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# How Does Islamic Organizations Respond to COVID-19 in Indonesia? A Case Study



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## ABSTRACT

**Background and purpose:** Indonesia has made several regulations to tackle the corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, including large scale social limitation (*Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar* (PSBB)). This regulation is related to physical distancing in all sectors and activities, including religious activities. But efforts made by government and other organizations are not enough to ensure society that these regulations will not affect their religiosity. To strengthen this policy, *majelis ulama Indonesia* (MUI) and other Islamic organizations have made *fatwa* and official statement about how worships, especially those which are done in groups should be conducted during this pandemic. This paper aims to provide report and analysis of Islamic organizations response during pandemic in relation to Islamic worships during COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia

**Methods:** This is a case study of Islamic organizations response during pandemic. It includes *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI), *Muhammadiyah*, and *Nahdlatul Ulama* responses (*fatwa* and official statement) to this issue and public responses as well. COVID-19 case also compared to vaccine hesitancy case, due to similarities of Islamic organization response between them.

**Results:** Some *fatwas* had been made by MUI as response to Islamic worships performance during pandemic. But still there were cases like Banjarbaru and Solo case, indicating that *fatwas* could not guarantee the success of COVID-19 prevention in religious worships.

**Conclusion:** Religious and community leaders are needed to strengthen government move by helping government promote and educate people about health issues from religious perspectives. Moreover, some kinds of punishment made by government are needed to strengthen *fatwas* and rulings, as most of these religious opinions do not have legal enforcement.

**Keywords:** Pandemic; COVID-19; Islamic Organization Response; Indonesia

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## INTRODUCTION

During Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, most countries are applying lockdown to assure physical distancing and minimize contact between people. Policies and regulations made to end this pandemic indeed are not easy for the citizens, including Indonesian. Indonesia is currently in battle with 425,796 confirmed cases up to May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020 with 3.4 % death rate.<sup>1</sup>

In April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020, Ministry of Health published a large-scale social limitation regulation, locally called *Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar* (PSBB) to flatten the epidemic curve. PSBB requires people to limit their activities outside their houses,

including large-scale religious activities. Question raised shortly after the PSBB applied was more likely: until how far Indonesians will obey this regulation when it comes to religious matters?

Indonesia is famous of its reputation as country with the largest Muslim population in the world, data from Central Bureau of Statistics in 2010 showed that 87,18% population in Indonesia are muslims.<sup>2</sup> Indonesian Muslims mostly join some Islamic organizations, such as *Muhammadiyah*, *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), and others. In terms of worship, there are types of worship those performed in groups within Islamic practice, such as *Shalat Jum'ah* and *Shalat Tarawih* which are restricted to be performed since PSBB

regulation. Islamic organizations were then placed in the spotlight as their thoughts and movements are being questioned.

Indonesian Ulema Council/*Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI), a non-governmental organization serve as top clerical body for *ulama*, *zu'ama*, and Islamic scholars in Indonesia, has made some *fatwas* about religious worships such as *Shalat Jama'ah*, and *Shalat Eid* to support the government in implementing the restriction of mass gathering including religious activities. The *fatwas* aim to support effort to minimize the virus from spreading through worship gathering. There were different responses toward the *fatwa* due to people's different perception on the virus and commitment to their

religious practices. Nevertheless, there was evidence of transmission of the virus at religious places or activities, from several reported cases of COVID-19 after such activities. In Banyumas,<sup>3</sup> there were 10 people confirmed positive after performing *Shalat Jama'ah* in a mosque, and similar cases in other part of Indonesia. We realize that religious-related factors, such as Islamic organizations and leaders' role contribute to the success of COVID-19 prevention in Indonesia.

This paper aims to provide report and analysis of Islamic organizations response during pandemic in terms of Islamic worships impacted by COVID-19 pandemic.

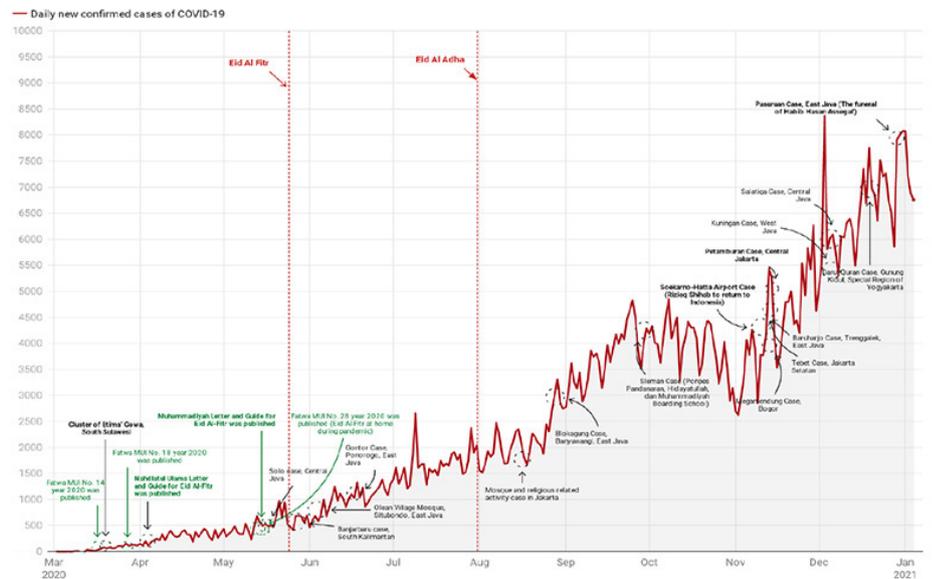
## METHODS

This paper emphasizes analysis of Islamic organizations' role during COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis was made after all events related to Islamic organization and muslims response had been arranged in form of timeline. This paper used case study method to analyze the phenomena of religious-related cluster in pandemic. The main areas of this paper include Islamic organization responses, also several related cases as response from public. Researchers will focus on *MUI*, *Muhammadiyah*, and *NU*, as their roles are considered significant in influencing Indonesian Muslims. Events and cases related to Islamic worships in specific were obtained from official website of Islamic organizations, also from online news. After that, we analyzed events and cases based on the aim of this study. Moreover, only initial case of coronavirus spread is included in timeline. Cases analyzed in this paper were compared to other faith-related health issue like vaccine hesitancy due to similar characteristics of both types of case.

## RESULTS

### Timeline of Islamic organization response and related cases

Timeline of Islamic organization response and related cases are described in Figure 1, including publication of fatwa from different religious organization.



**Figure 1** Timeline Faith-related Cases of COVID-19 and Islamic Organization Early Response

### Fatwa MUI No. 14 year 2020 was published

On March 16<sup>th</sup> 2020, *MUI* made a *fatwa* related to worship performance during pandemic<sup>4</sup> to rule *Shalat Jum'ah* and *Shalat Jama'ah* in pandemic. *MUI* commanded all muslims to prevent any possible activity which increase the potentials of coronavirus spread as the part of *al-Dharuriyat al-Khams* and ruled certain condition in which muslims could go to mosque, based on the status or level of their area related to COVID-19.

### Cluster of Ijtima' Gowa

This event was supposed to be held in March 19<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> 2020 on Gowa, Sulawesi Selatan.<sup>5</sup> Government dismissed this event before it was started. But around 8000 people had gathered in Gowa, and few days later some other areas in Indonesia confirmed COVID-19 cases related to this cluster. On May 13<sup>th</sup> 2020, nine patients in Manggarai Barat were confirmed coronavirus positive from this cluster.

### Fatwa MUI No. 18 year 2020 was published

On March 27<sup>th</sup> 2020, a *fatwa* about *tajhiz al-jana'iz* or Islamic Funeral ruling was made and published to the

public.<sup>6</sup> It contains procedures of taking care of muslims who died because of coronavirus based on Islamic rules and medical protocols. It includes how bathing the body, shrouding, and *Shalat Jenazah* or funeral prayer are conducted under medical protocols.

### Surat Edaran 3953/C.I.034.04.3030 was published by NU

This letter from *NU*<sup>7</sup> was published in April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020, commanding their followers to perform *tarawih* and *Eid Al-Fitr* prayer using health protocol to prevent the spread of *coronavirus*.

### Fatwa MUI No. 28 year 2020 was published

After making *fatwa* about worship performance, on May 13<sup>th</sup> 2020 *MUI* published a document which included a guide to perform *Eid Al-Fitr* at home during pandemic.<sup>8</sup> This *fatwa* explains about how Indonesian muslims should perform *Eid Al-Fitr* prayer during coronavirus pandemic.

### Muhammadiyah Letter and Guide for Eid Al-Fitr was published

As one of the largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, *Muhammadiyah* in May 14<sup>th</sup> 2020 made a letter and a guide about

performing *Eid Al-Fitr* prayer during pandemic.<sup>9</sup> These letter and guide were made by *Majlis Tarjih* as a part of *Muhammadiyah* which has authority to give certain *fatwa* specifically for *Muhammadiyah* followers.

### Solo case

May 16<sup>th</sup> 2020, local government put 90 families in Serengan, Solo under surveillance after they had been detected to be in contact with a coronavirus suspect while performing *tarawih* prayer.<sup>10</sup> Seven people of them were developing COVID-19 symptoms and classified as under surveillance patients.

### Banjarbaru case

An under surveillance patient in Banjarbaru, Kalimantan Selatan was forced to be buried with non-medical protocol by her family<sup>11</sup> in May 26<sup>th</sup> 2020. The hospital, police officers, and local government had explained to her family the necessity and importance of medical protocol for COVID-19 suspect funeral, but they refused to use it. After hours of negotiation, her family finally let the hospital and other institution to perform medical protocol.

### Several related cases as response from public

As tradition when there was someone who had just died in neighborhood, in 3rd April 2020 a citizen (MA) in Tulungagung<sup>12</sup> held a “*tahlilan*”, a form of prayer for the dead for his father. Three days later, he started to experience COVID-19 symptoms. His father was not diagnosed as COVID-19 patient, so they did the funeral with a non-medical protocol. But MA was suspected to be exposed to the virus while taking care of his father in hospital. This case contributed to the increase of 12 patients in total, making this a new cluster in Tulungagung. Similar to what happened in Tulungagung 9 days before, around 25 people were under surveillance because of *tahlilan* by April 12<sup>th</sup> 2020. People who attended *tahlilan* found out that the one they were praying for was confirmed as COVID-19 positive a week later.

In April 18<sup>th</sup> 2020, at least 10 people

were confirmed as other coronavirus cases in Banyumas, Jawa Tengah.<sup>13</sup> One of the suspects performed *Shalat Jama'ah*. After tracking other people who were in contact with the suspect, they found 10 positive cases in sum which later named as Kober cluster. The first confirmed case was in Gowa for *Ijtima' Ulama* that supposed to be held in 19th-22nd March, 2020. After having cases related to *Shalat Jama'ah* as a part of Islamic worship, 10 days later in April 28<sup>th</sup> 2020 a letter by *takmir masjid* or people who are in charge to take care of local mosque in Banyumas<sup>14</sup> were being controversial since it included the idea of destroying the mosque. *Takmir* published the letter as a form of protest to the government which implemented *Fatwa MUI* No. 14 year 2020.

## DISCUSSION

### Faith-related cases of COVID-19 and Islamic organizations' role

Lay people were less likely to be convinced that health policy is rooted in a certain ideology, values, or philosophy and this is implied from no identifiable effect of political party support acceptability.<sup>15</sup> Government seems to put *MUI* in trust with no exception as it is the actor behind Indonesian government-muslims relationship, and it bridges both sides' perspectives and stances in public policy-making. The role of *MUI* is mostly interpreted through *fatwas* to give Islamic perspective and rulings of some issues and to ensure Indonesian Muslims that government regulations or policies related to those issues are still on track with Islamic beliefs and teachings. *Fatwas* usually comes after public policies. Looking back to the contribution of *MUI* during the pandemic, it has published three different *fatwas* which related to daily and routine worship performances, Islamic Funeral ruling (*tajhiz al-janaiz*), and *Eid Al-Fitr* prayer performance. These three *fatwas* are *Fatwa MUI* No.14/2020, *Fatwa MUI* No. 18/2020, and *Fatwa MUI* No. 28/2020. Ironically, cases like cluster of *Ijtima' Gowa*<sup>5</sup> and Solo<sup>10</sup> still happened even after *MUI* had made a formal move to guide Indonesian muslims.

Islamic funeral ruling, called as *tajhiz al-jana'iz* in *fiqh*, is another topic to be ruled by *MUI*. In a normal condition, burial of

the body will involve such ceremonies like bathing the body which often conducted by several people, shrouding, and *Shalat Jenazah*. In Islam, dead body is shrouded in cloth named *kain kafan*. *MUI* response to this is similar with its response to Tsunami Aceh in 2004, through *Fatwa* No. 34. At that time, *MUI* responded quickly by making a *fatwa* over funeral ruling during the emergency period. This *fatwa* was made under consideration and *rukshah* (dispensation) that body of the victims should be taken care based on *fiqh* of emergency condition. Moreover, *MUI* has also provided and explained certain *dalil* from Holy Quran, *hadith*, and *ushul fiqh* as the foundation to make those *fatwas*. But still, Banjarbaru case which is strongly related to this rule happened.

This may be the reason why these cases happened. *Fatwa* has non-binding legal force characteristic, or in *fiqh* it is known as *mulzim-ghair mulzim*. Al-Syâtibî in Muhammad defines *fatwa* as an explanation of *syara'* or Islamic Shari'ah ruling that cannot force all muslims to follow and perform it.<sup>16</sup> This is in line with Mulyati,<sup>17</sup> that *fatwa* contributes to the process of forming religious norms in society with its “quality feeling” effect to create religious emotion and moral sanction instead of legal enforcement. With these characteristics, effectivity of *fatwa* in the society is fully depended on people's submission towards the *fatwa* itself. Even when *MUI* is supported by the government and treated as the representative of all muslims in Indonesia, *MUI* is still not able to force Indonesian muslims to follow its *fatwas* as both *fatwa* in general and *MUI fatwa* in specific do not have the authority of law enforcement.

At the same time, *Muhammadiyah* and NU also respond to this pandemic. *Muhammadiyah* through *Majlis Tarjih* has made a guide for its followers to perform *Eid Al-Fitr* in their own houses and tell its followers to obey the government and lessen physical contacts. Meanwhile, *Nahdlatul Ulama* also shows its supports by educating people about COVID-19 prevention through some information dissemination in mosques, *ta'lim*, and *pesantren* or Islamic boarding school.

Furthermore, both of these organizations have spread information about COVID-19 using their websites to

do health promotion and education from both medical and Islamic perspectives. A study of Slamet and Laila<sup>18</sup> in Jepara showed that both *Muhammadiyah* and *Nahdlatul Ulama* were using several media platforms, like websites and printed publications to spread information. Moreover, a study from Tomkins *et al*<sup>19</sup> showed that collaboration between religious organizations, health organizations, and policy makers contributed to immunization promotion and delivery in Pakistan, after it had been previously opposed. Heward-Mills<sup>20</sup> found the relation between unhealthy habits prevention, such as smoking and alcohol consumption, and African faith leaders' role by promoting it in Sunday church service. This is supporting the idea of faith leaders who are able to give such crucial impacts to their followers' health behavior and habits.

In Indonesia, most people are willing to obey rules if those are made and supported by their religious organizations and leaders. Organizations like *Muhammadiyah* and *Nahdlatul Ulama* have their own commissions of *ulama* which function is to give thoughts and consideration towards certain issues from Islamic perspectives. *Muhammadiyah* has *Majlis Tarjih*,<sup>21</sup> and *Nahdlatul Ulama* is standing with *Bahsul Masail*.<sup>21</sup> This organization plays an important role in resulting Islamic law consideration.<sup>22</sup> *MUI* consists of *ulama* from almost all Islamic organizations in Indonesia as a way to ensure that their opinions and perspectives are heard and considered. But when it comes to *Majlis Tarjih* and *Bahsul Masail*, both of these commissions have different styles in examining issues from Islamic side as certain Islamic organizations usually have their own bases and referrals of *fiqh*. This is surely narrowing its scope of influence merely to their followers. But at the same time it will enhance the possibility of its followers' acceptance, because most of certain groups' followers will have a tendency to listen and obey their own groups' regulations.<sup>23</sup>

Three big Islamic organizations in Indonesia have done a lot of efforts to support government during the pandemic. But still, their efforts have some other questions related to how effective

the efforts are and how obedient their followers are to those *fatwas* and advices. The answers of these questions are further discussed in the next part of this paper.

### Responses from the public and how this is not a "fresh" issue

After *MUI* published *fatwas* related to COVID-19, the public was starting to react responsively to those rules. Islamic organizations, like *Muhammadiyah* and *NU*, were suggesting Indonesian muslims to obey both government rules and *MUI fatwas*. Religious community leaders were also influencing their followers using faith-based approach. It is actually not a new idea that health programs can be impacted by faith and religious worship. Sabahelzain<sup>24</sup> studied the relation between vaccination hesitancy and religious belief in Pakistan. His study proves the connection of faith and health behavior, while religious faith is influencing most of certain religion followers' thoughts and acts that related to their health. A study from Lane *et al*.<sup>25</sup> found that religion was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> as the reason of vaccine hesitancy globally based on WHO/UNICEF Join Reporting Data from 2014-2016. Reasons related to religion were "due to certain religious sects (minority)" and "traditional cultural beliefs". Religion was constantly being in the 3<sup>rd</sup> place as reason for vaccine hesitancy for three years in a row. This is proof that health issues somehow can be connected to certain faiths or beliefs.

Also in Indonesia, religious belief is often a main reason why people are against certain programs or policies. Religious faith of parents makes them prohibit their children from getting immunizations. A study from Sulistiyani<sup>26</sup> showed a phenomenon in which families in Sendangmulyo, Semarang was reluctant to give their children immunizations. This happened even after *MUI* published *Fatwa MUI* No. 4 year 2016 that specifically examined Islamic opinion of vaccines. Through that *fatwa*, *MUI* ensured the permission of immunizations under certain condition. First, immunization is permissible (*mubah*) as it is a form of *ikhtiar* or an effort to prevent diseases. Second, vaccines should be made by *halal* materials. When it is under an emergency condition and it will threaten somebody's

life if he/she is not vaccinated, vaccine is still permissible despite the availability of *haram* materials. But after publishing such *fatwa*, there are still some cases related to community reluctance of immunizations.

In Sendangmulyo,<sup>26</sup> more than 50 percent of participants believed that vaccine was *haram* or not allowed because of its *haram* materials. Furthermore, immunizations was never been discussed explicitly in certain religious gathering such as *ta'lim*, making its status of permission stayed unclear in the society. This also indicated the lack of awareness and role of religious leaders in community to educate their followers of certain issues related to faith and belief. But this is in contrast with a study from Padmawati *et al*.<sup>27</sup> about the rotavirus vaccine acceptance of religious and community leaders in Yogyakarta. Her study explained the need of *halal* label for rotavirus vaccine in order to increase community acceptance. Moreover, religious and community leaders were aware that their role as key players could contribute to promote vaccine in society especially in post-labeling. From these studies, we can assume that not all religious and community leaders in Indonesia are already aware of their role in educating their followers about health-related religious issues. It is also obvious if not all of them understand the potentials of their roles to lead and influence their followers in this kind of issues.

The question is: how are these phenomena of vaccines related to today's issue about COVID-19? Both vaccine and coronavirus pandemic issues are strongly connected to people's religious beliefs and performances. These two issues are in a similar condition, in which society is currently threatened by certain diseases and government needs to do something to prevent harms. If *MUI* and other Islamic organizations have made actual responses to support immunizations from religious side, this time during the pandemic they once again express their responses as a form of responsibility towards their followers. Sadly, both of these cases are dealing with society's religious dogma. People believe that using vaccine consists of *haram* materials will affect their worships to God, despite *MUI fatwa* about its usage in emergency condition. The

same goes with the case of COVID-19 pandemic. Government had demanded social and physical distancing, including religious mass activities for all people to slow down the spread of SARS-CoV-2. This Islamic organizations are in charge to ensure religious worship performances can be progressive to current condition if it is needed, by educating their followers using Islamic perspective. But still some of the followers believe that religious worship, as a form of command from God, should not be restricted by any “human-made” regulations.

Moreover, the case of Gowa’s *Ijtima’ Ulama* adds another fact of how people will prioritize any effort to fulfill their religious-based needs. This event was supposed to be held in March 19<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>, but it was forced to be finished before it was even started with around 8000 people had gathered in Gowa. This case is not only related to how Islamic organizations could prevent any possible harms in religious gathering, but also how government applied an early warning system to stop SARS-CoV-2 from spreading through this kind of event. PSBB regulation was made 3 weeks after this event, making it “late” enough to prevent a number of people from gathering.

Meanwhile, cases related to *tajhiz al-janaiz* is found in Banjarbaru. As for Banjarbaru case in May 26<sup>th</sup>, the family was not being supportive in term of conducting medical protocol for the funeral. Even if the patient was classified as under surveillance patient and not yet as a coronavirus patient, but both government and *MUI* have explained why the normal performance of Islamic funeral is not possible to be conducted. *MUI* also explains in detail how *tajhiz al-jinayah* should be performed during the pandemic and why it is permitted to do so based on *fiqh*.

From those cases, we may see that these are evidence of people’s religious and personal beliefs characteristic which cannot easily be affected by externalities, even when it consists of another religious perspective which comes from another religious organization. Also, this may be an effect of non-binding *fatwa* characteristic. According to Mulyati,<sup>17</sup> *fatwa* has a characteristic named as *mulzim ghair-*

*mulzim*, explaining how *fatwa* may not have a power to “force” people to apply it. *MUI fatwa* does not contain legal enforcement from law perspective, but it does have an impact of society’s “quality feeling” by creating a sense of guilt and other moral sanctions. For this case, we may observe that *MUI fatwa* does not really cause a change of religious behavior and worships in pandemic. Moreover, the role of religious community leaders in those cases are not effective enough. Even in Banyumas after confirming 10 cases of COVID-19 in April 18<sup>th</sup>, ten days later *takmir* of the mosque made a letter expressing refusal on physical distancing for *jamaah* prayer by wanting to destroy the mosque instead.

*MUI, Muhammadiyah, NU* and other Islamic organizations in Indonesia have made certain moves to influence muslims in preventing coronavirus spread. But *MUI* is lacking of certain muslim groups’ representatives. This is why such organizations movement cannot be successful enough in guiding muslims as their followers to certain Islamic opinions. Therefore, local community and religious leaders are needed by person to educate their followers about certain worships performance during the pandemic. According to Padmawati *et al.*,<sup>27</sup> both religious and community leaders played an important role in educating and influencing people about vaccine *halal* status. Community representatives considered themselves as key players in promoting vaccine *halal* status to society. They must work together with religious leaders, who had deeper understanding of Islamic knowledge, to ensure that vaccination was not contrary with Islamic law and perspective.

Both issues have the same kind of barrier in society. Thus, these problems need supports from religious organizations in order to ensure muslims that government effort towards certain health issues are tolerable and will not affect individual religiosity. In addition, if people are still reluctant to obey both government and *MUI fatwa*, a form of punishment should be made. As *fatwa* does not have legal enforcement, government should prevail on religious communities in order to make them obedient to government

regulations. *Fatwas* are made to support government regulations. So it is possible for government and Islamic organizations to formulate a penalty for people who do not follow regulations related to religious worships during COVID-19 pandemic. This is also stated in a study from Ahmed *et al.*<sup>28</sup> that authorities in certain countries like Pakistan and Malaysia applied strict punishments to parents who refuse vaccinations for their children. Government should also take this idea into discussion of human rights, about how punishing people who are not obedient during the pandemic is not against the religiosity right as part of human rights, while it is actually protecting each citizens’ right to live.

## CONCLUSION

Several responses of Islamic organizations like *MUI, Muhammadiyah, and NU* are proven not effective enough to prevent the spread of COVID-19 through religious worships. Government and Islamic organizations should further analyze public responses and evaluate their policies about religious worships during pandemic, especially by benchmarking this issue to similar religious-related case like *halal-haram* vaccine. This step will help government to increase the effectivity of PSBB regulation, especially in religious-related cases of COVID-19.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

All authors have contributed equally.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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