

**RELIGIOUS "SUPER-SPREADERS" IN INDONESIA:  
MANAGING THE RISK OF STIGMATISATION**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Large gatherings of two religious organisations, one Muslim, one Christian, became “super-spreaders” of the Covid-19 virus in Indonesia, raising concerns that the pandemic could lead to an increase in religious intolerance, heightened communal tensions or localized outbreaks of violence. Despite a few close calls, however, no serious trouble had taken place by mid-May 2020, thanks in part to efforts by local leaders of the groups involved to defuse tensions. There are lessons to be learned, however, about how the outbreaks caused by these groups could have been better anticipated and prevented.

“Super-spreader” is a term used by epidemiologists to describe a highly contagious individual who transmits a disease to an unusually large number of people. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it has also come to refer to gatherings that have produced clusters of infection – cruises, business conferences, weddings, funerals – often with secondary outbreaks as participants then travel to other areas. Indonesia was not the only country where religious meetings became the site of contagion. In February 2020, a gathering in Daegu, South Korea of the cult-like Shincheonji Church of Jesus produced more than half of South Korea’s 3,700 Covid-19 cases by early March.<sup>1</sup>

In Indonesia, two of the organisations linked to multiple clusters of infection were Jemaah Tabligh and the Bethel Church (Gereja Bethel Indonesia, GBI). The first is an international Sunni missionary group that has thousands of followers in Indonesia. A single Tablighi event in Gowa, South Sulawesi in mid-March produced outbreaks of the virus in 22 out of 34 provinces of Indonesia. In several communities, local officials had to issue public warnings against the stigmatisation of Gowa participants. But Jemaah Tabligh is fully accepted as a legitimate part of the Sunni community. Had the super-spreader been from a stream that hardline Islamists consider “deviant”, such as the Ahmadiyah or Shi’a, the outcome could have been very different.

GBI, the Christian organisation, is part of a Protestant Pentecostal network that also began as a missionary organisation. Because it has been accused in the past of “Christianisation” or trying to convert Muslims, and in 2011, one of its churches in Solo, Central Java, was the target of a failed suicide bombing, its leadership was very much aware of the need to be transparent about its Covid-19 cases and to have regular communication with local authorities. Even so, hate messages against GBI on Islamist social media rose as the extent of infection became apparent.

In general, the clusters carried the highest risk of triggering tensions where there was a previous history of trouble and the virus became a new dimension of an old pattern. In Nabire, Papua, for example, the arrival of a Tablighi group returning from Gowa played into unease left over from an earlier incident when a group of Tablighis had been mistaken for terrorists and likely into migrant-indigenous tensions as well. The clusters also generated other issues: community rejection of quarantine centres where it was believed they would put local residents at risk; open defiance by individual clerics of Covid-19 protocols; refusal of some Gowa participants to report for testing. In such cases, law enforcement officials generally avoided heavy-handed sanctions, understanding they could make the problems worse. The issue of what to do with violators whose actions put others at risk was generally left to local authorities to handle.

In terms of social conflict linked to Covid-19, it is clear from an April 2020 Indonesian police manual called *Confronting Covid-19* (Menghadapi Covid-19) that the government is more worried (and rightly so) about economic issues than anything to do with religious tensions. It fears clashes triggered by perceived inequities in the distribution of aid, hoarding, food shortages, inflation and rising crime linked to economic hardship. But as the end of Ramadan, the Muslim fasting month, approached on 23 May, police were also worried about confrontations with groups that defied bans on public religious activities.

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<sup>1</sup> “Coronavirus: South Korea sect leader to face probe over deaths,” [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55888888), 2 March 2020.

Both the Tablighis and GBI have stopped missionary work and mass gatherings in Indonesia for now and are fully compliant with government restrictions. The label of “super-spreader”, however, may endure long after those restrictions are lifted.

## II. RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGIOUS GATHERINGS IN INDONESIA

Indonesia’s major religious councils – the Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI), Indonesian Council of Churches (Persekutuan Gereja Indonesia, PGI), Catholic Bishops Conference (Konferensi Wali Gereja Indonesia, KWI) and others – tried to provide guidance for their followers in addressing the pandemic. Their task was not made easier by a government that was sluggish and contradictory in its response to the pandemic, with policies that were too little, too late or on again, off again, with different ministers and advisers pulling in different directions.<sup>2</sup> Indonesia finally acknowledged its first case on 2 March 2020, long after most of its neighbours.<sup>3</sup>

For the first two weeks of March, the general message from the councils was that anyone who felt ill or had a cough should stay home but public worship was fine as long as basic hygiene procedures were followed. This was also the message of a circular issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs on 13 March, the same day that President Jokowi established a Covid-19 Task Force. There were no warnings to avoid mass religious meetings.

The first fatwa from the MUI on 16 March, a day after President Jokowi exhorted Indonesians to “work at home, study at home, worship at home,” did not ban mosque activities.<sup>4</sup> It said that people exposed to the virus were required to self-isolate and were forbidden to take part in group activities like Friday prayers or religious discussion groups where they might infect others. Healthy people in high risk areas were *permitted* to stay home and not attend Friday prayers or other mosque-based activities such as *tarawih*, the evening prayers during Ramadan. People in low risk areas were still *required* to attend Friday prayers.<sup>5</sup> The problem was that Indonesia had not done any mapping of high risk and low risk areas, so no one was sure what the criteria were.<sup>6</sup> Assessing risk by the number of positive Covid-19 cases was misleading because there had been so little testing. Local MUIs thus applied the fatwa as they saw fit. The South Sumatra provincial MUI said Friday prayers at mosques could continue, while the MUI in

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<sup>2</sup> For a good analysis of why the government was so slow to respond, see Marcus Mietzner, “Populist Anti-Scientism, Religious Polarisation and Institutionalised Corruption: How Indonesia’s Democratic Decline Shaped its COVID-19 Response,” April 2020 [forthcoming]. Throughout late January and most of February, Indonesia took few preventive measures, even as it was clear the virus had arrived in Southeast Asia. As of mid-February, it had reported no cases but also had done almost no testing, despite thousands of tourists from China, including from Wuhan, then the epicentre of the pandemic.

<sup>3</sup> A team of Reuters journalists did two detailed investigative articles, looking at how the number of burials had risen in Jakarta. “Exclusive: Jump in Jakarta funerals raises fears of unreported coronavirus deaths,” Reuters, 4 April 2020; “Burial numbers in Jakarta indicate coronavirus toll is higher than officially reported,” Reuters, 1 May 2020. The findings were questioned in a Jakarta Post article, Meilanie Buitenzorgy, “Behind Jakarta’s recent ‘spike’ in burials, Jakarta Post, 13 May 2020. The author argued that restrictions on travel were preventing people taking their deceased relatives back home for funerals and this accounted for the apparent rise, but some analysts raised questions about this explanation as well.

<sup>4</sup> A link to a video of the president’s statement can be found in “Pernyataan Jokowi Serukan Warga untuk Kerja, Belajar dan Ibadah di Rumah,” compass.tv, 15 March 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Majelis Ulama Indonesia, “Fatwa No 14 Tahun 2020 – Penyelenggaraan Ibadah dalam Situasi Terjadi Wabah Covid-19”, mui.or.id, 17 March 2020.

<sup>6</sup> “Jusuf Kalla Nilai Fatwa MUI Terkait Covid-10 Mutlak Diperhatikan,” kompas.com, 17 March 2020.

Palembang, the provincial capital, banned all mosque activity.<sup>7</sup> With little monitoring and no sanctions, many local mosques continued to operate as usual, even in areas where formal restrictions were in place.<sup>8</sup>

On 20 March, Habib Rizieq, the influential leader of the hardline Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) posted a video from his self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia in which he urged all Muslims to abide by the MUI fatwa and Muslims in Jakarta to avoid mosque activities. This was not only because Jakarta was clearly the epicentre of the virus, but also because it was important to prevent slanderous accusations (*fitnah*):

It's not that we fear Corona, we trust in Allah, but we must avoid slander. We have to avoid having someone at the mosque get ill and then have the mosque be accused of spreading the virus because it continued to hold Friday prayers.<sup>9</sup>

In his urging his followers in Jakarta to stay at home, he was supporting a political ally, Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan, who had been urging the central government to impose a lockdown. He was also undoubtedly influenced by the decision of the Saudi government the same day to suspend prayers at the main mosques in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina as a measure to prevent the spread of the virus.<sup>10</sup>

For the Protestant community, the trajectory was much the same: an exhortation on 16 March from PGI to stay at home and attend worship services on line and gradual moves to close churches for Sunday services.<sup>11</sup> Many Christians from different denominations insisted on going to church anyway, believing God would protect them. The deaths of two GBI pastors from the virus on 21 and 22 March became a turning point, though, and thereafter some of the holdouts shifted to online services.<sup>12</sup> On 28 March, leaders of all major religious communities gathered at the media centre of the Covid-19 Task Force and publicly urged their followers to worship from home.<sup>13</sup>

The first legal measure at a national level restricting public religious activities did not come until 31 March, when President Jokowi announced that Indonesia would apply Large-Scale Social Restrictions (Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar, PSBB) to address the virus.<sup>14</sup> The regulations required local authorities to gather data on Covid-19 cases and where there was evidence of a rising number of infections or deaths, they could apply to the Ministry for PSBB status. This would involve, among other

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<sup>7</sup> “MUI Sumsel dan Palembang Beda Pendapat Soal Shalat Jum’at,” buananews.com, 27 March 2020.

<sup>8</sup> “Virus corona dan ramadan: Mengapa salat berjemaah di masjid masih digelar, walau MUI dan ormas Islam mengimbau salat di rumah?,” bbc.com, 27 April 2020.

<sup>9</sup> “HRS Minta Jemaah Jakarta Ikuti Fatwa Salat Jumat MUI: Cegah Fitnah Corona,” detik.com, 20 March 2020.

<sup>10</sup> “Saudi Arabia bans prayers at mosques over coronavirus fears,” aljazeera.com, 20 March 2020. This was in addition to other measures already in places beginning in late February, such as suspending the *umroh* pilgrimage, cancelling international flights and gradually halting other mosque activities.

<sup>11</sup> “Imbauan Majelis Perkerja Harian Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia (MPH-PGI)”, 16 March 2020, available at [pgi.or.id](http://pgi.or.id).

<sup>12</sup> IPAC interviews with contacts in Christian community, 8 April 2020.

<sup>13</sup> “Imbauan Para Pemuka Agama Untuk Beribadah Dari Rumah,” tzuchi.or.id, 30 March 2020.

<sup>14</sup> A regulation to this effect from the Health Ministry was subsequently issued on 3 April (Peraturan Menteri Kesehatan Republik Indonesia Nomor 9 Tahun 2020 tentang Pedoman Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar Dalam Rangka Percepatan Penanganan Corona Virus Disease 2019), [hukor.kemkes.go.id](http://hukor.kemkes.go.id), 3 April 2020.

things, shutting schools and workplaces, limiting religious activities at houses of worship, and limiting social and cultural activities in public.<sup>15</sup> Jakarta formally applied PSBB measures on 9 April.<sup>16</sup> It took three more weeks to impose light penalties for violators -- fines of up to Rp250,000 (about USD \$17.45), for example, for anyone gathering in a group of more than five people.<sup>17</sup> In West Java, PSBB measures went into force on 15 April and only applied in the districts adjoining Jakarta: Bogor city, Bogor district, Depok and Bekasi. They did not apply in Bandung.

Thus the organisations that became super-spreaders were violating no regulation when a GBI church held a meeting for some 170 people at a hotel in Lembang, just outside Bandung or when Jemaah Tabligh was planning its mammoth gathering (*ijtima*) of 10,000 men in Gowa for 19-23 March – although it should have been clear to the latter by mid-March that any gathering of that size in the midst of a pandemic was a very, very bad idea.

### III. JEMAAH TABLIGH AND ITS TWO FACTIONS

Anyone mapping out the religious groups in Indonesia that would be most susceptible to infection would have put the Tablighis high on the list for several reasons. As noted, they take pride in gathering in large numbers in meetings called *ijtima*. Their annual meeting in Dhaka, Bangladesh is the second largest gathering of Muslims in the world, topped only by the pilgrimage to Mecca. As missionaries, they require their members to travel outside their own communities to preach for a certain number of days per month and months per year in a practice known as *khuruj*, with extensive mixing of members from South and Southeast Asia. Mosques are the focal point of Tablighi activities, but they are also the places where members on *khuruj* from other areas sleep and pray. As of early May 2020, some 1,400 Indonesian Tablighis on *khuruj* were stranded overseas, unable to return because of Covid-19 lockdowns and travel restrictions, and dozens of foreign Tablighis were stranded in Indonesia, with many infections in both groups.<sup>18</sup>

#### A. Who Are the Tablighis?

Tabligh-e Jamaat began as an Islamic revivalist movement in northwestern India in 1926. From the beginning it was non-violent and apolitical, focusing on individual piety and bringing Muslims back to a “purer” practice of Islam.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, it was criticised by other puritan Muslims, including Salafis, for its “limited” interpretation of *tauhid* (oneness of God); reliance on disputed *hadith* (traditions of the Prophet); recognition of some Sufi orders; and elevation of *khuruj* over other religious obligations. Thus, even though the Tablighis adopted similar dress to Salafis, including white robes and turbans or

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<sup>15</sup> “Indonesia’s Strategy to Combat COVID-19: What we know so far,” *thejakartapost.com*, 3 April 2020. Jakarta’s governor, who long had been pressing for more stringent measures, complained that the procedures outlined for getting approval from the Ministry for putting PSBB measures in place would waste valuable time while quick action was vital.

<sup>16</sup> Gubernur Provinsi Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta, “Peraturan Gubernur Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta Nomor 33 Tahun 2020 tentang Pelaksanaan Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar dalam Penanganan Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19)”, 9 April 2020. Available at [corona.jakarta.go.id](http://corona.jakarta.go.id).

<sup>17</sup> Gubernur Provinsi Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta, “Peraturan Gubernur Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta Nomor 41 Tahun 2020 tentang Pengenaan Sanksi Terhadap Pelanggaran Pelaksanaan Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar dalam Penanganan Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19)”, 30 April 2020. Available at [corona.jakarta.go.id](http://corona.jakarta.go.id).

<sup>18</sup> “Ada 1,456 WNI Ikuti Tabligh Akbar di Luar Negeri,” *Media Indonesia*, 1 April 2020. Some 30 Indonesian tablighis in Manila were due to be repatriated on 15 May 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Ambroon Agha, “Is Tablighi Jamaat a Variant of Islam?,” *Outlook (India)*, 9 May 2020.

skull caps for men and face veils (*niqab* or *cadar*) for women, there were major theological distinctions between them.<sup>20</sup>

A major leadership dispute took place in 2015, splitting the international movement in two.<sup>21</sup> One faction, led by Maulana Saad, the great-grandson of founder Maulana Ilyas Kandhlawi, kept the control of the international Tablighi headquarters (*markaz*) in Nizamuddin, New Delhi. The second, calling itself Shura Alami or SA, set up its *markaz* first in Navi Mumbai and then in Raiwind, Pakistan. Many of the Tablighis in Pakistan and Bangladesh follow the SA faction.

The split affected Jemaah Tabligh in Indonesia. The Tablighis had first come to Indonesia in 1952 but only established a national *markaz* in 1974 in Kebon Jeruk, Jakarta. They were not seen as a threat by the Soeharto government and from the beginning had many followers in the police and military. The movement grew rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1986, thanks to the preaching of a group of Pakistani Tablighis, the kyai of the influential Al-Fatah pesantren in Temboro, Magetan, East Java joined and began attracting many new followers, making the pesantren one of the major centres of Tablighi activity in the country. By the time the leadership split occurred, Jemaah Tabligh may have had some 40,000 (male) followers, the majority of whom chose to stay loyal to the founder's family and followed Maulana Saad; they kept control of the Kebon Jeruk mosque.<sup>22</sup> A significant minority, however, joined Shura Alami and in 2017, set up a new *markaz* at Al-Muttaqien mosque, Ancol. The split had a major impact in how the virus played out.

## **B. Covid-19 Strikes Tablighi Gatherings in Malaysia and India**

The first indications from Asia that Tablighi *ijtima* were emerging as Covid-19 clusters came from two gatherings: one at the Sri Petaling Mosque outside Kuala Lumpur from 27 February to 1 March 2020, followed by another at the Nizamuddin *markaz* in New Delhi, India from 13 to 15 March. The many Indonesians present at both belonged to the Kebon Jeruk faction.

The Sri Petaling event was attended by 16,000 people, including some 1,500 foreigners. The biggest foreign delegation was from Indonesia, with some 700 participants.<sup>23</sup> By mid-March, two-thirds of the 673 cases of Covid-19 in Malaysia were linked to this gathering and more were being discovered daily; a 34-year-old Malaysian had died of the disease.<sup>24</sup> By May, Sri Petaling-linked cases were up to 2,179.<sup>25</sup> Malaysia and Singapore were quick to do contact-tracing of participants, once it was clear that the

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<sup>20</sup> “Kapolda Papua Pastikan Keberadaan Jemaah Tabligh di Jayapura Bukan Kelompok Jihad”, *tribunnes.com*, 7 October 2019. [www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2019/10/07/kapolda-papua-pastikan-keberadaan-jemaah-tabligh-di-jayapura-bukan-kelompok-jihad](http://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2019/10/07/kapolda-papua-pastikan-keberadaan-jemaah-tabligh-di-jayapura-bukan-kelompok-jihad)

<sup>21</sup> The issue revolved around succession. The founder of Tablighi Jamaat, Maulana Ilyas, was succeeded by his son Muhammad Yusuf Kandahlawi. He in turn was succeeded by In'amul Hasan, son-in-law of a nephew of the founder. The movement took off globally under Sheikh In'amul's leadership. Just before his death in 1995, he appointed a collective leadership council (*shura*) composed of five ulama from India, four from Pakistan and one from Bangladesh. In 1995, Maulana Saad, Ilyas's great-grandson, unilaterally declared himself to be the sole amir and took over control of the Nizamuddin *markaz*. Several other members of the shura objected and founded the new faction known as Shura Alami.

<sup>22</sup> When Tablighi ulama provide numbers, they tend to count only the men who attend their *ijtima*. Thus one source told IPAC that in the first *ijtima* after the split, some 30,000 “brothers” attended. He estimated that only 10 per cent of the Tablighi community had gone over to the rival faction, but it was almost certainly higher. IPAC text exchange with senior Tablighi member, 10 May 2020.

<sup>23</sup> “How Sri Petaling tabligh became Southeast Asia's Covid-19 hotspot”, *nst.com.my*, 17 March 2020; “No Tracing yet of Indonesians attending Kuala Lumpur event after positive COVID-19 cases,” *Jakarta Post*, 13 March 2020.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> “Indonesia, Malaysian Tablighi Jemaat members left stranded by India's coronavirus lockdown,” *scmp.com*, 4 May 2020.

meeting was a source of the virus. In Malaysia, a task force from the police criminal investigation department worked with the Health Ministry to identify and then screen 10,533 participants and their networks of close contacts.<sup>26</sup> The Singaporean government identified two nationals from the meeting who contracted the virus and proceeded to trace and test the other 90 Singaporeans who had taken part.<sup>27</sup>

The Indonesian government did not have the capacity at the national level for any serious tracing or testing. On 13 March, the National Disaster Management Agency and Health Ministry issued a circular urging those who had attended the Sri Petaling meeting to contact the embassy in Kuala Lumpur and get themselves tested for the virus if they were still in Malaysia, or call a hotline number or go to the nearest hospital if they were already back. It was not clear, however, how many were aware that the circular had been issued or how to track who had acted on its contents.<sup>28</sup> By 20 March, thirteen Indonesian participants had become ill, and more were to come.

Responsibility for tracing depended almost entirely on local authorities and the good will of local Tablighi coordinators. In Tanjung Pinang, Riau, one man who attended the gathering returned home ill. By 29 March, the municipal health office, with the help of the Tablighi coordinator, had tested all sixteen members of the local Tablighi community and five were found to be positive.<sup>29</sup> In Ketapang, West Kalimantan, the health department found a Sri Petaling participant with COVID-19 symptoms—shortness of breath and cough—while crossing border from Sarawak, Malaysia. The patient received intensive care in the local hospital but died on 29 March.<sup>30</sup> By 26 April, seven more cases linked to the Sri Petaling meeting had been found in West Kalimantan.<sup>31</sup>

While the virus was still spreading from the Sri Petaling event, the Indian *ijtima* got underway on 13 March 2020 at the Tablighi *markaz* in Nizamuddin, New Delhi. Some 9,000 people attended, including over 700 from Indonesia, by far the largest contingent.<sup>32</sup> Many had attended the Sri Petaling meeting. The *ijtima* opened on the same day that the Delhi government issued an advisory against holding meetings of more than 200 people, but it was too late. Tablighi organisers said they informed police and local authorities of the meeting, none of whom made any move to stop it. Several Indian media outlets were quick to label the Tablighis as irresponsible for going ahead with the event.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid and “Malaysia: COVID-19 Puts Scrutiny on Tablighi Jamaat,” [benarnews.org](http://benarnews.org), 20 March 2020.

<sup>27</sup> “Contact tracing being done for 90 Singaporeans who were at KL event,” [straitstimes.com](http://straitstimes.com), 13 March 2020.

<sup>28</sup> “BNPB Imbau WNI yang Ikut Tabli Akbar di Masjid Sri Petaling Segera Tes Corona,” [kompas.com](http://kompas.com), 14 March 2020.

<sup>29</sup> “5 Pengikut Jamaah Tabligh Tanjungpinang Positif Corona,” [Suara.com](http://Suara.com), 29 March 2020.

<sup>30</sup> “Dua PDP di Kalbar Meninggal Dunia, 1 Orang Pernah Ikut Tabligh Akbar di Malaysia,” [today.line.me](https://today.line.me), 29 March 2020.

<sup>31</sup> “Kasus COVID-19 di Kalbar jadi 50, 6 Peserta Tabligh Akbar di Malaysia,” [kompas.com](http://kompas.com), 24 April 2020; “Pasien PDP Kalbar Peserta Tabligh Akbar di Malaysia Positif Corona,” [insidepontianak.com](http://insidepontianak.com), 26 Maret 2020.

<sup>32</sup> “Coronavirus: About 9,000 Tablighi Jamaat Members, Primary Contacts Quarantined in Country, MHA Says,” [timesofindia.indiatimes.com](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com), 2 April 2020. A breakdown of the international delegations appears in “1.290 Jamaah Tabligh Kluster Masjid Petaling Positif Corona, Panitia Tabligh Gowa; Itu Faksi JT Lain,” [tribunnews.com](http://tribunnews.com), 1 April 2020.

<sup>33</sup> For one in-depth report on the meeting, see “Tablighi Jamaat & the Coronavirus,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jB3b0pNQcTM> The Nizamuddin gathering took place as Hindu nationalism and government-encouraged Islamophobia were at fever pitch, just a few weeks after Hindu-Muslim clashes on the streets of Delhi had killed 53 people, most of them Muslims (parenthetically triggering anti-Indian protests on 6 March in pre-lockdown Jakarta by Indonesia’s Islamist activists). The link between the Tablighis and the virus fuelled anti-Muslim sentiment and a torrent of hate speech. As the scale of infection became clear -- more than 4,000 cases or almost 30 per cent of all cases in India were directly linked to the Nizamuddin *ijtima* – calls for judicial prosecution of the Tablighis intensified. On 16 April, Delhi police brought charges of manslaughter (negligent homicide) against Maulana Saad, who had gone into self-quarantine. Several days later, additional charges of money laundering were brought against him, as police began to inspect Tablighi financing.



The Indonesians, meanwhile, were left stranded when Indonesia imposed a lockdown on 25 March. They had to go into a quarantine camp and though the Indonesian embassy in Delhi was active on their behalf, it could not get them home – though a few found their way out undetected. By early May, 75 had tested positive for Covid-19 and 276 had been reported to police for violating quarantine or immigration regulations. Of these, 138 were said to be in judicial detention. Meanwhile, travel restrictions and cancellation of flights made it difficult for others to return, not to mention the fact that local communities were wary of receiving anyone known to have been exposed to the virus.

Of those who managed to return home, some carried the virus with them. On 19 March, two people from Kutai Timur, East Kalimantan, who attended the Nizamuddin *ijtima* were declared positive, and other cases emerged thereafter.<sup>34</sup>

None of this affected the plans of the minority Shura Alami faction of the Tablighis to go forward with plans for what they called “Global Ijtima – Asia Zone”(Ijtima Dunia Zona Asia) in at the Darul Ulum complex in Pakatto village, Gowa, South Sulawesi from 19-22 March 2020. The organising committee emphasized that no one from its faction had attended the meetings in Malaysia or India, as if this were a guarantee of immunity.<sup>35</sup> But neither the claim nor the immunity held up.

### C. The Gowa Cluster

The Gowa organisers may have been driven in part by the desire, as the minority faction, to show they had a significant following, but they also saw themselves as trapped by circumstances that moved beyond their capacity to control. The original plan, in the works long before the pandemic erupted, was to bring in 10,000 people from Indonesia and 48 other countries for a four-day meeting beginning on 19 March.<sup>36</sup> By early March, however, public concern about the event was growing. On 3 March, the national MUI urged mass Islamic organisations, without mentioning Jemaah Tabligh by name, to postpone any mass meetings.<sup>37</sup> The Sulawesi provincial government began putting pressure on the organisers to cancel, but they resisted as participants began flooding into the area.

The idea that mass meetings could be dangerous was also not getting through. The bupati of Luwu, a district in South Sulawesi, hosted a send-off for the 200 Tablighis from Luwu leaving for Gowa to attend the *ijtima*. He said how happy and proud he was to host them because his son was part of the group. Not a word was said about the virus.<sup>38</sup>

Even he was speaking, the meeting was being shut down. The South Sulawesi governor formally cancelled the *ijtima* on 18 March, and the organising committee agreed to abide by the ruling. The national government largely stood on the sidelines.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “Hadiri acara Keagamaan di India, 2 Pria Asal Kultim Ini Positif Corona”, *selasar.co*, 19 April 2020.

<sup>35</sup> “1.290 Jemaah Tabligh Kluster Masjid Petaling Positif Corona, Panitia Tabligh Gowa; Itu Faksi JT Lain”, *tribunnews.com*, 1 April 2020.

<sup>36</sup> “Ijtima Dunia 2020 Zona Asia Dibatalkan, Panitia: Kami Ikuti Arahan Pemerintah”, *kompas.com*, 19 March 2020. The article gives detailed number of international and domestic participants who had arrived in Gowa on 18 April 2020.

<sup>37</sup> “Ada Virus Corona, MUI Imbau Kegiatan Tabligh Akbar Ditunda”, *tempo.co*, 3 March 2020.

<sup>38</sup> “Bupati Luwu Lepas 200 Jemaah Tabligh Ikuti Ijtimah Asia 2020, Termasuk Anaknya”, *Fajar*, 19 March 2020.

<sup>39</sup> On 19 March, President Jokowi said he had asked the Covid-19 Task Force to evaluate mass religious gatherings (presumably with a view to restricting them, though this was not made explicit). After the meeting was cancelled, the president thanked all parties for their cooperation. “Virus corona: Ijtima Tabligh di Gowa dan penahbisan uskup Ruteng, President Jokowi evaluasi acara keagamaan di tengah wabah Covid-19”, *bbc.com*, 19 March 2020.

The cancellation came far too late. By that time, some 8,700 participants had already arrived in Gowa, including over 400 foreigners from Malaysia, Thailand, Pakistan, India, Brunei, Timor Leste, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh and the Philippines, some of whom had already been in Indonesia for months, travelling around preaching from mosque to mosque.<sup>40</sup> Participants came from 29 of Indonesia's 34 provinces. One defiant cleric posted a video of himself addressing a packed audience in Gowa in reaction to the cancellation:

A virus comes along and the whole world trembles. It's easy to finish off this virus. Send the jamaah [the Tablighis] to wherever the virus is! [shouts of "Allahu Akbar!" from the crowd]. This Coronavirus is scared of the jamaah ["Allahu Akbar!"], the jamaah isn't scared of the virus! ["Allahu Akbar!"] The jamaah fears only Allah! ["Allahu Akbar!"].<sup>41</sup>

All foreign nationals and hundreds of domestic participants were to be sent home after first being quarantined in Makassar. Many of the foreigners were from countries now in lockdown and could not travel. Others had purchased round-trip tickets which would have to be cancelled, and they wanted government help. Many, however, left the site unchecked, causing outbreaks in their hometowns, even where local Tablighi coordinators promised to ensure they self-isolated for fourteen days.<sup>42</sup> But the consequences of the weeks of government indecisiveness over what to do about the *ijtima* became apparent almost immediately. Many provinces in Indonesia got their first coronavirus cases from the Gowa returnees, and the numbers shot up within weeks.

Two of the most affected provinces were South Kalimantan, where 137 of the 199 cases identified by late April were from the Gowa cluster, and West Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur, NTB), where the entire caseload of 93 patients was Gowa-linked.<sup>43</sup> As the number of cases rose, new issues appeared. In several areas, villagers opposed local schools or other buildings being designated as quarantine centres for Gowa returnees for fear they would lead to new infections.<sup>44</sup> But the risk of conflict in both areas appeared to be low, because of steps taken by local officials to try and prevent stigmatisation and by cooperative local Tablighi leaders. In NTB, for example, Gov. H Zulkieflimansyah, who had attended several Tablighi gatherings and was seen as sympathetic toward the movement, tried to head off any public hostility by urging that the Tablighis not be blamed for the high number cases in the province.<sup>45</sup> On 15 April the Tablighi coordinator (Syuro Alama faction) in West Nusa Tenggara also issued a public letter announcing full support for the Covid-19 Task Force; stating that the Tablighis were stopping religious outreach (*dakwah*) activities for now, including *khuruj*; and noting that anyone who violated the restrictions would face legal sanctions.<sup>46</sup> Tablighis in South Kalimantan issued a similar letter.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> "Ratusan WNA Peserta Ijtima Dunia 2020 Sudah 2 Bulan Keliling Masjid di Indonesia", *kompas.com*, 19 March 2020.

<sup>41</sup> "Acaranya Dibatalkan, Jamaah Tabligh: Kami Tidak Takut Corona", *lagaligopos.com*, 19 March 2020.

<sup>42</sup> "Soal Tudingan Ogah Dikarantina, Begini penjelasan Jamaah Tabligh", *mimosa.tv*, 12 April 2020.

<sup>43</sup> "Tambah 21 Positif Covid-19 di NTB dari Kluster Gowa," *kompas.com*, 21 April 2020 and "68.84 Persen Kasus Covid 19 di Kalsel dari Kluster Gowa, Tersebar di 7 Kabupaten," *kompas.com*, 5 May 2020.

<sup>44</sup> "Tolak Kluster Gowa di Karantina di Gedung SMPN 2, Puluhan Warga Seruduk Kantor Camat Praya Tengah", 20 April 2020; "Capek-capek Jaga, Malah Kampung Kami Dijadikan Lokasi Karantina Jemaah Gowa", *kompas.com*, 22 April 2020.

<sup>45</sup> "Gubernur NTB Pernah Ikut Jamaah Tabligh. Minta Tak Salahkan Lonjakan Corona", *bali.bisnis.com*, 21 April 2020.

<sup>46</sup> "Surat Edaran Jamaah Tabligh NTB Terbit, Ini Isinya", *suarantb.com*, 17 April 2020.

<sup>47</sup> "Jamaah Tabligh Kalsel Dukung Putus Rantai COVID-19 dengan Patuhi Panggilan Pemerintah dan Ulama", *suaraindonesia.com*, 24 April 2020.

Tension over Gowa returnees also arose in Nabire, Papua, building on pre-existing suspicions among locals toward Tablighis.<sup>48</sup> Information on the Gowa outbreak had already been well-publicised when sixteen local participants in the *ijtima* returned to Nabire. They had travelled by ship from Sulawesi to Manokwari, West Papua, since Papua province had imposed a ban on passenger travel by air or sea as of 26 March 2020.<sup>49</sup> After a two-week quarantine in Manokwari, they were given certificates of good health and allowed to go home on 12 April, but many in the local population demanded they be tested again, accusing the government of being reckless by letting them come back. Discussion of the issue on social media further inflamed tensions, to the point that the spokesman for the local Covid-19 task force felt obliged to warn residents that there was no need to burn houses, chase down and intimidate the Tablighis, or otherwise take the law into their own hands.<sup>50</sup> As of 26 April, 25 of the 35 suspected Covid-19 cases in Nabire were linked to Gowa.<sup>51</sup>

Elsewhere as Gowa participants returned home, local authorities tried to set up quarantine centres, sometimes generating community protests. Particular anger was directed at individual Tablighis who deliberately sought to evade quarantine measures or were otherwise deemed irresponsible about abiding by restrictions. While senior Tablighi ulama tried to cooperate with government procedures, they had little capacity beyond exhortation to persuade members to comply. On 21 April 2020, for example, Central Java governor Ganjar Pranowo called on all 1,500 residents of the province who attended the Gowa meeting to report to local authorities for testing. At that time, despite repeated calls, only a small fraction had come forward.<sup>52</sup>

Elsewhere local officials urged the public not to stigmatise Gowa returnees, an indication that stigmatisation was in fact a problem.<sup>53</sup> The potential for violence, including vigilante violence, could increase as the number of cases continues to rise, especially if new clusters of Tablighis emerge.

By 11 May, Indonesia had confirmed 1,068 cases from the Gowa cluster in 22 provinces, with an additional 42 cases in Thailand and twelve in Malaysia from participants in the *ijtima* who had returned home.<sup>54</sup> The Indonesian numbers were almost certainly higher: while the national Covid-19 task force ordered local authorities to do contact-tracing, testing capacity remained limited.

#### D. Other Tablighi Clusters

In addition to the Gowa cluster, two smaller Tablighi clusters emerged linked to the Nizamuddin faction that had organised the *ijtima* in Malaysia and India. The first was at the Kebon Jeruk mosque, the faction's Indonesian headquarters. The *markaz* has a dormitory where fellow Tablighis frequently stay, with several hundred in residence at any one time to take part in the jamaah's activities. On 24 March, the

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<sup>48</sup> The Tablighis had first come to Papua in 1988 and built a following among Muslim transmigrants. Their activities were centered at the Serambi Mecca mosque and the Darul Ulum Islamic boarding school in Jayapura. In October 2019, 22 Tablighi who arrived in Jayapura for *khuruj* were false rumoured over social media to have come for jihad, apparently simply because of their style of dress (robes and turbans). The provincial police chief clarified the disinformation, but suspicions against the Tablighis were not so easily erased.

<sup>49</sup> "16 Warga Nabire Klaster Gowa Akan Jalani Rapid Test COVID-19", *tabloidjubi.com*, 14 April 2020.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> "Hasil Tes Cepat Reaktif, 35 Warga Nabire Tunggu Hasil Tes Realtime PCR", *tabloidjubi.com*, 26 April 2020.

<sup>52</sup> "Bertambah 26 Positif Covid-19, Ganjar Pranowo: yang Ikut Ijtimu Gowa Segera Laporkan", *pikiranrakyat.com*, 21 April 2020; "Curhat Jemaah Alumni Ijtimu Gowa: Dikucilkan, Dilarang Salat di Mesjid", *sulsel.idntimes.com*, 28 April 2020; "Jadi Sorotan Saat Wabah Virus Corona, Berikut Jawaban Anggota Jamaah Tabligh di Samarinda", *kaltimtoday.co*, 12 April 2020. The latter is a good example of the Tablighi response, explaining how the Tablighi community was dealing with the aftermath of Gowa.

<sup>53</sup> "Hilangkan Stigma Negatif pada Peserta Tabligh Akbar Gowa", *gatra.com*, 18 April 2020.

<sup>54</sup> We thank Jordan Newton for providing the database of Gowa clusters across Indonesia. The database relies mostly on online media reports from 20 March to 29 April 2020.

West Jakarta government received a report of many people gathered at Kebon Jeruk, in clear violation of the Jakarta government's regulation on social distancing and the 16 March circular of the Indonesian Ulama Council. It sent a team to check out the report and found that some 190 Tablighis were in residence: 111 from Indonesia and 80 from other countries.<sup>55</sup> Given reports from Sri Petaling and Gowa, they isolated everyone in the mosque and conducted rapid tests. Two days later, they had the results: three men, two from Aceh and one from Medan, were confirmed positive – all had taken part in the Sri Petaling meeting.<sup>56</sup> The three were taken to the emergency hospital at Wisma Atlet, while the others were also gradually transferred there for a fourteen-day quarantine. The infection, however, had already spread. By 7 April, 73 of the Kebon Jeruk Tablighis tested positive.

Another cluster was identified at the Tablighi pesantren in Temboro, Magetan, home to around 25,000 students (*santri*). On 16 April, 43 of 200 Malaysian *santri* who had returned home tested positive for coronavirus. Magetan officials admitted they did not take test them prior to departure because they had too few testing kits.<sup>57</sup> After critical reports came out in the Malaysian media, the Magetan bupati and East Java government decided to trace and test the rest of the students, but even when they could do so, they were still hampered by the lack of supplies. Of the 5,000 remaining at the school as of mid-April, only 200 had been tested by 22 April.<sup>58</sup> Thirty-one tested positive, raising concerns that not only the students but locals around the school had been exposed.

#### IV. THE BETHEL CHURCH

Another religious group that became a super-spreader is the Protestant evangelist Bethel Church, the largest Pentecostal church in Indonesia. As clusters of infections linked to different Bethel gatherings began to emerge, so did anti-Christian hate speech.

The Bethel Church in Indonesia (Gereja Bethel Indonesia, GBI) is part of an international Pentecostal movement that originated in Seattle, Washington in the 1920s and today claims millions of followers, though it has split over time into many different groups. Historically, the strongholds of GBI were in Bandung, Temanggung, Cepu and Surabaya but it took off in the 1970s and spread to all corners of Indonesia.<sup>59</sup> Like other Pentecostals, GBI stresses a literalist interpretation of the Bible and direct individual experience with the Holy Spirit through healing, miracles, prophecy and exorcism.<sup>60</sup> Like the Tablighis, many Pentecostals scoffed at fear of the coronavirus and rejected exhortations to avoid mass gatherings, even as they sought to raise funds to aid front-line medical personnel.<sup>61</sup>

In a short video on 15 March that went viral, Rev. Philip Mantofa from the Rose of Sharon Church (Gereja Mawar Sharon, GMS) in Surabaya -- once linked to GBI but now independent -- said in a service:

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<sup>55</sup> “Tiga Jamaah Diduga Corona, 101 Wara Dikarantina di Masjid Jami Kebon Jeruk,” nasional.okezone.com, 28 March 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid and “Menelisik Peta Corona Jemaah Tabligh,” news.detik.com, 5 April 2020.

<sup>57</sup> “Pandemi Covid-19: 4 Hal Seputar Klaster Temboro,” tempo.co, 21 April 2020.

<sup>58</sup> “5 Ribu Santri Masih Ada di Pesantren Temboro, Baru 200 Di-Rapid Test”, vivanews.com, 22 April 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Gani Wiyono, “The Beginning of Pentecostalism in Indonesia,” Asia Center for Pentecostal Theology, pentecost.asia, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> “Mega Church di Indonesia: Menjual Mukjizat dan Klaim Kesuksesan,” tirta.id, 25 July 2019.

<sup>61</sup> See for example the 25 March 2020 entry on the Facebook page of Gereja Mawar Sharon Medan (a branch of the Surabaya church). <https://www.facebook.com/gmsmedan/posts/saudara-saudara-yang-terkasih-di-tengah-tengah-kasus-covid-19-yang-semakin-menin/2794264317358909/>

Ah, I don't care. When we are here, it is church business. Stand up! I want to hug you, what can they do? [hugs parishioners] God bless you. Stand up! I don't have coronavirus! If someone got infected, it should be the priest first. Don't be afraid, come to church!<sup>62</sup>

But in fact, the virus was already spreading in the Bethel community. The first gathering to be infected was a pastoral meeting of 170 people held on 3-5 March 2020 in Lembang, outside Bandung, West Java. This was before any protocols on social distancing were in place. On 19 March, one of the participants, the deputy head of the Sukawarna Bethel Church in Bandung, Rev. Natanael Aslam, went to the hospital with corona symptoms, including shortness of breath. He was 70 and had had heart troubles. The head of the church, Rev. David Tjakra Wisaksana, also fell ill. In less than a week, both men had died, as had Rev. Aslam wife.<sup>63</sup> The men had led church services on 6 and 11 March 2020, and soon other parishioners began to show symptoms. By 2 April, of 677 Covid-19 cases identified in Bandung, 226 were linked to the Lembang meeting.

West Java Governor Ridwan Kamil from the beginning was one of the political leaders most active in urging that stricter regulations be put in place and enforced, and that tracing and testing be increased. (As of early April, 61,000 rapid testing kits had been distributed in a province with a population of about 50 million.)<sup>64</sup> The governor asked the Bandung police, in cooperation with GBI leaders, to trace participants in the meeting and administer rapid diagnostic tests (RDT), later followed by swab tests for those who were showing symptoms. The GBI cluster was one of four in the province; another large one was a meeting of the Western Indonesia Protestant Church at the Hotel Aston in Bogor.<sup>65</sup>

Another cluster related to the Bethel community – but not linked to Lembang – emerged in April at GBI's seminary in the densely populated area of Petamburan, North Jakarta. The complex houses a theology institute (Sekolah Tinggi Teologi, STT), a theological junior high school Sekolah Menengah Teologi Kristen), and a school for proselytisation (Sekolah Penginjil), with one dormitory that serves all. The complex is only a few hundred feet from headquarters of the hardline Islamic Defender Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI).

On 11 March, a resident of the GBI complex was hospitalized in RSUD Mintohardjo, one of the designated hospitals for COVID-19 patients in Central Jakarta, though it was never clear that he actually had tested positive. After he was deemed to be recovered, three others fell sick. Authorities suspected that the virus had struck the school dormitory as much as a month before the first person was hospitalised. Six more from the dormitory went to a local clinic on 26 March to take the rapid test, which came out negative. They took a second test on 6 April, which was positive and subsequently confirmed by swabs on 9 April. On 12 April, a month after the first case emerged, health officials finally tested all 134 students and staff of the seminary.<sup>66</sup> Thirty-six students tested positive but were asymptomatic. They were all taken to special emergency hospital that had been set up in a sports dormitory known as Wisma Atlet and all were later reported to be in good health. When the remaining 94 students were given swab tests several days later, 27 were found to be positive; they were also brought to Wisma Atlet. None exhibited

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<sup>62</sup> See the full video on YouTube: Ps. Philip Mantofa – GMS Surabaya Sunday Service III – 15 March 2020,” uploaded by Jonathan Hadi, 15 March 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDxFBAtVaww>. The Mawar Sharon church, one of Indonesia's largest, was originally part of GBI. It now has 70 branches with some 30,000 followers, 20,000 of them at the Surabaya church alone. See “17 Gereja dengan jumlah jemaat terbanyak di Indonesia,” rubrikkristen.com, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> “Mengurai Penyebaran COVID-19 Klaster ‘Seminar Keagamaan’ di Bandung, tirta.id, 30 March 2020.

<sup>64</sup> “226 Jemaah GBI Lembang Positif Covid-19 Usai Ikut Acara Keagamaan, Ini Kronologinya,” merdeka.com, 4 April 2020.

<sup>65</sup> The other three were a seminar on no-interest banking in Bogor, a seminar of the Western Indonesia Protestant Church at the Hotel Aston in Bogor and a meeting of the business organization HIPMI in Karawang.

<sup>66</sup> “Surat Terbuka Seminari Bethel Jakarta,” beritabethel.com, 17 April 2020.

any symptoms.<sup>67</sup> The cluster at the dorm caused local residents to demand that local authorities shut down the dormitory.<sup>68</sup> Other Bethel students were accused of being virus carriers.<sup>69</sup>

The Bethel cluster produced a rash of untrue anti-Christian hate speech suggesting, in one posting, that 10,000 pastors linked to GBI and another Pentecostal group were Indonesia's "silent killers", a posting that was denounced as a hoax on the Covid-19 Task Force website. But the outbreak in the dormitory did not produce any organised action by FPI, its close neighbour. Why? Because Habib Rizieq, the exiled FPI leader, is an alumnus of the Bethel junior high school, class of 1973, and turns out to feel very warmly toward his alma mater.<sup>70</sup> The relationship between the two institutions has always been friendly, an institutional "odd couple" if there ever was one. FPI members guard the GBI seminar at Christmas and its ulama are frequently invited to have debates with the seminary teachers. A few ugly social media postings therefore may not have much influence as long as local authorities can address concerns over the dormitory effectively.

## V. NEW CLUSTERS DURING RAMADHAN

Additional clusters of "super-spreaders" could emerge during Ramadan, the Islamic fasting month that in 2020 began on 24 April and will end on 23 May. Muslims around the world fast from dawn until dusk and then traditionally break the fast with a large communal meal, followed by group evening prayers called *tarawih* at the local mosque. Despite the urgings of the MUI to stay home, it remains unthinkable for some Muslims to abandon these practices.

In Pare-Pare, South Sulawesi, the province with the highest number of COVID-19 patients outside Java, people climbed onto the locked fence of a mosque so they could hold *tarawih* prayers on the first day of Ramadan. Around 196 mosques in Solo, Central Java, and 20 in Pekanbaru, Riau continued to have *tarawih* sessions, even though there were indicators the area was vulnerable to the virus. Six people tested positive with a rapid testing check after holding *tarawih* prayers at Al-Ikhlas mosque, in Sidoarjo, East Java.

The government gave particularly mixed signals over whether people would be allowed to return home (*mudik*) for the post-Ramadan Idul Fitri holiday known as Lebaran in Indonesia. Some 33 million people normally take part in the exodus every year, and major urban centers like Jakarta become half empty. But with the greater Jakarta area the epicenter of Covid-19, many local officials were wary of possibly infected travelers coming into their areas. Governors pressed Jokowi for a firm decision, with the governors of Central and West Java particularly vocal. But Jokowi seemed unable to make up his mind.

On 30 March, the president urged people not to go home, but he and his advisers said there would be no formal ban since for those determined to defy it, it was unenforceable anyway. Many had already departed, especially those who had lost jobs and had no source of income in the capital. It took almost another month to act, even as some local authorities made it clear that any travelers from outside the area would face an automatic fourteen-day quarantine. Finally, on 21 April, Jokowi declared that *mudik* was forbidden, but immediately confused the issue by saying there was a difference between going home (*pulang kampung*), and going home for the holidays (*mudik*), and that the first would be allowed but not the second. It was unclear how anyone was going to be able to determine the difference.<sup>71</sup> The Ministry

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<sup>67</sup> "Positif Covid-19 di Asrama STT Bethel Jadi 68 Orang," ayojakarta.com, 23 April 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Warga Tolak Keberadaan Mahasiswa, Pos Pantau Kini Didirikan di Asrama Bethel Petamburan," megapolitan.kompas.com, 17 April 2020; "Beredar Video Warga Minta Asrama Bethel Petamburan Dikosongkan, Ini Kata Camat Tanah Abang," megapolitan.kompas.com, 17 April 2020.

<sup>69</sup> "Kabar Terkini Para Mahasiswa Seminari Bethel Jakarta yang Positif Corona," ebahana.com, 20 April 2020.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> "Jokowi Diuji Pandemi – Jokowi: Mudik dan Pulang Beda (Part Two), Mata Najwa, 22 April 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BC6F6Uxw1G0>,

of Transportation shut down inter-regional transport in accordance with the *mudik* ban, but on 7 May lifted some restrictions.

On 13 May, the MUI issued a new fatwa. It addressed both the traditional activities on the night before Idul Fitri when there are prayers through the night in many mosques and people driving around in groups shouting the *takbir* (Allahu Akbar, God is great), and prayers on Idul Fitri itself. The fatwa said it was permissible to take part in group activities in areas “where the situation was already under control”, as measured by a decline in infections and an easing of restrictions based on expert assessments or in rural areas where the population was homogenous, no one had been infected and there was no coming and going from outside the area.<sup>72</sup> Where the virus was not under control, people were permitted to conduct prayers at home. Regardless of the reliability of data, many interpreted the fatwa as a sign that Indonesia was coming back to normal. In East Java, the provincial government reopened the largest mosque in Surabaya on 14 May for prayers and seemed to be moving toward reopening others, but the decision was revoked on 19 May after warnings of serious health consequences.

With the confusion and the inconsistencies on the part of the government and the deep emotional ties to the annual family gathering at the end of Ramadan, new clusters of Covid-19 cases are almost certain to emerge. With them will arise the possibility of new tensions in local communities. Most of these will have no link to religion or religious groups but local task forces need to be aware of any underlying conflicts – land disputes, gang rivalries, inter-village hostilities -- that could exacerbate Covid-linked fears.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of religious super-spreaders has produced some stigmatisation, particularly of Tablighis, but not violence. The fact that Tablighis generally have such good relations with the government undoubtedly helped. In many areas, local authorities moved quickly to avert more serious problems by appearing with local Tablighi coordinators and presenting them as valued members of the community. On their part, the Tablighis made a point of using social media to announce the measures they were taking to halt activities involving travel, like the *khuruj*, and large gatherings. Stigmatisation, especially after the Gowa meeting, was an issue, but it could have been worse if the Tablighis had been less well-connected.

GBI also was quick to counter misinformation and make facts on its meetings fully available. It was still the target of hate speech on social media but the stigmatisation stayed within manageable levels. Had the initial outbreak taken place in Solo, Central Java, where there was a history of extremist hostility toward GBI, rather than West Java, the problem could have been worse.

The government should have acted much earlier to ban mass gatherings, and at least had a contingency plan to deal with events like the Gowa meeting, with a clear agreement between national and local authorities about procedures to be followed, including for the testing and monitoring of participants.

From the cases described in this briefing, it is clear that tensions involving religious clusters of Covid-19 are highest when they build on a previous history of conflict, as in Papua; when a community believes that local authorities are not doing enough to address an outbreak; or when local authorities try to set up a quarantine centre for infected patients that residents fear will endanger their own well-being. The solution is not discourage quarantining but to ensure communities understand how risks will be minimised.

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<sup>72</sup> Indonesia Ulema Council, “Fatwa No. 28 Tahun 2020 tentang Panduan Kaifiat Takbir dan Shalat Idul Fitri Saat Covid 19,” [mui.or.id](http://mui.or.id), 14 May 2020.

There are several immediate issues on the horizon. First is the repatriation of stranded Tablighis, a process that is already underway. The national Covid-19 Task Force, working with local authorities and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, needs to map all the Tablighis stranded abroad awaiting repatriation, understanding that there could well be an assumption unless proven otherwise that they have been exposed to the virus. Their home communities and local coordinators need to be consulted prior to repatriation to ensure they are not stigmatised or targeted on return, and there needs to be a clear agreement on testing and quarantine procedures. With more than 1,000 citizens involved, this is no small undertaking.

A second issue is the coming Idul Fitri holiday and the widespread flouting of restrictions on travel, social distancing and group gatherings that is already taking place. The MUI and major Islamic organisations like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama have urged Muslims to conduct Idul Fitri prayers at home rather than in mosques, but it may be hard to enforce. The lack of clear guidance on enforcement or sanctions could lead to two unfortunate outcomes: new clusters of religious “super-spreaders” or vigilantism, as some groups decide to take the law into its own hands.

Indonesia has had fewer problems from religious “super-spreaders” than might have been expected, but it remains important that the government not let down its guard.



**APPENDIX 1: The Gowa Cluster as of 11 May 2020**

	<b>Province</b>	<b>No. Positive*</b>	<b>PDP**</b>	<b>Positive Deceased</b>	<b>Total</b>
Sumatera	Bangka Belitung	1	0	0	1
	West Sumatera	12	0	0	12
	Jambi	36	0	0	36
	Lampung	6	0	0	6
Java	West Java	3	0	0	3
	Yogyakarta	18	0	0	18
	Central Java	367	3	3	373
	East Java	3	0	0	3
Kalimantan	Central Kalimantan	37	1	0	38
	East Kalimantan	75+	0	3	152**
	South Kalimantan	38+	1	0	139**
	North Kalimantan	32	0	0	32
Sulawesi	Central Sulawesi	35	1	0	36
	Gorontalo	22	0	0	22
	North Sulawesi	15	0	0	15
	South East Sulawesi	1	0	0	1
	South Sulawesi	3	0	0	3
Nusa Tenggara	East Nusa Tenggara	42	0	0	42
	West Nusa Tenggara	92	0	0	92
Maluku	North Maluku	2	0	0	2
Papua	Papua	38	0	0	38
	West Papua	4	0	0	4
<b>TOTAL</b>					<b>1068</b>

\*) Confirmed positive through PCR/swab-test and reactive to rapid test.

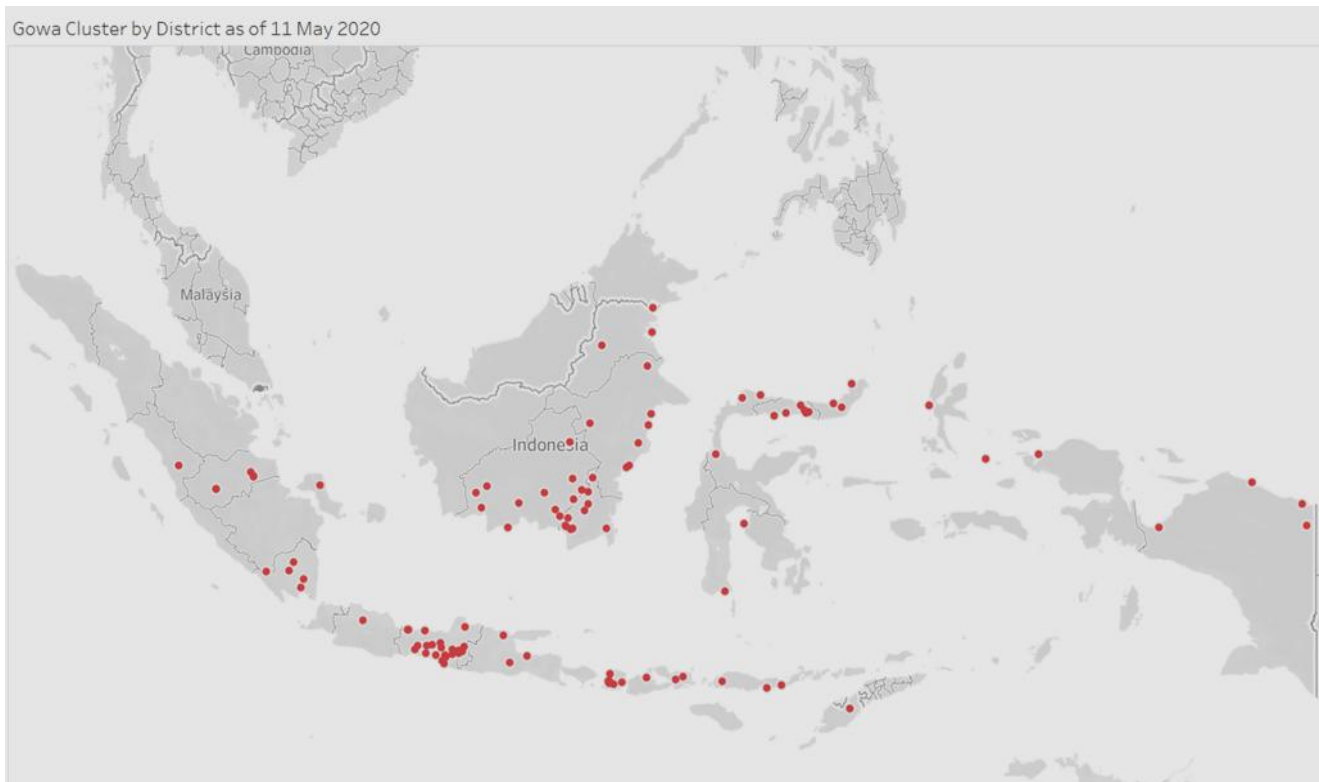
\*\*) PDP is an Indonesian abbreviation for "patient under supervision" who shows COVID-19 symptoms but either has not been tested or has not received test results.

\*\*) Compiled number from provincial governments.

### Gowa Cluster by Province as of 11 May 2020



### Gowa Cluster by District as of 11 May 2020



## APPENDIX II: TIMELINE OF RELIGIOUS GATHERINGS

### Jan-Feb 2020

- 26-29 Feb : Annual meeting of Western Indonesia Protestant Church (GPIB) in Bogor.
- 27 Feb-1 March: Tablighi ijtimia in Sri Petaling Mosque, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

### 2 March : First case announced in Indonesia

- 3-5 March: Pastoral meeting of Bethel Church Indonesia (GBI) Sukawarna in Lembang, Bandung.
- 13 March: Jokowi establishes National COVID-19 Taskforce; Minister of Religious Affairs issues protocols on houses of worship.
- 13-15 March: Tablighi ijtimia in Nizamuddin, New Delhi, India.
- 15 March: Jokowi urges work from home, study from home, worship from home.
- 16 March: Fatwa MUI No. 14/2020 on Friday prayers and congregational prayers in mosque; Council of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) encourages online services.
- 18 March: Cancellation of Tablighi ijtimia in Gowa, South Sulawesi.
- 19 March: National Police Regulation No. Mak/2/III/2020 on mass gathering.
- 21 March: Bethel Church Indonesia (GBI) pastor dies; churches shift to online activity.
- 22 March: MUI fatwa permits evening Ramadhan prayers (*tarawih*) in green zones.

### 23 March: 1st day of Ramadhan

- 24 March: Virus emerges in Kebon Jeruk Mosque, Jakarta.
- 28 March: Religious leaders urge worship from home.
- 31 March: Jokowi issues PP No.21/2020 on Large Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB).
- 3 April: West Java announces four clusters, incl. GPIB and GBI Sukawarna.
- 10 April: PSBB applied in Jakarta.
- 12 April: Outbreak in GBI Petamburan.
- 15 April: PSBB applied in Jakarta suburbs (West Java).
- 16 April: Outbreak Tablighi in pesantren in Temboro, Magetan.
- 21 April: Jokowi bans travel home for Idul Fitri holiday (*mudik*).
- 6 May: Minister of Transportation issues circular letter allowing public transportation operations.
- 13 May: Fatwa MUI No. 28/2020 on Idul Fitri prayer.
- 15 May: Jokowi: 'make peace with COVID-19'.

### 24 May: Eid