
Friction between Religious Groups during the Pandemic and the Urge of Dialogue

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Abstract

This paper discusses conflict between and within religions occurring during the pandemic. The government's regulation on closing public spaces, including houses of worship, has led all religious groups to perform and to do their worship from home. However, it is oftentimes disobeyed; some rituals and worships are believed to require a number of people to get involved in, including Jumah prayer which belongs to Islamic tradition and *Ibadah Minggu* which belongs to Christianity. The result shows that conflict that leads to violence often occurs in the process of reinforcing the regulation where mostly the rule-breakers act as the offenders. Yet, in some occasions, the Islamic tradition is generally treated in an exclusive manner. This paper also examines the best strategy to resolve religious conflict and to build peace as well as to prevent such conflict to happen yet another time in the future – that is, through dialogue accompanied by religious rituals and symbols.

Keywords

Conflict, Violence, Dialogue



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INTRODUCTION

Religious violence in Indonesia has existed since its proclamation, even way before. As the dominant religion, Islam contributes to almost all scenarios of religious violence both as the perpetrators and the victims. Being extremely diverse, the Old Order's government formulated *Pancasila* as an ideology to unite the nation. This was arguably the starting point where Islamic radical group – at that time, the *Darul Islam* (DI) movement whose notion was to establish an Islamic state – began utilizing violence to express their dissatisfaction towards it (Andini, 2017; Schulze, 2004). Soon after the fall of the Old Order, the New Order regime was able to prevent such violence to come to surface by applying repressive actions and executing whoever questioned Pancasila and the government's policies. However, after the New Order ended in 1998, the Reform era began to flourish and marked the revival of radical groups due to its notion of freedom and democracy.

In this modern Indonesia, religious violence and conflict have occurred in various forms. In the examination that follows, the focus is limited to conflict and violence happening during the early pandemic, particularly those which involve conservative Muslims. The outbreak of the novel corona

virus, better known as Covid-19, has put human civilization into a new phase where physical or non-physical contact is considered dangerous. It has been spreading so rapidly that on March 11, 2020 the *World Health Organization* declared Covid-19 pandemic. Only after the declaration did Indonesian government take an action by applying a new regulation regarding regional *lockdown* or PSBB (*Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar*). The regulation includes the closure of public spaces and governmental offices which definitely limits the citizens' activities for the people's safety. It also limits their access to get full service – that is, their rights as a citizen. Public hospital, for instance, prioritizes patients who are infected to Covid-19; thus, those who are suffering from other diseases are forced to recover by themselves or find other medical alternatives.

Such closure affects the people's religious lives as well. Houses of worship such as mosque and church are subject to the closing. Religious individuals can no longer worship or pray from or in their representative houses of worship, particularly during the first lockdown in the first half of 2020. At this time, worship and prayer could only be done from home. However, some conservative Muslims ignored this regulation and still prayed in their mosques, which triggers conflict to occur. Today almost all houses of worship are open; but limited. Social distancing protocol must be applied or the government will force it to close yet another time. The latest regulation concerning the prohibition of home return and grave pilgrimage at the end of *Ramadhan* to early *Lebaran* Days to suppress the spreading of Covid-19 also incites arguments among Indonesians in the social media platforms. They claim that the regulation is problematic since people are allowed to visit local tourism objects. Moreover, they still welcome visitors from other countries such as China and India. The government now ought to stay alert, or another conflict will arise.

METHOD

This research is a descriptive-qualitative research which data were obtained from various forms of references, including books and journal articles as well as online sources. It also includes the writer personal experiences with regard to religious rituals and worships during the pandemic. In addition, observation towards the society was also done to help analyze the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religion is believed to be identical with peace and harmony. However, religion might turn violent if it employs one or more of these features: absolute truth claim, blind obedience, establishing the "ideal" time, the end justifies any means, and declaring holy war (Kimball, 2008). These five signs are Kimball's conclusion after comparing the motivations of the actors behind religious violence from two Abrahamic religions, Islam and Christianity. The first feature will occur when one claims that his religion is the only "true" religion which usually leads to conversion, where his group forces others to convert to his religion by threatening to kill them or attacking their houses of worship. The second feature often occurs in cults or groups led by charismatic leaders. Their followers would listen to them obediently: whatever they say is the law that must be done. The third feature is rather a revenge sought by the minority who in their live time are oppressed by the dominating religion in their region. The fourth feature includes important components of religious life such as sacred space and time, communal identity, and institutional structures, which should ideally improve the quality of religious life in a community. Yet, oftentimes they are damaged in favor of certain group to achieve their goals. The last feature, holy war, is claimed to be a contest of power which seems to be more political than religious.

Another matter that drives to violence is conflict. Galtung (1990) suggests three different

types of violence: 1) direct violence, 2) structural violence, and 3) cultural violence. Direct violence will provide an immediate result such as that of murder. Meanwhile, structural violence needs longer time to have an impact such as policies that favor a certain group. The cultural violence, however, occurs due to conflict between two or more differing cultures, usually between ethnic groups. Conflict could definitely form disastrous events. civil war in Poso and ethnic war in Sampit are among the instances that portray the worst outcome conflict could provide. On a global sense, war in Afghanistan and conflict in Northern Ireland showed how conflict was transformed into violence. Those conflicts discussed above occurred because of turmoil between groups carrying out material competition. It includes competition between natives and newcomers and between Islam and Christianity. Nevertheless, religious matter is not always the main factor to escalate conflict to violence.

While Kimball and Galtung discussed how religion or an element of religion could be a source of violence, other scholars found that religion could as well potentially build peace, including Mohammed Abu-Nimer. He argues that religion could function as a foundation of peacebuilding in forms of dialogue (Abu-Nimer, 2002). In his other piece, he defines inter-religious dialogue as an effort to maintain one's belief while, at the same time, understand other people's beliefs (Abu-Nimer, 2004). Conducting dialogue does not require a specific method; what more important is to focus on religious dimensions, including rituals and sacred texts, which, in the process, ought to contextualize the existing issues in the society.

Despite his argument that no certain method should be applied to inter-religious dialogue, Abu-Nimer suggests four phases to conduct dialogue in order to allow a fruitful result to come. First, it is pivotal that participants start with expressing their excitement and gratitude to be invited to the forum. Each participant needs to share their background and their reasons for participating in the dialogue. Second, participants need to study differences among their beliefs. Participants must learn what makes them different and, if possible, find similarities among their religions. It is important to study how they perceive things and tolerate it as a trait of diversity. Moreover, similarities that they find could stir them to a good cause – that is, to belong to each other. Third, participants are to understand the religious values of others. During this stage, participants will compare what values and teachings exist in their religion that do not in others, so that they could recognize others as it is essential to build equal reciprocity in inter-religious dialogue. Fourth, participants emphasize agreements they have made and restate similarities they have found as well as define any matters that are sensitive to discuss. By this phase, participants will have built trust to one another and, therefore, will have felt less threatened. The last phase indicates a shift in views towards other religions. After the dialogue, the participants are expected to have a new awareness of other people who are different from them and to have their own action-plan once they return to their society.

In April 2020, a Christian family in Bekasi was reviled by two local leaders affiliated with Islam, the local religious leader (*pak Haji*) and head of neighborhood (*pak RT*), for inviting their family over their house to do *Ibadah Minggu* together (Lova, 2020). In a video uploaded by one of the family members to his social media account, the family was seen to have a heated debate with the two. At the end, both leaders urged them to dismiss in accordance with the government's regulation regarding the maximum number of people to be in the same room and the minimum distance between each other allowed during the pandemic.

Another form of conflict involves adherents within the same religious group. In most regions, the government shut houses of worships, including mosques, and convicted mosque keeper and

imams who disobeyed this regulation. Still, some conservative Muslims ignored such regulation and used all means possible to be able to pray in their representative mosques. They broke the fences and windows; even in a more horror scenario, they injured mosque keepers. In Samarinda, some mosques were open secretly. They first conspired with one another and turned off the microphone during prayers to avoid suspicion.

During the early pandemic in Indonesia, the government was at its peak of strictness, particularly in western and central parts of Indonesia – that is, any violation towards the lockdown regulation would be dealt firmly. Policemen were deployed surrounding places that a mass of people usually gathered, including offices, tourism objects and houses of worship. Human's dwelling such as houses and apartments were excluded; however, if they wished to host a ceremony that involved a huge number of people, they should hold or have a legal permission from the local government. The case of the family in Bekasi was indicated by the police as a misunderstanding because the two local leaders did not learn that these people are a family. Nevertheless, the family claimed that this was not the first time they experienced such aggression. When they first move to that environment, they were terrorized. Their house was attacked by the locals with stones (Haetami, 2020).

To compare, the government seemed to be less strict to Muslims. When Muslims performed *Tahlilan*, for instance, the government needs to think twice before dismissing them. The writer's family has hosted several *Tahlilan*'s during the pandemic in which a lot of people were invited to their house to pray for their ancestors. There are a religious leader, doctors, and civil servants among them; but nothing has ever happened to them, nor have they received any reprimands or warnings. It definitely did not apply to all Muslims in general because there might be cases where Muslims were forced to dismiss while doing religious worships in a big scale, but simply did not get into the writer's recollection.

The cases discussed in this paper represent the first feature of Kimball's five signs of religious violence – that is, absolute truth claim – and Galtung's types of violence. In the first case, both *Pak Haji* and *Pak RT* believe that their religion, Islam, is the only true religion that will bring salvation to humankind. Little was their action influenced by the lockdown regulation. Pandemic is perceived as a momentum to legitimize their action. That this Christian family was attacked several years ago, and that the attackers were composed of the same people evidence this claim. The people in that environment feel that this family's existence would disturb their harmony, in this sense, their Islamic traditions. Furthermore, the notion of fear of small numbers, who might cause conspiracy and revolutionary as well as excite sympathy from other minor parties or outsiders or foreigners (Appadurai, 2008), could possibly be sensed.

Their action also incites a cultural violence because the local leaders, *Pak Haji* and *Pak RT*, justified their action based on their ideology – that is, an Islamic environment. The arrival of a different religious group would be a threat to their existence. Thus, they tried to expel this family from their environment from the very beginning. The writer himself did not have a chance to observe this environment directly due to the pandemic. However, it can be assumed roughly that this environment does not support the concept of multi-cultural society.

Moreover, it exemplifies a structural violence. It is not necessarily a pure structural violence, but it encounters the concept of structural violence. The government regulation on closing houses of worship causes religious individuals to do and perform their worship from home despite some people disobey such regulation, particularly the conservative Muslims. The unstrictness towards these rule-breakers plays a role in promoting violence. When Muslims invite a mass of people to, for instance,

Tahlilan, the government does almost nothing. They indeed reprimand such action, but perhaps that is the farthest thing they could do. This definitely would turn the minority envious, because they respect and obey the regulation. In turn, such jealousy might lead to violence.

In addition, the writer proposes the world religion paradigm which is somehow applied in Indonesia. The notion of world religion paradigm, which suggests that all policies and regulations should be in favor of the dominant party or community, is adopted. It is due to the fact that Indonesia employs the term religion defined and constructed by the West, which is ethnocentric and subjective; and therefore, it is problematic because it discriminates minorities and discredits indigenous communities as well as constitutes the dominant religion as the prototype. (Maarif, 2017). In the West, Christianity acts as the dominant, while in Indonesia it is Islam. The regulations in Indonesia do not necessarily in favor of Islam, but they are standardized and reviewed with regard to Islamic laws. This paradigm also affects how one views other religions. Being the dominant, an Indonesian Muslim would characterize other religions or religious sects that are irrelevant with the definition of religion by the government as heretical. Therefore, this might be the case why this family was treated rudely by the local society.

The second case, however, portrays Kimball's absolute truth claim in a different form. While, the first case shows Islam as an absolute religion, this case depicts absolute, genuine Islamic teachings. Conservative Muslims understand that obligatory prayers and *jumah* prayer, for instance, must be done in a mosque in a congregational manner (*jamaah*). Thus, banning them from going to their mosques simultaneously means harming their belief.

Due to the fact that their ideology is harmed and violated, they are unhesitant to commit direct violence towards anything or anyone blocking their ways. Vandalism towards the mosque's structures such as fences and doors, and assault on individuals who try to prevent them from going to mosque, including mosque keepers and the locals, are a few instances of violence they could do to reinforce Islamic teachings. It is noteworthy that a structural violence could also be characterized from this case. The fact that they prayed in their mosques secretly proves that they conspired among themselves to violate the rules.

To resolve conflict or to prevent it to escalate to violence, scholars promote an attempt to do so and dub it peacebuilding. Galtung (1969) defines peace as absence of war, absence of violence, and presence of social justice. He adds that the idea of peace should follow three basic principles: 1) the term 'peace' shall be agreed to be used for social goals, 2) these goals should be possible to be attained though difficult and complex, and 3) the statement "peace is absence of violence" shall be promoted and kept in mind.

Scholars offer various methods of making peace or peacebuilding, including dialogue. Lederach (1997) argues that peacebuilding is understood as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict towards more sustainable, peaceful relationships. For Lederach, peace is not just an in-time stage or condition, but more of a dynamic social construct. It needs to be continuously reviewed. What might be the best solution today might not be the same on the other day in the future. He does not explicitly mention dialogue as a method, but constant examination of current situation definitely needs communicating.

Galtung (2010) suggests three phases to prevent conflict to promote to violence: mapping, legitimizing, and bridging. First, understand all aspects that cause the conflict, including the

background and condition of the two conflicting parties and try to empathize them, not sympathize (mapping). Then comprehend laws on human rights and try to be familiar with their goals (legitimizing). Finally, offer solutions to them (bridging). During the last phase, a mediator or the third party is necessary to resolve issues of the conflicting parties by providing dialogue. He adds that a mediator should be constructive, concrete, and creative.

The case of a family in Bekasi was mediated by the police. The family forgave both *Pak Haji* and *Pak RT* and agreed not to bring up this case to the court. An agreement was reached by the family and the local society – that is, there will be no more restriction of any kinds of worship in that environment. One is free to perform or do their rituals in any forms in his house. The family wished that such incident would never happen again to them or any other minor religious beliefs in the future. However, there is no guarantee that such intolerance would never exist again due to the fact that Islamic radical groups in Indonesia is rapidly growing day by day. Therefore, as Lederach suggests, the agreement should be reviewed later and redesigned in a way that best fits the condition in that era.

The above method of dialogue does not necessarily involve elements of religion in building peace. Oftentimes, peacebuilding requires religion to resolve the issues. When religion is involved, the term is better known as religious or faith-based peacebuilding, and in terms of dialogue, it is inter-religious dialogue; but, it is important to understand that inter-religious dialogue is not always practiced to resolve conflict, also, for instance, to share ideas between religious groups about current issues. Garred and Abu-Nimer (2018) explain that faith-based peacebuilding is an interactive process where one or more parties is motivated or influenced by religious identity or experience. They believe that religious leaders play a significant role as peacebuilders. Whatever they say and do would incite actions from their loyal followers. However, religious leaders might as well be a peacebuilder as long as they are able to relate the ongoing situation to their faith. In this sense, two important elements of religion which are satisfactory in conducting inter-religious dialogue are rituals and symbols.

Schirch (2015) assesses that peacebuilding requires religious rituals in order to relate one to a sense of the divine or the purpose of the existence. Such rituals would also function as agent of reconciliation and trauma healing. Rituals engage all people's senses of perception such as feeling, hearing, seeing, smelling, and tasting and oftentimes take place in symbolic spaces. In every city in Indonesia lies a Grand Mosque and a Cathedral or Church. These places act as the religious symbols of Islam and Christianity respectively. All religious individuals who worship their God in those houses of worship would feel that their city is blessed.

Similarly, Lattu (2019) proposes ritualization, symbols (symbolic dialogue), and oral narratives as approaches to conduct dialogue with oral-based communities. Ritualization would create a sense of belonging to one another, while symbols would give an understanding of the system of meaning in a society. Oral narrative is important because that is how this type of community usually, if not always, transmits knowledge to others and their offspring.

The agreement made in the case of a family in Bekasi would have best been made in their representative mosque and church or any place that is considered sacred in that environment. It should also be witnessed by the local leaders, *Imam* and pastor or priest. The witnesses should be wise and not biased to their religion. The choice of the police as the mediator was a great decision, because a mediator should not be of one of the two sides. Employing rituals would also be beneficial to create a sense of belonging towards each other as Indonesian citizens. Perhaps rituals could open their minds and bring back memories of where they come from and who their ancestors are because none of the six recognized religions in Indonesia originate from the archipelago. It is also applicable for the

second case to build a stronger bound between Muslims, yet risky since rituals are considered as heretical by many conservative Muslims. Perhaps, bringing back Islamic symbols to the dialogue among them would lead to a better result. For instance, they discuss the meaning of mosque or hijab to remind them about similarities of views that they share.

The agreement made between the family in Bekasi and the local society indeed needs, if necessary, revisiting. MUI (*Majelis Ulema Indonesia*) of Malang once reviewed the regulation of the use of speaker in mosque. Someone complained that the sound from the speaker, particularly during fasting month or Ramadhan bothered their rest time. It was a habit that Muslims recited Koran till late night during Ramadhan. Thus, the MUI of Malang declared that the use of speaker was allowed till at last 10 pm since then. The use of it more than that hour would be followed up strictly and investigated further.

CONCLUSION

Conflict between religious groups in Indonesia still occurs due to misconception of understanding religious teachings as shown in the cases discussed above. It also happens because of a lack of tolerance among religions' adherents. The family in the Bekasi, for instance, believe that there is an aspect of intolerance employed by the local people. This case also shows us that minor groups are often the object of violence. Any wrongful action towards Muslims would incite an action or a protest from them because Islam is the dominant religion in Indonesia. Being the majority would lead them think that they are superior against the others, in this sense, the minor groups.

Another factor that causes conflict is difference. Different religious rituals, different ethnical practices, different spoken languages, and any other differences play a role in the occurrence of violence. When we understand the source of the difference, a peaceful agreement could be discussed.

As scholars we need to formulate the best recipe to resolve conflict and to build peace, and one of which is through dialogue. A small conflict does not require a formal institution resolve the issue, but dialogue in forms of mediation should be sufficient. Rituals and religious symbols would assist the process of peacebuilding in terms of dialogue. Different individuals or groups would engage with their senses, emotions, and feelings as well as communicate their issues from heart to heart. They should bear in mind that the fundamental teaching of all religions is peace. No religion in this world advertises and promotes violence to its followers.

Once peace is acquired, we should able to maintain it. Peacebuilding is a lot easier than peacekeeping. Keeping peace for a long period of time is not easy, yet possible. Promoting tolerance needs to be done continuously. Furthermore, revisiting the agreements that have been made is also necessary to adjust with the current condition.

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