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City & Society

(Re-)setting Moral Standards in Jakarta: Policing FPI through Anti-Covid Measures

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Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, has been [hit hard by Covid-19](#). Thus far, this megacity of over 10.5 million inhabitants – with nearly 35.5 million in the urban agglomeration surrounding it – has suffered some 4,300 deaths due to the pandemic. While this is a relatively low number compared to other countries worldwide, it seems likely that these numbers are incomplete. The total number of infected patients for the entire country passed one million in late January 2021 and as one reporter [noted ominously](#), “patients are refused by hospitals, daily numbers of new cases routinely pass 10,000 and the graveyards are full”. That said, Indonesia’s government has been taking the pandemic seriously. They declared a state of emergency in March 2020 and implemented the all too familiar security measures that are in force in most nations: mandatory distancing, compulsory wearing of facemasks, the closing of many shops, offices, restaurants and so on. The nation’s police is charged with upholding these protocols and regularly makes a public warning out of doing so: in Bali, foreign tourists who are found not wearing a face mask in public are given the choice between paying a fine or doing 50 push-ups in public. In East Java, those found without a face mask in public were made to help digging graves for Covid-19 victims. In September 2020, Jakarta’s police had offenders of the face mask regulations [lie in a coffin](#) to “get used to the idea”, although application of this measure was swiftly abolished after senior commissioners pointed out its disrespect for human dignity.

Policing in Jakarta, and in Indonesia more general, is not the monopoly of the police. Indonesian society has a long tradition of security provision by neighborhood watches and by somewhat ambiguous local gangs who keep an eye out for the community, but may also run criminal activities on the site. These “security groups” focus on the provision of security on behalf of specific ethnic or religious groups (see e.g. Wilson and Nugroho 2012). They stand out in society, as their members

wear uniforms when “on duty”, but also because of their numbers – some can mobilize huge masses, as I discuss below – and because of their bravado when out on the streets. Importantly, these groups have legal standing, but must be registered by the state in order to operate. Legally, they are societal organisations (*organisasi kemasyarakatan*, abbreviated as *ormas*) and they are subject to the *ormas* law which defines (quite broadly) what they can and cannot do, and designates (in equally broad terms) the powers that the state holds over them. Despite the vagueness in its phrasing, this regulation is important. Many *ormas* threaten or use violence as part of their security-provision, even though this is illegal. *Ormas*’ societal reputations are however substantiated by their capacity to use violence. The legal framework provides the state a means to regulate this paradox (cf. Bakker 2015). *Ormas* thus hold an awkward place in a nation that sees rule of law as the basis of government and justice. It is not uncommon for the authorities to arrest *ormas* members for criminal activities, but they also call upon their assistance when faced with major public issues. For instance, the National Police involved them in September 2020 in [upholding Covid-19 health protocols](#) in public.

When out for dinner on a Friday evening in the affluent Cikini area of Central Jakarta, one could until recently (see below) frequently see groups of 30 or 40 people, clad in white, chanting and marching down the road. They look agitated but sound festive and one could think that not too much was going on until it became clear that these are Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Defenders of Islam Front) members out on a *sweeping*. FPI was established in 1998 and presented itself as an organization defending Islamic values, which it considered to be under pressure in modern Indonesia (see Jahroni 2008). The group swiftly made a name for its aggressive public actions, several of which gained international attention. These included [attacking a protest](#) by activists of Indonesia’s National Alliance for the Freedom of Faith and Religion – several of whom ended up in hospital as a result – in 1998; instigating and staging violent attacks on [Ahmadiyah communities](#) – during which three people were killed – in 2011; and preventing singer [Lady Gaga from performing in Indonesia](#) in 2012 on the basis that she was satanic and promiscuous.

Sweepings are what FPI is best known for. These included closing down bars, smashing bottles of alcoholic drinks in shops that sell them, forcing restaurants to close during the month of Ramadan and intimidating Christians, Chinese and other minorities. The weekly FPI manifestations at Jalan Cikini would [frequently target](#) Taman Ismael Marzuki, an arts center in the area where the group

would end up shouting their protests against what was on show. In truth, FPI enjoyed considerable support under the population. In Jakarta, many citizens credited them with providing peace and order, driving less salubrious elements from their neighborhoods and having Muslims commit to a more pious, more compassionate lifestyle. “You know, without FPI this street would be a den of sin with all those bars and whatnot. Taman Ismael Marzuki is full of dope heads, you know” a local resident told me while we jointly witnessed an FPI group at Cikini in December 2018 (see Bakker 2019), “FPI just maintains a cleanliness and peacefulness in the neighborhood. We, the residents, are grateful for that”. By and large, the Jakarta regional government and police let FPI carry out activities such as the Friday evening manifestations in Cikini, provided things did not get too violent. The group’s societal popularity and its connections to figures in government, the army and the police have provided it with a level of support that would guarantee considerable difficulties in taking it on for minor offences (see Facal 2020). Also, on those occasions that the police did act, it was not uncommon for masses of FPI members to show up at police stations and demand that police officers drop the charges.

Yet the organization was not without adversaries. In East Java, for instance, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), a powerful, long-established Muslim organization championing a moderate and culturally Indonesian interpretation of Islam (in contrast to FPI’s more Wahabi interpretation), has showed itself highly critical of FPI. On various occasions members of Banser (NU’s own security group) and FPI have engaged each other in violent public clashes. In the provinces of Bali, West Kalimantan and North Sulawesi, which have majority Hindu and Christian populations, FPI has long been prevented from setting up local chapters. In several, highly publicized cases, its representatives were prevented [from disembarking their plane](#) by members of local *ormas*, and sent straight back to Jakarta.

In 2016, governmental attitudes towards FPI began to change. Jakarta’s governor Joko Widodo was elected to the national presidency in 2014; the FPI had vigorously supported Widodo’s opponent, former army general Prabowo Subianto, during this same election. Vice-governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, known as Ahok, became Jakarta’s acting governor. Ahok, a Christian of Chinese descent, sat badly with FPI who instigated – together with other groups – public protests, arguing that a Christian could not rule a Muslim-majority constituency. Ahok stayed in office. However, while campaigning for re-election in 2016, a recording of a speech he made was altered in such a way as

to make his words interpretable as blasphemy. This version was widely disseminated via social media and while it was clear that the recording had been manipulated, FPI mobilized mass protests in November and December 2016, demanding that Ahok be persecuted for blasphemy. The protests paralyzed Jakarta's infrastructure and turned into riots that saw 80 police officers and at least 160 rioters [injured](#). Despite the dubious evidence, Ahok was sentenced to two years in jail under the Blasphemy Act. His successor to the governorship, Anies Baswedan, was known to be more sympathetic towards the FPI.

Things seemed to be looking good for FPI. Yet a month later, in January 2017, Indonesia's national police declared Muhammad Rizieq Shihab, the FPI founder and its Grand Imam, a suspect in a case of [slandering Pancasila](#), the national state ideology that decrees unity in diversity in the nation. Under Indonesian law, this is a crime punishable with imprisonment. A few months later, in April, this was followed by the opening of a second, rather more piquant case as Rizieq was also suspected of [contravening the Anti-Pornography Act](#). The police had obtained proof that Rizieq had had exchanged rather suggestive messages and nude images with a woman who was not his wife; the transcripts were widely published in the press. As the investigation began, Rizieq left for Saudi Arabia to perform *umroh*, a pilgrimage to Mecca. Pending the investigations, he remained there for the next three and a half years.

In Jakarta, FPI as well as various of its individual members were increasingly subject to police research on suspicion of involvement with ISIS recruitment, instigating extremism and opposing Indonesian unity. Rizieq was reported to be [displaying an ISIS flag](#) in his home in Mecca and the organization's loyalty to Indonesia was questioned in the media. The [first of several online petitions](#) to abolish the organization was signed by thousands of people. Nevertheless, its popularity remained considerable.

In spring 2019, FPI once again supported Prabowo in his bid for the presidency against Widodo. Again Prabowo lost, but he accepted a position as Minister of Defense in Widodo's cabinet. Meanwhile, all charges against Habib Rizieq had been dropped for lack of proof, and he returned from Saudi Arabia to Jakarta in November 2020. His return was confrontational and in style. While thousands of his supporters awaited his arrival at the airport, they flaunted Covid-19 measures, blocked traffic and delayed flights. Rizieq announced that he had returned to the country to instigate a "moral revolution" and warned that FPI would not [tolerate anyone trying to interfere](#).

FPI and Rizieq began a series of large public gatherings, including his [daughter's wedding](#), which saw thousands of people disregarding Covid-19 measures. Jakarta's police called on Rizieq and his son-in-law to report for questioning on the event on 7 December. Early that morning, however, a convoy of cars left his family's home with an unknown destination. Undercover police decided to give chase. What followed is still being investigated at the time of writing, but the police maintain that their car was surrounded by Rizieq's bodyguards who assaulted the officers, who returned fire [in self-defense](#). According to FPI, the convoy was on its way for a dawn prayer when it was attacked by [unknown assailants](#) who kidnapped six of their number. Indeed six of Rizieq's bodyguards lay dead and three days later the police arrested him for incitement to criminal acts and for holding mass gatherings where Covid-19 protocols were breached.

Then, the national government made a decisive move: on 30 December a consortium of Ministers, the National Prosecutor, Head of the National Police and Head of the National Anti-Terrorism Agency declared FPI a [forbidden organization](#) based on its links to terrorism, its violent actions against civilians and its operating without a valid governmental license for well over a year. As I spoke to friends and contacts in Jakarta via social media, reactions varied from relieved to incredulous. "This is all the doing of Banser", a disappointed FPI-supporter stated. "As the new vice-president is from NU, they have made the rivalry political". "This is excellent", a relieved friend of Chinese descent told me, "it is a clear signal by government that they do not tolerate militant Islam, but that might change with the next elections". "It is an abuse of legal power and goes against human rights" an FPI attorney told me, "we will fight this in court, but we can also easily start a new organization with another name. What is stopping us?". A contact in a human rights NGO confirmed the first part of the attorney's comments but expressed his concern about the second.

Covid-19 had brought down FPI, two people from Cikini suggested: Rizieq ignored the public health measures so blatantly that it provided the police with the necessary excuse to intervene. At the same time, Covid-19 measures made it impossible for people to demonstrate against FPI's ban as mass gatherings were illegal. FPI supporters had not been visible on the street for a long time due to the measures, and the residents wondered who would take FPI's place once the Covid-19 measures were lifted.

Many of the people I spoke to about FPI's ban considered this a case of the state 'disciplining' the *ormas*. FPI and Rizieq had challenged the order of government by publicly transgressing anti-Covid

measures, perhaps expecting that no reaction would follow. After all, FPI was a prominent element in Jakarta's plural policing system and an established authority with considerable influence in urban order. Yet some of its earlier prominent supporters -Prabowo, Jakarta governor Baswedan- were now part of the presidential entourage while replacements in the tops of the army and police had removed supporters there. Nahdlatul Ulama, by contrast, had just provided the new national vice-President. In such a reading of events, Rizieq and FPI were left with substantial support among the masses only. The mass transgression of anti-Covid measures at FPI events then provided government and police with an urgent reason to act, as well as with the means to prevent mass demonstrations in support of Rizieq, following his arrest.

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