

Absolutism and Misguided Policies: Muhammadiyah and NU's Criticism against Government's Handling of COVID-19A

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Abstract

This study examines the role of Islamic Civil Society Organizations (ICSOs), specifically Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), in addressing COVID-19 in Indonesia. In contrast to previous works, it focuses on their constructive criticism against the Indonesian government, which has undergone political absolutism leading to misguided policies in addressing COVID-19 Pandemics. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Civil Society Organizations, this study shows that the two ICSOs constructively criticized the state for its inadequate, inconsistent, and contradictory policies on handling Covid 19 pandemics caused by political absolutism in the parliament. The results enriched the debate on Islamic Civil Society theories, shedding light on their voluntary and inclusive nature and their intricate relationship with government.

Keywords: Islamic, civil, society, organizations, Muhammadiyah, NU, criticism, Covid-19, government

1. Introduction

COVID-19 was declared as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, by the World Health Organization (WHO). Among the nations significantly affected by the health crisis, Indonesia faced considerable challenges and contributed 7.8 % of the global death rates from 2019 to 2022. Therefore, the nation's economic, political, and social aspects were profoundly impacted. Previous studies extensively examined the significant roles played by religious organizations in managing COVID-19, showing the importance of international organizations maximizing their participation in addressing the global crisis (Boro et al., 2022). The government also collaborated with civil society organizations (CSOs), including religious leaders, to assume responsibility for protecting the public.

Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) are Islamic Civil Society Organizations (ICSOs) collaborating with the state and other organizations to address society's challenges effectively. These organizations effectively established grassroots networks to initiate voluntary programs and to protect adherents from the impact of COVID-19 (Levin et al., 2020). Additionally, the organizations initiated self-voluntary programs and established constructive partnerships with the government and other CSOs. The leaders emphasized religious obedience and promoted compliance with policies to ensure the safety and well-being of individuals. It includes advocating for adherence to health protocols to prevent the transmission of the pandemic (Najoan, 2022).

The two ICSOs have fostered an inclusive membership framework that welcomes Muslim streams and groups. This framework enhances rich social interactions and facilitates cooperation with non-Muslim partners or CSOs representing various identities and religions. The objective is to promote solidarity and public virtue, addressing a spectrum of concerns ranging from health and education issues to basic needs and emergency response. Members of ICSOs actively engage in voluntary efforts to mobilize participation from the membership base. In collaboration with governmental and non-governmental institutions, Muhammadiyah and NU prioritize a non-formalist approach to beliefs (Probosiwi, 2019). These guiding principles are manifested in the initiatives carried out by ICSOs, which is particularly evident in the efforts to address the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama have established task forces to institutionalize the efforts in handling COVID-19. Muhammadiyah established the Muhammadiyah Command COVID-19 Center (MCCC) and NU established the NU COVID-19 Care Center. These task forces, with the support of thousands of volunteers across

Indonesia, developed branches and command posts to maximize outreach to grassroots communities in most geographic locations. They organized campaigns to prevent transmission and indicated the roles of Muhammadiyah and NU hospitals in providing social aid and supporting small-scale businesses (Hidayah & Bastomi, 2020). Additionally, the two ICSOs voluntarily initiated spiritual, narrative, and concrete programs. The collaboration of NU, Muhammadiyah, and other Islamic groups with the government is in line with Cohen and Arato's theory (1992) on voluntary, egalitarian, and inclusive principles of CSOs to facilitate social interactions and cooperation, as well as mobilize human solidarity in addressing public goods (Cohen & Arato, 1992 p. xx).

Other studies examined the role of Islamic organizations, including NU and Muhammadiyah, in issuing *fatwas* or circular recommendation letters (*Surat Edaran*), which guide Muslims in adjusting prayers and religious rituals in line with health protocols. Subsequently, these organizations initiated concrete programs aligned with government efforts to combat the pandemic (Harfiani, 2022; Musodiq & Imron, 2020). Other studies analyzed COVID-19, which sparked controversial responses from certain religious clerics. Certain populist Islamic clerics rejected the notion of the virus as a global pandemic (Jayanto, 2020) and propagated the belief of a manufactured conspiracy (Permana & Nashrullah, 2020). According to the clerics, this situation is perceived as a malevolent scheme devised by humans to inflict pain on Muslims or as a divine retribution from Allah directed at the Chinese government for the treatment of Uighur Muslims (Insertlive, 2020). In contrast, this study examines Muhammadiyah and NU's constructive criticisms of the misguided policies and efforts in handling the COVID-19 pandemic to understand the comprehensive and critical responses to the counter-productive policies.

1.1 Theoretical Frameworks

The state's role concerning CSOs has been the subject of extensive debate in previous studies. Poulantzas (1973) reported that states assumed the responsibility of advancing society's interests. Conversely, Jessop (1990) stated the indispensability of state autonomy in addressing fundamental needs, including mitigating poverty inequality and environmental and healthcare challenges. According to Porio E & Tadem T (2010), the state must build partnerships with CSOs and complement each other, avoiding confrontational relationships (Porio E & Tadem T, 2010). CSOs rely on the government to legally recognize their establishment in this context. Similarly, the government relies on these organizations to enhance the political participation of individuals (Qureta, 2016). Several studies examined the structural and critical relations between states and CSOs. Milliband (1969), a leftist structural thinker, argued that the state was an instrument of the capitalist class. Meanwhile, Skocpol (1979, 1995) reported that interest groups dominated the state. Culla (2006), Hikam (1996), and Gellner (1995) stated that state official behaviours were dominant, despotic, and tyrannical. In these circumstances, CSOs are expected to play critical and reflective roles or become strong non-state actors to balance authority and maintain autonomy. According to UNDP (1997), the state should ensure consensus in deciding political, economic, and social priorities and accommodate the interests of the poorest and the most vulnerable.

2. Method

This study adopted a qualitative method and used the theory of Miles and Huberman (1992) as the analytical framework, including data collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion (Miles & Huberman, 1992, p.20). Secondary data resources such as books and journal articles were obtained in the data collection stage. The primary data consists of printed and virtual documents from the two Islamic organizations and government offices. To enhance the validity and reliability of the data, triangulation, deepening, and verification were conducted through interviews with key informants from the two ICSOs and Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Ulema Board/MUI). These informants included the secretary of MCCC, the officers responsible for NU COVID-19 Care Centre, and the deputy of the Secretary of MUI.

During the reduction stage, relevant data directly addressing the study questions were categorized and selected, while irrelevant information was discarded. The collected data in the presentation stage was structured into a narrative format in line with the variables of the theoretical frameworks. In the conclusion stage, coherence was established between the study questions, theoretical frameworks, and the reduced and classified data. In this study, Muhammadiyah and NU were selected as the primary cases due to three key rationales:

- 1) The two ICSOs held significant stature as prominent Islamic organizations with different characteristics. Muhammadiyah represented a modernist Islamic organization followed by Muslims residing in urban areas, while NU embodied a traditional Islamic organization with strong networks and followers in rural regions.
- 2) These two ICSOs had substantial influence over Indonesian Muslims and the government.
- 3) The two ICSOs addressed constructive criticism against the government with partnerships to address COVID-19.

The selection does not represent Indonesian ICSSOs numbered more than 100. Indonesian CSOs also play an essential role in handling the pandemic. Some joined MUI and conducted programs similar to NU and Muhammadiyah to handle the pandemic.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Muhammadiyah and NU Criticism against Government Policies in Handling COVID-19 Pandemic

3.1.1 Policy Misprioritization

Muhammadiyah and NU's criticism against the government's misguided policies included policy misprioritization, problems with medical kits availability, testing, tracing, and treatment programs, the halal status of the vaccine, poor coordination of institutions, and poor CSOs engagement in the handling efforts. Muhammadiyah and NU raised concerns about the inconsistent and paradoxical policies and strategies, which needed a more precise direction. Indonesian government implemented *Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar/PSBB* (Big Scale of Social Restriction) strategies, while other nations adopted lockdowns. Despite the local gathering restrictions, the government continued to afford individuals considerable movement in contrast with the measures adopted by other nations. Muhammadiyah also expressed dissatisfaction with the decision to allow the opening of malls and shopping centers while keeping places of worship closed. The implementation of PSBB allows opening malls and shopping centers to move economic activities. In DKI Province, the government permitted the opening of 80 malls, while in West Java, the reopening of 23 malls was allowed. The decision to permit the reopening of malls received support from business people to revitalize the economy and create employment opportunities. However, the decision received brutal critiques from epidemiology experts, arguing that the reopening potentially triggered the COVID-19 explosion. The warnings issued by epidemiologists are substantiated, particularly given the persistently high number of infected individuals in DKI, which was 8,863 out of 38,277 cases (Kompas.com, 2020).

The Minister of Tourism implemented controversial and misguided policies by widening the number of nations and promoting tourism to increase the national income. Air ticket and hotel discounts were offered, and media influencers were hired to market the facilities. During the pandemic, the government launched pre-employment programs. However, the implementation could have been more problematic since the labour market's demand was not matched (Nadzir, 2020). The two organizations complained about government policy which balanced the economy over health recovery (Saputra, 2021). The adoption of PSBB strategy, as President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) admitted, failed to prevent the increasing number of infected people (nasional.kompas.com, 2020; nasional.tempo.co, 2021). Additionally, launching economic and social programs to support people's survival was unsuccessful due to ineffective outcomes (Nadzir, 2020.) The government strategy contradicted the principles of PSBB and the efforts of Muhammadiyah to fight the virus transmission. Prof. Haedar Nashir, the executive chairperson of Muhammadiyah, expressed concern about the policy, stating, "Economic recovery is essential, but people's lives are more important" (Wahidin, 2020). Similarly, a young NU intellectual, Ainun Najib, expressed disappointment with the administration of President Jokowi in handling the pandemic, stating, "I give up, Mr. President, the highest leader of the nation, who has prioritized the economy over the life of individuals" (CNN Indonesia, 2021).

3.1.2 Problem with Medical Kit Availability and Testing, Tracing, and Treatment Programs

Despite the distribution of self-protection equipment, 933 private hospitals and 3.800 people health centers complained about the inadequate supply of Self Protection Equipment (Alat Pelindung Diri/APD), including gloves, surgical masks, air-purifying respirators/Mask 95, protective glasses, face shields, gloves, and gown. The inadequate supply of self-protection equipment is rooted in unpredictable needs, problems with raw materials, production capacity, industry consolidation, marketing, procurement management, and supply chains. The insufficient supply of APD affects the safety of the medical officers in COVID-19 handling (Rezkisari, 2020 Yuniarti, 2020). Meanwhile, the number of infected people, including medical officers, increased and was ranked among the 30 nations in the world. The government has not reached a significant number of T3 programs (testing, tracing, and treatment), and the number of vaccinated people is insignificant (Fahmi, 2021; Nadzir, 2020). Muhammadiyah expressed dissatisfaction with the failure of the state to guarantee the availability of medical kits, medicine, oxygen tubes, and effective COVID-19 law enforcement (Afandi, 2021).

3.1.3 Election Rescheduling

The government, legislators, and the election commission finally agreed to hold concurrent general elections in 224 regions and cities as well as nine provinces in December 2020 scheduled in September 2020. The decision received wide criticism from the public, including Muhammadiyah and NU. The National Commission of Human Rights deemed the decision to proceed with the December 2020 Election amidst the peak of transmission as

illogical. This was because numerous regions had recently implemented PSBB, and COVID-19 had infected several election commission officers. Muhammadiyah and NU proposed that President Jokowi reschedule the 2020 General Election after creating a new transmission cluster. However, the President rejected this proposal to fulfill people's constitutional rights to elect or be elected (Lidwina, 2020; Aria, 2020). To respond to the critique, the legislators and the Election Committee modified the procedure in every implementation stage to fit the health protocol (Lidwina 2020, Danang, 2020). The critique by Muhammadiyah, NU, and other CSOs has been substantiated by the significant increase in the number of infected individuals in January 2021, which reached 917,015, resulting in 26,828 fatalities.

3.1.4 The *Halal* Status of the Vaccines

The transmission of COVID-19 in Indonesia, which holds a Muslim majority, raised the issues of the *halal* status relating to the vaccine. The government preferred Sinovac Pfizer, Moderna, Astra Zeneca, Sinopharm, Novavax, Sputnik V, and Zifivax brands of the vaccine. However, only Sinovac, Zifivax, *Merah Putih* (red and white), and Sinopharm received halal certification from MUI. NU, Muhammadiyah, and MUI raised questions on the halal status of the vaccines. For NU, the use of the halal COVID-19 vaccine is non-negotiable. Therefore, the members were ordered to use the excellent vaccine. NU, Muhammadiyah, and MUI acknowledged temporarily using "nonhalal" vaccines when the stocks were limited (Fernandez, Zamzami, 2022 & Tanjung, 2022).

3.1.5 Poor Coordination and CSOs Engagement

To increase the handling, the government established COVID-19 Acceleration Handling Task Force. Under the leadership of the National Agency of Disaster Handling (*Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana/ BNPB*), the task force comprised members, including the Coordinating Minister of Human Development and Culture, Minister of Health, Minister of Interior, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Transportation, Minister of Communication and Informatics, Minister of Education and Culture, Minister of Religious Affairs, the Indonesian Army (TNI), the National Police (Polri), BNPB, and representatives from the Presidential Office. The establishment aims to take fast, accurate, more focused, integrated, and synergic measures in handling the pandemic (Kominfo,2020). Muhammadiyah criticized the government's decision to establish ad-hoc task forces, which resulted in problematic coordination between BNPB and Minister of Health. This lack of coordination and communication negatively impacted the ability to effectively respond to the crisis (Nurkholis, 2022 & Lidwina 2020). According to KH Said Agil Siraj, NU criticized the government for not including CSOs, such as academia, business people, media, and other non-government organizations (NGOs), in the efforts to address COVID-19. This critique is supported by the initial hesitancy in acknowledging virus transmission and the dismissive attitude toward the severity of the pandemic (Ilmiyah, 2022). Due to the limitation, KH Said Agil Siraj considered the state to have failed in handling the pandemic (CNN Indonesia, 2021).

3.2 Explaining Muhammadiyah and NU's Criticism of the Government

3.2.1 Downplaying the Pandemics

The strong criticism from leaders of NU, Muhammadiyah, and other CSOs primarily occurred in the initial phases of the pandemic. During this period, there were discrepancies between the government and the two influential CSOs regarding the perceptions and beliefs concerning the severity of COVID-19. Therefore, differing viewpoints resulted in adopting distinct policies and strategies for addressing the crisis. The two ICSOs viewed the state's approach as contradicting efforts to manage the pandemic and Islamic principles effectively. The poor responses were rooted in the stance of downplaying the severity of the pandemic.

Similarly, Muhammadiyah and NU showed an acute awareness of the danger posed by COVID-19. At the onset of the pandemic, several high-ranking officials showed counterproductive attitudes in their responses. These officials belittled the severity, denied scientific facts about the pandemic, trivialized through jokes, and resorted to fatalistic religious interpretations or supernatural solutions. The government officials also propagated hoaxes and pseudo-conspiracy theories to prevent public panic. The President, Vice President, and Ministers reported partial and controversial rhetoric in response to the pandemic (nasional.kompas.com, 2020). The statements were not based on valid and reliable information, resulting in counterproductive efforts for COVID-19 prevention and recovery. For example, Minister of Health, Terawan Agus Putranto, considered Influenza or Difteri to be more dangerous. The virus was perceived as a self-limiting disease, leading to the unwarranted belief, and individuals were blamed for wearing masks as a precautionary measure. Additionally, the results from Harvard University were dismissed, showing that the virus had spread among the Indonesian population. Other senior ministers resorted to making light-hearted jokes about COVID-19 to prevent panic (suara.com, 2020; cnbcindonesia.com, 2020; national.tempo.co, 2020).

3.2.2 The Dominant and Tyrannical State Approach

The stance in belittling the pandemic resulted from the imbalanced political landscape in the parliament. The inadequate responses from the political landscape are characterized by the government and the party coalition's domination of power, resulting in a *weak checks and balances* mechanism. This dominance cultivated an environment characterized by absolutism and tyrannical inclinations, undermining the effectiveness of the checks and balances mechanism. The dominant coalition of political parties, which led to absolutism, started in 2019 when Indonesia held a direct presidential election. Jokowi-Makruf Amin triumphed over the rivals Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno. Instead of letting Prabowo-Sandi become political opposition, President Jokowi, the incumbent winner, welcomed Prabowo, Gerindra Party leader, to join the coalition and appointed him and Edy Prabowo as Minister of Defense and Minister of Sea and Fishery, respectively. Gerindra Party, which controls 12,85% of the population, joined a political party coalition that supported the government. National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional/PAN) supported Prabowo-Sandiaga Uno's presidency and initiated an approach to join the coalition. After President Jokowi appointed Zulkifli Hasan as Minister of Trade, PAN officially joined the coalition. The government receives support from political parties controlling 73% of parliament seats by joining the two former opposition parties. It includes PDIP (19, 66%), Gerindra (12, 85%), Golkar (11,88%), PKB (9,19%) Nasdem, (8,3%), PAN (6,7), and PPP (4,6%), leaving PKS and Democratic Party (Patai Demokrat) as the "opposition party in the parliament."

The support led to political stability, allowing the government to implement policies and programs. The political landscape weakened the parliament's oversight function since the parliament members were expected to obey party policies directed by the chairpersons and leaders who served as President Jokowi cabinet members. During the second period of the administration, President Jokowi appointed 18 of 32 cabinet members from the party coalitions, including four ministers from PDIP and Golkar, three from PKB and Nasdem, two ministers from Gerindra, as well as one minister from PAN and PPP. Additionally, the legislators from the parties had to obey the cabinet members occupying high leadership positions. The misguided policies were accepted instead of exercising *checks and balances*, which stimulated wide public criticism and sparked controversies. Therefore, the pro-government politician's domination of the parliament weakened political control. For example, the parliament promptly passed a Regulation replacing Law (Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-Undang/PERPPU) No 1/2020 on the state financial policies to handle COVID-19 and anticipate threats that prohibiting the National Economy and financial stability from becoming law. The parliament posits that PERPPU addresses COVID-19 recovery and financial stability. The parliament focuses more on the substance than the disbursement procedure, which guarantees financial stability. The law is used as the legal foundation to take extraordinary measures to ensure public health and secure the stability of the national economy and financial system. The government was also legitimized to allocate IDR 405,1 trillion to finance COVID-19 recovery, including purchasing health kits, social protection, developing a small-scale economy, and tax restitution (Humas Setkab,2020). To enact the PERPPU, Government Regulation No. 21/2020 concerning PSBB and the Acceleration of COVID-19 Handling and Presidential Decree No. 11/2020 declaring the People's Health Emergency Status due to the Coronavirus were implemented. A Presidential Decree outlining the specifics of the state budget to complement PERPPU was also issued. In this circumstance, elites of interest groups strongly influenced the decision-making to deal with the pandemic, resulting in public controversies and criticism.

Despite the majority of political support in parliament, PERPPU received criticisms and sparked societal controversies. The contents, specifically articles 12,27 and 28, potentially violated legal principles driving the President's absolute power in the law-making and absolute legal immunity to government officials in the Financial Stability System Committee (KSSK). This includes the Minister of Finance, Financial Service Authority, Central Bank, and Saving Loan Institutions. The broad authority of the committee results in poor accountability and is prone to corruption practices (Saputra, 2020). Therefore, Luhut Panjaitan and Erick Tohir allegedly commercialized polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and antigen tests by taking personal advantage. The suspicion was justified given that the two ministers were embroiled in a conflict of interest, occupying prominent roles as public officials and having ties to PCR and antigen test suppliers. The procurement process, which should have been managed by private companies with transparency, lacked clarity in the selection of vendors (megapolitan.kompas.com, 2022; Nadzir, 2020).

Additionally, PERPPU legitimizes the President to decide the state budget based on the presidential decree, removing parliament's agreement. The checks and balances principle and the constitutional oversight or judicial authority are negated to try potential public official violations. The parliament's participation in abolishing the budget formulation as PERPPU is regulated by presidential decree (Humas FHUI, 2020). The repressive and absolutist tendency triggered progressive intellectuals in Muhammadiyah to criticize the policies of the state,

criminalize critical figures, and neglect the interests of individuals. In this context, the dissatisfaction led to discussions of initiating the impeachment of President Jokowi (Putri, 2020). The dominant and inconsequential attitudes proved counter-productive in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Indonesian government hesitantly responded to the pandemic and made ambiguous policies, spreading controversies and conspiracy theories in society.

4. Analysis

This study found Muhammadiyah and NU's criticism against the stance in handling the pandemic since the government tended to become absolute and tyrannical. The two ICSSOs voiced strong criticism against the misguided policies to defend the constituencies in fighting against the transmission. This study analyzes misguided policies that were politically entrenched in absolutism and a dominant, tyrannical tendency. The government obtained strong support from political parties within the coalition, namely PDIP, Golkar, Gerindra, Nasdem, PKB, PAN, and PPP, collectively controlling 73% of parliamentary seats. Legislators affiliated with the parties were expected to adhere obediently to the directives of the respective leaders, who served as cabinet members under the administration of President Jokowi. This tendency resulted in a weak checks and balances mechanism that is required for a healthy democracy. At the outset of the pandemic, the effects of COVID-19 were neglected by putting on jokes, rejecting the scientific findings on the transmission, exposing irrational approaches to curing the pandemic, and spreading hoaxes and pseudo-conspiracy theories. Muhammadiyah, NU, and other civil societies' criticism is consistent with the assertions of Culla (2006), Hikam (1996), and Gellner's theories (1995). According to the theories, CSOs serve as potent non-state actors that critique the dominant and absolute power wielded by the state. This study challenges Muhammadiyah and NU partnerships with the government in fighting against COVID-19 transmission, which has been debated by Poulantzas (1973) and Jessop (1990), Porio E & Tadem T (2010), and (Qureta 2016).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study contributed to understanding Muhammadiyah's role in addressing the criticism of poor policies in handling the danger of the COVID-19 pandemic. The critics included misprioritization in balancing between COVID-19 and Economic Recovery, Inadequate supply of medical kits, low number of Testing, Tracing, and Treatment Programs, General Election, *halal* status of the vaccine, and poor coordination of agencies in dealing with COVID-19 and CSO's engagement in the recovery. Additionally, this study analyzed the government's poor policies, which were politically explained by a tendency toward executive absolutism and dominance over the legislative. The government received support from the majority political parties, which controlled 73% of seats in the parliament. It reduced the strength in exercising oversight and implementing checks and balances mechanisms required for a healthy democracy. The imbalance, dominance, and absolutism led to counterproductive responses in dealing with the pandemic. The results showed that poor government responses triggered criticism of Muhammadiyah, NU, and other civil CSOs. This study challenged previous works related to Muhammadiyah and NU with other CSOs' partnerships in addressing the pandemic.

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Authors contributions

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sri Yunanto, Prof. Dr. Ma'mun Murod, and Assoc. Prof. Dr Asep Setiawan were responsible for preparing the research design, writing the result, discussion, analysis, and conclusion and revising the final manuscript. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Lusi Andriyani and Dr. Usni were responsible for writing an introduction, methodology, and theoretical frameworks. Suhail MA and Khoirul Anwar M. Si were responsible for data collection and processing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript and contributed proportionally to the study.

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