view, notably after receiving much criticism, this narrative affirmed the views already held by many Muslims. It was not only Ustadz Abdul Somad who initially downplayed the threat of the virus, with other famous preachers who are considered more moderate very strong in voicing similar opinions. For example, Habib Luthfi bin Yahya, a respected *sufi* guru and NU preacher, stated that the pandemic would not affect Indonesian Muslims. Habib Luthfi was so convinced of this that on 20 March 2020, he organized a congregation called *Pengajian Kliwonan* at his residence in Pekalongan, Central Java; the event was attended by thousands of people from all over Java. Habib Luthfi boldly sent a clear message to Indonesian Muslims that the pandemic should not prevent them from normal activities, especially praying.³¹ Despite this, he later changed his mind and supported the government’s health protocols on social distancing and partial lockdown.

What was common in the contents and tones of the preachers was that many of them related the pandemic to people’s sins, suggesting that people must repent in order to avoid COVID-19. This belief is closely related to theological fatalism, a philosophical doctrine that emphasizes the conquest of all events or actions for fate or destiny³², and is generally

³⁰ Adib Auliawan Herlambang, “Ustaz Abdul Somad: Virus korona merupakan tentara Allah melindungi Muslim Uighur,” Ayo Semarang, February 29th, 2020, <https://www.ayosemarang.com/read/2020/02/29/52975/ustaz-abdul-somad-virus-korona-merupakan-tentara-allah-melindungi-muslim-uighur>.

³¹ Radar Pekalongan, “Habib Luthfi: Waspadai bahaya syirik karena corona,” Radar Pekalongan, March 20th, 2020. <https://radarpekalongan.co.id/100598/habib-luthfi-waspadai-bahaya-syirik-karena-corona/>.

³² Hunt, David P. 1998

associated with the view that humans are powerless to do anything other than what they actually do and that they do not have the power to influence the future or even the results of their own actions.

The calamity that befell the people of Moses now repeats again. Although not similar, the disaster now comes in the form of the coronavirus. It turns out that the calamity occurs because many people are arrogant. Therefore, Allah reminds us so that we all will immediately realize and return to the path of Allah before Allah inflicts more terrible disasters.³³

Conservative beliefs also include the glorification of the Islamic past. Mohammed Ayoob suggests that the reappropriation of the past and the 'invention of tradition' in terms of a romanticized idea of a largely mythical golden age, lies at the heart of the instrumentalization of Islam.³⁴ It is exactly the invention of tradition that provides the tools for dehistoricizing Islam and separating it from the various contexts. As a result of this glorification, many Muslims in Indonesia are now also influenced by the growing global trend of religious conservatism that has appeared as a challenge to liberal democracy.³⁵

During the pandemic, the government relied upon MUI, NU, Muhammadiyah, and other leading Islamic organizations to convey its messages and support its missions³⁶. What we find in the field, however, indicates that these organizations were largely unable to persuade their followers to obey COVID-19 health protocols. This occurred for several reasons, such as the limited clarity of the messages, the difference of knowledge between leaders and followers, and the difference of local circumstances in each area.

³³ Sermon, 20 March 2020.

³⁴ Mohammed Ayoob, 004, pp. 1-14.

³⁵ Diego Fossati, 2019, pp. 119-148.

³⁶ Aisyah Putri Rahyy and Ilham Akhsanu Ridlo, 2021

In sum, preachers' sermons during the pandemic were primarily encouragements for people to keep up their usual prayer practices. Religious doctrines causing religious conservatism played a significant part in terms of influencing the public to perform congregational prayers during the pandemic. Therefore, as religion plays a significant role in many countries around the world, any strategy being pursued to contain and end the COVID-19 pandemic (and any future pandemics) must be developed in close consultation with religious leaders to ensure that the implementation will be effective. Otherwise, as the findings above show, it is not uncommon for religious leaders and state officials to utilize religious appeals and rhetoric to convey certain perspectives, even if they are flawed, contradictory, or simply inaccurate.³⁷

Increasing Anti-Scientism

Studies show that anti-scientism is closely related to religious conservatism. This is evident in the works of Durant,³⁸ Gauchat,³⁹ and Ellison and Musick.⁴⁰ The essence of their argument is that religious conservatism is often correlated with anti-scientism attitudes. This means that the more religious people are, the more anti-scientism they are. They fear that science and modernity will endanger human nature.

Other scholars see anti-scientism in relation to government policy. Suhay, for instance, views that anti-scientism occurs when politicians and other political actors decide to discredit science in which a conclusion is

³⁷Alexander Arifianto, and Jonathan Chen, “*An uneasy partnership? Islam and the COVID-19 response in Indonesia*,” The LSE Religion and Global Society, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2020/05/an-uneasy-partnership-islam-and-the-covid-19-response-in-indonesia/>. Accessed on June 21th 2020.

³⁸Darrin Durant, “*Who are you calling ‘anti-science’? How science serves social and political agendas*,” The Conversation, July 31th, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/who-are-you-calling-anti-science-how-science-serves-social-and-political-agendas-74755>.

³⁹Gordon William Gauchat, 2008, pp. 337-357.

⁴⁰Christopher G. Ellison, and Musick MA, 1995, pp. 245–262.

based or bend the science to support their policy position.⁴¹ In this case, politicians use science to justify the policies they design and ‘manipulate’ methodological research findings that.

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In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-scientism can be taken up by the government, the ‘*ulamā*’, and the people. In terms of the government and the ‘*ulamā*’, they can be considered to have anti-scientific views if their policies and appeals are produced without considering scientific research or if they pay attention to scientists’ advice only when the advice is treated as a justification to already-formulated policies and appeals. Meanwhile, the public can be regarded to hold on to anti-scientific views if they, in addition to ignoring science, see science as a threat to their ‘normal’ life before the pandemic.

Semarang is known as a city which it is relatively free from socio-religious conflicts. One of the likely reasons behind this is the preservation of the local tradition of *srawung*. *Srawung* is a meeting held by more than one person or group with the aim of building a feeling of togetherness. Therefore, harmonious relations between different communities in

⁴¹ Elizabeth Suhay, 2017.

⁴² Gerald James Holton, 1993; Jon D. Miller, Scott Eugenie Corol and Okamoto Shinji, 2006, pp. 765-766.

Semarang are maintained⁴³ and that people have a medium to express their communal concerns.

However, our field work findings from Semarang show that during the pandemic, many preachers firmly used anti-scientism jargon in their sermons by referring to *fatwā* of Islamic mass organizations. The communal meeting of *srawung* lost its importance because people did not discuss the pandemic in the meetings.

Prior to today's sermon assignment, I had already informed the mosque administrators about the MUI *fatwā*. In fact, I also shared a video by 'ulamā' about Friday prayers. There is also a wise view of the NU which considers that as long as the area has not been classified by the red or dangerous zone, Friday prayers can still be held, as long as the congregation is told to wash their hands first. We also need to tell [worshippers] about physical distancing by instructing them to bring their own prayer mat.⁴⁴

The above sermon shows that the preacher was aware of the MUI *fatwā* (this *fatwā* is described in a later section) on congregational worship during the pandemic. However, he used a more ambiguous NU *fatwā* (also described in a later section) to justify his decision for the mosque to continue holding Friday prayers. Nevertheless, we were unable to identify any official information about which areas of Semarang were defined as green or red zones on 27 March 2020 when the relevant Friday prayers were held.

The same tone was present in another sermon, which also ignored scientific advice and was highly influenced by religious conservatism:

⁴³ Stefanus Wawan Setiawan and Sibarani R, 2021, p. 194-204.

⁴⁴ Sermon, 27 March 2020.

Pandemic disease is a disease that spreads throughout the country. Now COVID-19 attacks almost 182 countries. In Indonesia alone, there are around 600 people who are infected, and around 50 people who have died. But the situation is extraordinary; we are not afraid of the devil, but we are very afraid of this tiny virus. We abandon the congregational prayers. Why do we abandon congregational prayers? Why do we trust COVID-19 more than Allah? This is the house of Allah (the mosque). This is not the place where we will be infected by the virus.⁴⁵

From the scientific point of view of global health, a pandemic is not a natural event but is rather caused by the failure to apply a pandemic preparedness system from the beginning. The underlying assumption is that when someone is infected with a virus, it is a biological event. However, how they infect other people and when the infection transforms into a global pandemic, is mostly due to human negligence in anticipation.⁴⁶ The above sermon clearly shows that the preacher was aware that the outbreak was already in hundreds of countries, including Indonesia, yet nevertheless neglected to share the danger with his congregation.

The probability that the pandemic had already arrived in Indonesia long before the government announced it is strengthened by Jomar F. Rabajante's research, which used mathematical modelling to show that Indonesia had already been affected by COVID-19 as early as the beginning of 2020.⁴⁷ This finding was confirmed by research result from De Salazar, Niehus, Taylor, Buckee, and Lipsitch, who also found that according to mathematical modelling, the virus had arrived in Singapore,

⁴⁵ Sermon, 27 March 2020.

⁴⁶ Dimas Iqbal Romadhon, "Gagalnya sistem kesiapsiagaan membawa dunia pada pandemi COVID-19," The Conversation, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/gagalnya-sistem-kesiapsiagaan-membawa-dunia-pada-pandemi-covid-19-137613>.

⁴⁷ Jomar Rabajante, "Insights from early mathematical models of 2019-Ncov acute respiratory disease (COVID-19) dynamics," Arxiv, 2020, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2002.05296>.

Thailand, and Indonesia before the Indonesian government made it known to the public.⁴⁸

Since the government initially neglected scientific reports on the spread of the virus, it is not surprising that the majority of Indonesian citizens followed the same path and denied scientific advice on health protocols. Anti-scientific attitudes in Semarang show that the government, ‘*ulamā*’, and the public all often ignored scientific views and tended to follow conservative religious views. If conservative religious views conflict with scientific views, then conservative religious views are usually followed. In the case of COVID-19, this mean that many members of the public did not follow the recommendations of scientists and the government’s health protocols.

Recurring Poor Communication and Ambiguous Messages

One of the important findings from this study is the ignorance of many Islamic preachers and lower-level ‘*ulamā*’ in complying with the health protocols due to ambiguous and indecisive messages disseminated by the government that confuse the wider public. The Indonesian government’s pattern of communication in the case of the pandemic is characterized by denial, undermining, lack of responsiveness, lack of coordination, lack of consistency, lack of transparency, and lack of accuracy.⁴⁹

In crisis communication theory, before a crisis occurs—the ‘pre-crisis stage’—communication is key to provide initial knowledge to and raise awareness with the public about the upcoming crisis, so that the public understands and is prepared when the outbreak arrives.⁵⁰ However, in the

⁴⁸Pablo M De Salazar, Niehus R, Taylor A, Buckee C and Lipsitch M, “Using predicted imports of 2019-nCov cases to determine locations that may not be identifying all imported cases,” In *MedRxiv: The Preprint Server for Health Sciences*, (2020).

⁴⁹ Wijayanto et al, 2021.

⁵⁰ Barbara Reynolds and Seeger MW, 2005, pp. 43–55.

case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indonesian government failed to provide adequate initial knowledge and preparation. The government's poor communication during this phase—which primarily focused on denying and undermining—reflected the government's lack of responsiveness when the pandemic first emerged; this continued until the government was finally forced to admit that the pandemic had spread because people tested positive to COVID-19 after initially being diagnosed with other illnesses.⁵¹ Based on our findings and journalistic reports, it is clear that the Semarang government was equally ignorant as the central government in the way they neglected the importance of clear and bold public communication, by failing to inform the people about safe zones and the danger of joining public prayers.

The ambiguous, unclear, and inconsistent government messages and poor communication caused confusion and misunderstanding among the general public. As a result, many Islamic preachers did not know that performing Friday prayers during the pandemic was risky. At one mosque, for instance, a preacher insisted that government's messages were unclear:

The connection with this problem (the pandemic) is real due to the lack of socialization by the government. Why are there many people who conduct Friday prayers? It is because the people feel safe due to the absence of people who are affected by the disease. Obeying the government can be realized by carrying your own prayer mat and bringing hand sanitizer. We are already aware of the danger of coronavirus, that is why I am very careful about that.⁵²

⁵¹ Joshua Nevett “Coronavirus: I watched the president reveal I had Covid-19 on TV” 6 May 2020 BBC <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52501443>

⁵² Sermon, 3 April 2020/

The ignorance shown by Islamic preachers in responding to the pandemic in Indonesia was in line with the perception of state leaders. The footprint of the Indonesian government's denial and neglect can be documented as follows. On 27 January 2020, President Jokowi expressed his optimism that the virus would not be detected in Indonesia, although this statement was unfortunately not accompanied by a serious effort to conduct widespread testing.⁵³ When the World Health Organization and Harvard University criticized these comments and said that the virus could have arrived in Indonesia but was undetected due to the lack of ability of the government to test, then-Minister of Health was angry and regarded it as an insult.⁵⁴

Next, the Minister of Transportation even joked that Indonesians were immune to the virus because they liked *nasi kucing* (small portions of rice with side dishes).⁵⁵ Just one month later, the minister himself contracted COVID-19, becoming case #76 and the highest-level government official to be struck down by the virus at that point in time.⁵⁶ Even the Head of the National Disaster Management Agency made a statement that Indonesia was free of the virus because the citizens liked to drink *jamu* (herbal medicine), and suggested that herbal medicine should be more strongly promoted because of this.⁵⁷ The tone of denial

⁵³ Esthi Maharani, "Jokowi: Virus corona tak terdeteksi di Indonesia," Republika, January 27th, 2020, <https://nasional.republika.co.id/berita/q4r2pi335/jokowi-virus-corona-tak-terdeteksi-di-indonesia>.

⁵⁴ Ihsanuddin, "Menkes: Ahli Harvard suruh ke sini, lihat langsung alat deteksi corona," Kompas, February 11th, 2020, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/02/11/17080231/menkes-ahli-harvard-suruh-ke-sini-lihat-langsung-alat-deteksi-corona?page=all>.

⁵⁵ Andri Saubani, "Kelakar Menhub: Kita kebal corona karena doyan nasi kucing," Republika February 17th, 2020, <https://www.republika.co.id/berita/nasional/umum/20/02/17/q5ul4k409-kelakar-menhub-kita-kebal-corona-karena-doyan-nasi-kucing>.

⁵⁶ The Jakarta Post, "BREAKING: Indonesian transportation minister tests positive for COVID-19", March 14th, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/14/breaking-indonesian-transportation-minister-tests-positive-for-covid-19.html>

⁵⁷ Sania Mashabi, "Indonesia masih aman dari virus corona, kepala BNPB: Apa mungkin karena sering minum jamu?" Kompas, February 24th, 2020,

and neglect was also conveyed by then-Vice President Ma'ruf Amin, when at the end of February 2020 he stated that Indonesia was free of the virus because the citizens were fond of reading the *qunut nazilah* (a special prayer to get rid of dangerous diseases) during dawn prayers.⁵⁸

We found empirical evidence that the equally poor communication performance of the central government was followed by the Semarang government. On 26 February 2020, media reported that a COVID-19 suspected patient was being treated at Semarang's Kariadi Hospital, the largest hospital in Central Java.⁵⁹ At that time, coverage suggesting that COVID-19 had arrived in Indonesia began appearing in the media. However, in the same tone as the central government, the Semarang government did not confirm the spread of the illness; as a result, the patient—who later died of COVID-19—was not officially recognized as the first case in Indonesia. Even after Jokowi's official announcement of the outbreak in early March, the Semarang government did not hesitate to give permission to a cruise ship carrying foreign passengers to dock in Semarang.⁶⁰ Despite the local government's claim that the passengers of the cruise had undergone medical checks, one passenger was in fact hospitalized due to lung-related illness.⁶¹

The Semarang government announced the city's first official case of COVID-19 on 15 March 2020. Two days later, it was reported that a patient had tested positive then subsequently died had already been hospitalized

<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/02/24/12141771/indonesia-masih-aman-dari-virus-corona-kepala-bnbp-apa-mungkin-karena-sering>.

⁵⁸ Adhi M Daryono, “*Ma'ruf Amin: Banyak kiai baca doa qunut, corona minggir dari Indonesia*,” Kumparan, February 28th, 2020, <https://kumparan.com/kumparannews/maruf-amin-banyak-kiai-baca-doa-qunut-corona-minggir-dari-indonesia-1svX6HuXHFB/full>.

⁵⁹ Angling Adhitya Purbaya, “*Pasien suspek corona meninggal, ini kata RS Kariadi Semarang*,” Detik, 25 February 25th, 2020, <https://health.detik.com/berita-detikhealth/d-4914369/pasien-suspek-corona-meninggal-ini-kata-rs-kariadi-semarang>.

⁶⁰ <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/03/14/06330871/ribuan-turis-asing-kapal-pesiar-columbus-boleh-turun-di-semarang-ini?page=all>

⁶¹ <https://www.liputan6.com/regional/read/4201694/satu-penumpang-kapal-pesiar-dirawat-di-rs-semarang-night-carnival-2020-ditunda>

for 10 days, meaning that the patient might have been exposed to COVID-19 as early as 7 March 2020, or even earlier due to COVID-19's long incubation period.⁶² Nevertheless, the Semarang government only made its first official appeals on its website for the public to follow health protocols on 15 March 2020.

Based on data gathered from various sources, as of 26 March 2020, at least 46,018 people departed Jakarta to return home to various towns in Central Java. This was because Jakarta was severely affected by the pandemic since the first official case was announced on 2 March 2020. However, as of 29 March 2020, unlike Jakarta, the local government of Semarang did not have a proper pandemic monitoring system that mapped the distribution of people with suspected or diagnosed COVID-19 at the level of urban neighborhoods (*kelurahan*). Not only was the data incomplete, but the COVID-19 website of the Semarang government also frequently malfunctioned.

In line with the poor communication and ambiguous messages of the central and local governments, many Islamic mass organizations shared the same attitude. The government heavily relied on these organizations to assist the fight against COVID-19: Jokowi appealed to Islamic mass organizations early on in the pandemic, in the expectation that they would encourage their congregations to practice social distancing and would discourage participation in large-scale religious gatherings.⁶³ While many Islamic leaders largely complied with the central government's directive, the situation was not so clear-cut with the country's major Islamic organizations, including MUI, NU, and Muhammadiyah. For example, the state depended on MUI's statements to convince the public to worship

⁶² Angling Adhitya Purbaya, “1 pasien positif corona meninggal di RS Kariadi Semarang hari ini,” Detik, March 17th, 2020, <https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-tengah/d-4942759/1-pasien-positif-corona-meninggal-di-rs-kariadi-semarang-hari-ini/1>.

⁶³ Alexander and Jonathan Chen “An Uneasy Partnership? Islam and the COVID-19 Response in Indonesia” May 2020 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2020/05/an-uneasy-partnership-islam-and-the-covid-19-response-in-indonesia/>

safely during the pandemic, while MUI relied on the state in determining which areas were considered ‘safe’ for congregational worship; this resulted in ambiguous appeals and prohibitions that, in turn, created confusion among Islamic preachers, mosque administrators, and religious leaders, impacting their decision making on whether to hold and attend Friday prayers.

On 17 March 2020, MUI issued a *fatwā* on the obligation for Muslims to observe prayer rituals under the circumstances of a pandemic. They stated that Muslims were not obliged to perform Friday prayers in regions that were considered ‘too risky’. However, Muslims were still encouraged to do so in regions that were considered ‘safe’. The *fatwā* did not specify which areas were deemed ‘safe’ or ‘risky’, thus allowing for arbitrary interpretations and a lack of serious attempts at enforcement.⁶⁴ NU also issued a *fatwā* on what steps should be taken when facing the pandemic, stating that during a pandemic, Muslims could forego praying in mosques, and added that individuals who had been tested positive with COVID-19 were banned from attending congregational prayers and must stay at home. Yet at the same time, NU also advised Muslims living in areas where COVID-19 was considered to be under control to join Friday prayers. All these *fatwā*, however, did not consider the weak capacity of both the central and provincial governments in conducting mass and rapid testing. Therefore the definition of ‘red’ (‘risky’) or ‘green’ (‘safe’) zones remained unclear, further complicating the already-ambiguous *fatwā*.⁶⁵ As a result, many lower-level Islamic preachers in Semarang misunderstood the messages of these organizations’ *fatwā*.

An interview with a top leader of the Central Java NU chapter identifies the poor communication and ambiguous messages of the

⁶⁴ Alexander Arifianto and Jonathan Chen, Loc. cit.

⁶⁵ Syafiq Hasyim, Covid-19, “Islamic civil society and state capacity in Indonesia,” *ISEAS Perspective* 39, 2020, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ISEASPerspective_2020_39.pdf.

government and Islamic mass organizations as being a key source of the confusion:

Indeed, there are those who praise our decision and some who criticize. We issued a *fatwā* for the mosque to hold Friday prayers in *kelurahan* that appeared as green and yellow zones. We have not been able to expressly forbid Friday prayers because the government itself has not yet made a firm decision. Unfortunately, there is no information on the government website about which areas are included in the green zone and which areas are included in the red zone.⁶⁶

This interview reflects that there was a serious communication problem between the central government and religious leaders. This regional NU leader believed that the government failed to provide a clear and firm message whether or not Friday prayers could be performed at the mosque. He also pointed towards the unavailability of updated Semarang COVID-19 data on the government's website. Nevertheless, the top regional NU leader in Central Java insisted that Friday prayers must be performed at the mosque. Furthermore, he was convinced that Central Java NU's *fatwā* scientifically-based. In this regard, it is clear that poor communication performances go hand in hand with anti-scientific attitudes, as in Semarang (and also possibly in many other parts of Indonesia), many Muslims without adequate religious education backgrounds were left in limbo, trying to decide who and what to follow because they were in constant search of religious conformity and knowledge.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Interview, 29 March 2020.

⁶⁷ Yanwar Pribadi, 2020, p.229.

Conclusion

This article has investigated why certain Islamic preachers, mosque administrators, and religious leaders in Semarang, Indonesia, held and attended Friday prayers despite COVID-19 health protocols issued or spread by scientists, the government, and Islamic organizations. We demonstrated, that, firstly, a rising religious conservatism in Indonesia strongly influenced Islamic preachers, mosque administrators, and religious leaders to continue holding and attending Friday prayers in the time of the pandemic. Secondly, religious elite practiced anti-scientism, ignoring widespread scientists' advice and government health protocols due to religious reasons. Thirdly, there was confusion among the wider public caused by poor communication and ambiguous messages delivered by the government and Islamic organizations on health protocols, particularly at the local level, including in Semarang.

Despite showing their cultural-moderate characteristics, feelings of closeness to NU's religious rituals and thoughts, and a predilection in preserving local Islamic traditions, many Muslims in Semarang now show a large degree of religious conservatism and anti-scientism. Our findings confirm this state of affairs. This trend towards religious conservatism is influencing the way people think about science, including ignoring the dangers of COVID-19 during the peak of the pandemic by continuing to hold and attend congregational prayers. The COVID-19 situation deteriorated because the Semarang and central governments and Islamic organizations disseminated ambiguous, unclear, and inconsistent messages and failed to properly communicate, resulting in misunderstanding amongst the residents of Semarang.

These findings resonate with recent developments of religious configuration in the middle of democratic decline in Indonesia. Our arguments show that Islamic preachers, mosque administrators, and religious leaders held and attended congregational prayers despite COVID-19 health protocols from scientists, the government, and Islamic

organizations because they were deeply influenced by strong religious factors, a tendency to neglect science, and the poor and ambiguous communication of the government and Islamic organizations. The continuance of Friday prayers during the pandemic was in line with the shift in religious thought and expression in line with conservative forms of Islam that are widespread in contemporary Indonesia, influencing how people hold on to religious reasoning.

The three areas we have explored in this article expose the inability of the Indonesian government and Islamic mass organizations to succeed against strong conservative religious factors and anti-scientism, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. This severely damaged the country's health sector, both prior and during the pandemic. Certainly, the pandemic revealed the weakness of many socio-economical-cultural-political systems in Indonesia, even the simple religious ritual of Friday prayers.

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