

Indonesian president wise to turn to religion

Joko Widodo looks for help from religious leaders to guide country from lockdown to 'new normal'

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Indonesian President Joko Widodo (2-R) wearing a protective face mask gets his body temperature checked as he inspects the implementations of coronavirus safety measures during a visit at an MRT station in Jakarta, Indonesia, 26 May 2020. (Photo by EPA/SIGID KURNIAWAN / POOL /MaxPPP)

As Indonesia gradually eases COVID-19 restrictions, though not simultaneously across the nation, President Joko Widodo has turned to religious leaders to support his exit strategy.

On June 2, four days after an opinion poll revealed public dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the pandemic, Widodo held a closed-door meeting with eight religious figures to solicit their opinions and support.

These figures included the Indonesian Bishops' Conference chairman, Cardinal Ignatius Suharyo, and Rev. Gomar Gultom, head of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia.

The meeting was considered important as three days later Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan announced the start of the "new normal" in the capital city of more than 11 million inhabitants.

The meeting was not just routine but an opportunity for the president and religious leaders to learn from each other. It was a time for the president to admit to the government's shortcomings and seek religious leaders' help.

It was not the first time Widodo has sought advice from religious leaders. Before his second inauguration as president last year, Widodo met religious leaders to listen to their views on how to deal with nationwide protests against a new anti-corruption law and revised Criminal Code.

The most nerve-racking situation was perhaps when conservative Muslim groups and his political rivals accused him of being anti-Islam after he issued a decree disbanding Hizbut Tahrir, a radical group accused of being behind attempts to create an Islamic caliphate in Indonesia. His rivals called for his impeachment, but with the help of moderate Muslim groups he survived.

Widodo, a very devout Muslim, once said that he respects leaders of any religion for their closeness to the heart of believers. With that in mind, he has continued to see them as the nation's problem solvers, no matter how difficult the social and political paths the country walks through.

The good thing about this "presidential-clerical relationship" is that Widodo is also close to the heart of religious leaders who have seen his sincere efforts to combat radicalism, environmental destruction, corruption and other forms of injustice.

Once again Widodo has shown his sincerity in fighting the coronavirus pandemic by encouraging religious leaders to play a bigger role in the cause.

Widodo is well aware of the destruction the pandemic is inflicting on the economy and people. It could push more than 37 million Indonesians into poverty, and if not handled carefully social unrest could erupt soon.

It's right that Widodo seeks the support of religious leaders in leading Indonesians out of misery. He knows that in certain cases people of faith will listen more to religious leaders rather than the government. Hence, during the meeting, Widodo emphasized the importance of religious leaders' help in making his "new normal" plans successful.

The government is in the process of restarting economic and religious activities in over 120 regencies or cities by July. Some governors and district heads have been allowed to do so already.

Jakarta, for instance, has reopened offices, restaurants, public transportation and some places of worship, but not schools. Some mosques have organized public prayers but churches remain closed for now.

Widodo told religious leaders that their help is needed more than ever to ensure their followers remain vigilant and disciplined against the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Without discipline, whatever the government does will be useless, and society will continue to live in the shadow of COVID-19," Rev. Gultom quoted the president as saying.

The government's handling of the pandemic has been poor, according to a survey conducted by state-run Radio Republik Indonesia and pollster Indo Barometer published on May 28.

Some 54 percent of respondents were unhappy with the Widodo government's efforts. Among the criticisms were inconsistent policies, slow distribution of aid, an influx of foreign (Chinese) workers during the pandemic, and the poor way large-scale social restrictions were implemented.

Widodo admitted to flip-flops at the start of the pandemic but assured religious leaders that the government was trying to avoid widespread panic, not being careless as the public seem to think.

Neither did he deny problems in the early days of the pandemic, saying the government had to compete with many other nations in obtaining necessary items such as personal protection equipment (PPE) and ventilators and test kits.

Despite the difficulties presented by budget restrictions, Widodo said, Indonesia can now finally produce such equipment to tackle the virus.

According to Widodo, Indonesia now has reason to be optimistic about a speedy recovery.

Indonesia, with its 0.5 percent economic growth rate — down from 5 percent — is among three nations with a positive growth rate, behind India at 1.9 percent and China at 1.2 percent, according to the World Bank.

Widodo stressed that to ensure further growth, all of society including religious leaders must work together.

The religious leaders generally appreciated the measures taken by the government. However, they also warned the president and his aides to communicate government policies clearly to avoid misinformation and confusion.

The intervention of religious leaders in the government's exit strategy has been manifested in many different ways. Churches in Jakarta, for example, remain closed despite the Jakarta administration allowing their reopening. Church authorities fear that if churches are opened too soon, they could become home to new COVID-19 clusters.

Religious leaders also remain determined to provide support for groups affected by the pandemic.

Since 87 percent of Indonesia's population are Muslims, the role of Muslim leaders is crucial in helping the government exert its influence on society.

For that purpose, the Indonesian Ulema Council and the government's National Disaster Mitigation Agency inked an agreement on June 8 which emphasized the important role Muslim clerics can play in dealing with COVID-19.

Through the agreement, the government expects Muslim clerics and preachers to convey messages about the importance of following health protocols, such as wearing masks, washing hands and maintaining social distancing.

The agreement is a manifestation of Widodo's conviction that the more messages about the importance of health protocols Muslim leaders deliver, the sooner Indonesia will recover from the pandemic.

Widodo correctly realizes that to change people's behavior it is better to do so through gentle persuasion via religious leaders rather than taking a heavy-handed approach with law enforcement.