

The Catholic Church and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Case Study of Bishop Ordination in Ruteng, Flores, Indonesia

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Fransiska Widyawati
Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng
fwidyawati@gmail.com

AQ2

Yohanes S. Lon
Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng
yohservatiusboylon@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the connection between the activity of Catholic Church and the COVID-19 pandemic through the case of a bishop ordination held in Ruteng, Indonesia. The ordination mass took place on March 19, 2020, against the background rising numbers of COVID-19 cases globally and in Indonesia. The mass, which was attended by four thousand participants, led to criticisms of the Catholic Church in Ruteng. The Church was accused of jeopardizing the health of the community and failing to adhere to government advisories. It was labeled as selfish and stubborn. This paper discusses the urgency of both the COVID-19 situation in Indonesia and of the bishop ordination in Ruteng. Ordination of a new bishop symbolizes a climax in the journey of the Catholic Church in Ruteng. It is a resolution of past conflicts and controversies in the history of the Church in the region. The Church needed ordination as a way of gaining power and legitimacy.

Keywords

Catholic Church – COVID-19 – Pandemic – Manggarai – Indonesia

1 Introduction

On March 19, 2020, the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Ruteng, Manggarai, celebrated the ordination of Monsignor Siprianus Hormat amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The ordination was performed by the Indonesian Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, Monsignor Ignatius Suharyo, who is also the head of the Bishops' Conference of Indonesia (KWI). The event was attended by four thousand participants comprising local Catholics, KWI officials, bishops, and priests from all over Indonesia, as well as government officials at district, provincial, and national levels.

The ordination mass took place just days after the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, and it faced harsh criticism from various parties and individuals. It quickly attracted the attention of the mass media and sparked a controversy on social media. The Catholic Church was labeled stubborn for insisting on proceeding with the event despite the advisory of the Indonesian government to cancel large gatherings. The Church was also accused of failing to adhere to Pope Francis's call to Catholic Churches around the world to suspend religious celebrations because of the pandemic. The Catholic Church was deemed fatalistic, ignorant, and irresponsible with regard to the health of the people.¹

The bishop ordination in Ruteng was a special occasion for the Catholic Church. The event represented a climax in the history of the Catholic Church in Ruteng and served as a resolution of conflicts and controversies in which the Church had been involved in the past. The new bishop was ordained after the old bishop was forced to resign in 2017, after his alleged involvement in misappropriation of Church funds and claims of having a mistress. The ordination

1 Almost all national TV stations delivered news about the ordination of the bishop on March 19, 2020. Likewise, many national newspapers carried more news of the event on March 19, 2020 and for several days afterwards. The relatively limited news in English included: Associated Press Television News. Thousands Attend Ordination on Indonesian Island of Flores. Retrieved 19 March 2020. <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/thousands-attend-ordination-on-indonesian-island-of-flores.html>; Coconuts Bali. Ordination Mass in East Nusa Tenggara Draws Hundreds Despite COVID-19 Warnings Retrieved 19 March 2020. <https://coconuts.co/bali/news/ordination-mass-in-east-nusa-tenggara-draws-hundreds-despite-covid-19-warnings/>; Ann. Hundreds attend ordination Mass in East Nusa Tenggara despite COVID-19 Warnings. Retrieved 19 March 2020. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/regional/2020/03/19/hundreds-attend-ordination-mass-in-east-nusa-tenggara-despite-covid-19-warnings>; Ryan Dagur. Church in Indonesia condemned over Bishop Ordination. Retrieved 23 March 2020. <https://cathnews.com/cathnews/37557-church-in-indonesia-condemned-over-bishop-ordination>. Both authors of this article attended the ordination mass.

was perceived as a way to restore the reputation of the Catholic Church, and marked a new beginning for the Church. The Church deemed the event to be urgent and essential.

The present article discusses opinions for and against the bishop ordination in Ruteng, both rooted in the perception of harm arising from the failure to adhere to certain expected guidelines. Those against the ordination, including the national government, expected the Catholic Church to be sensitive to the social issues related to COVID-19² rather than a source of danger for the community.³ The decision of the Church to proceed with the ordination was risky, and could have led to a new crisis that jeopardized the health of the community. This case study illustrates an encounter between religion, state, and community under the shadow of COVID-19.

The article contains five sections. Following this Introduction, section 2 discusses various government advisories at the local and national levels pertinent to COVID-19; section 3 delves into the local narrative of the bishop ordination; section 4 discusses the dilemma surrounding the ordination; and section 5 concludes the article.

2 Indonesian Government Advisories Regarding COVID-19

On March 2, 2020, the Indonesian President announced the first two cases of COVID-19 in Indonesia, both in Jakarta. With the announcement, Indonesia became the 66th country to declare confirmed COVID-19 cases. The news was met with doubts by critics worldwide, including the WHO, especially as some foreign nationals had been found to contract COVID-19 after traveling to Indonesia. There were further doubts about the late discovery of COVID-19 cases in Indonesia after neighboring Southeast Asian countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia, had announced multiple cases much earlier, in January 2020.⁴

Many Indonesians questioned the seriousness of the government in tracing COVID-19 cases. Some officials denied the urgency and took pride in Indonesia having close to zero cases, calling Indonesia untouchable by COVID-19. Some associated the few cases with natural immunity due to local diet and the hot

2 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Polity: Cambridge, 2008); Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

3 Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs* (USA: Harper Collins, 2009).

4 Ardila Syakriah, "Indonesia should have confirmed coronavirus cases by now: Study." The Jakarta Post. Retrieved 8 Feb 2020. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/02/08/indonesia-should-have-confirmed-coronavirus-cases-by-now-study.html>.

climate. Some religious leaders attributed the few cases to divine power. Others promoted racist statements that COVID-19 would not affect faithful Indonesians, calling the virus a God-sent weapon to punish the Chinese.⁵ Hatred toward the ethnic Chinese had been reported to be on the rise, both in Indonesia and overseas.⁶

On March 3, 2020, a day after the announcement of the first cases of COVID-19 in Indonesia, the Indonesian President appointed 100 general hospitals as Referral Hospitals dedicated to provide treatment for COVID-19 patients. On March 11, 2020, after 116 countries reported cases of novel coronavirus transmission, the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic.⁷ The WHO declaration prompted the Ministry of Health of Indonesia to release an official advisory on March 12 regarding COVID-19. A day after, the President announced Presidential Decree Number 7 of 2020 concerning a Task Force for Acceleration in Handling COVID-19. By this time, Indonesia had reported 69 cases of COVID-19 and four deaths.

The appointment of a special Task Force quickly gained public attention. People became more apprehensive and interested in news related to COVID-19. Many anticipated official updates on new developments of COVID-19, which were broadcast daily on television. Many criticized the government, believing the efforts were not nearly enough. As the number of cases continued to grow, the government began promoting aggressively education programs to inform the masses about the virus, to compensate for its initial indifference. On March 15, President Joko Widodo called for Indonesians to study, work, and pray from home.

In the third week of March, 2020, which coincided with the peak of the ordination event in Ruteng, the central government announced additional

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- 5 Riyanti Djalante et al. "Review and analysis of current responses to COVID-19 in Indonesia: Period of January to March 2020", *Progress in Disaster Science*, 100091. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pdisas.2020.100091>; S. Setiati & M. K. Azwar. "COVID-19 and Indonesia", 52(1) *Acta Medica Indonesiana* (2020), 84.
 - 6 Rifka Sibarani, Birut Zemits, & Stephen Miller. "How to communicate COVID-19 risk without fuelling anti-chinese sentiment in Indonesia." *The Jakarta Post*. Retrieved 10 March 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>. hrw.org; Human Rights Wach. "Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide. National Action Plans Needed to Counter Intolerance". *hrw.org*. Retrieved 12 March, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>.
 - 7 Kopecki Dawn, Berkeley Lovelance Jr, William Feuer, & Noah Higgins-Dunns. "World Health Organization declares the cononavirus outbreak a global pandemic." *cncb.com*, Retrieved 12 March 2020. <https://www.cncb.com/2020/03/11/who-declares-the-coronavirus-outbreak-a-global-pandemic.html>.

COVID-19 advisories. On March 16, 2020, the Ministry of Health released a health protocol stressing the risk of local transmissions as seen earlier in other countries, and encouraging social distancing. The Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform published an advisory for civil servants to stagger working hours and work from home (WFH) whenever possible. The Governor of Jakarta also called on students to study from home. Three measures were repeated by government agencies: work, study, and pray from home. Despite the advisories, however, daily activities in Jakarta and other large cities in Java, where COVID-19 cases had been discovered, remained largely normal. Some schools closed down, but many civil servants continued to work regularly. Other offices, private companies, businesses, and markets operated as usual.

At the same time, none of the religious institutions released any advisories concerning COVID-19, and until the day of bishop ordination in Ruteng, on March 19, none of the religious institutions in Indonesia had officially called for a halt in religious gatherings. In East Nusa Tenggara Province, where the Ruteng diocese is located, an official government statement concerning COVID-19 was released on March 21, two days after the ordination mass. Similarly, an official statement from the Regency Government in Manggarai came after the event.

In the first two weeks following the WHO declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic, the government was still learning and adapting to the changes, and had limited equipment and infrastructure to address the pandemic. There were no COVID-19 test kits. Amid uncertainties and fear over the spreading virus, the head of the Task Force for Acceleration in Handling COVID-19 wrote a message to the Cardinal of the Indonesian Catholic Church to call off the bishop ordination in Ruteng. It was the first time a government agency in Indonesia addressed a letter to a religious institution to call off a religious event. One day later, a similar letter was addressed to the World Ijtima Ulama in Gowa, South Sulawesi, where an international Islamic event (*tabligh*) was about to invite thousands of Muslim participants from Indonesia and Malaysia, India, Iran, and Pakistan.⁸

3 The Ordination as a Local Narrative

The Diocese of Ruteng is the largest in Indonesia in the number of Catholics, priests, nuns, convents, and Catholic schools. Ruteng is the birthplace of priests and nuns who carry out their mission all over the world, especially in Europe.

⁸ Riyanti Djalante et al., *ibid.*

The first bishop of Ruteng, Monsignor Wilhelmus van Bekkum, was a Dutch missionary. Today he is celebrated for his past works in incorporating cultural aspects into the Church liturgy, also known as *inculturation*, long before the concept was discussed in the Second Vatican Council.⁹ Yet, his progressive ideas were met with negative responses from his colleagues in Manggarai. He was forced to step down as the Bishop of Ruteng in 1972. A year later, the Pope appointed a local priest, Monsignor Vitalis Djebarus SVD, as the new bishop, but in September 1980 he was transferred to Bali. Rumors circulated that the reason behind the transfer was a conflict of interest with local government officials.¹⁰

The Pope appointed a new bishop, Monsignor Eduardus Sangsun SVD, who was ordained in 1985. He served until his death, in 2008. There were several controversies during his leadership, such as his failure to oppose government policies on mining despite public outcry and opposition.¹¹ Although many in Manggarai lost respect for him, many mourned his death.

Monsignor Hubertus Leteng was subsequently appointed as the new bishop, and ordained in 2010. The ordination was a festive one, and celebrations cost billions of rupiah, a disproportionately large sum for an impoverished region like Manggarai. A few years after his ordination, he was accused of alleged corruption regarding diocesan funds and of having a mistress. The priests and the people in Manggarai voted a motion of no-confidence and demanded his immediate resignation. His resignation, in 2017, tainted the image of the Catholic Church in Ruteng and left painful memories for the Catholic people.¹²

On November 13, 2019, Pope Francis appointed Reverend Siprianus Horvat as new bishop of Ruteng. According to the Code of Canon Law #379, the newly appointed bishop must be ordained within three months of receiving the

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- 9 Fransiska Widyawati, *Catholics in Manggarai, Eastern Indonesia* (Geneva: Globethics, 2018).
- 10 Bonefasius Jehandut, *Uskup Wilhelmus van Bekkum & Dere Serani* (Jakarta: Nera Pustaka, 2012).
- 11 Maribeth Erb. "Between empowerment and power: The rise of the self-supporting Church in Western Flores, Eastern Indonesia", 21(2) *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* (2006), 204–229.
- 12 Ryan Dagur, "Churuch gives scandal-hit Indonesian Bishop Second Chance". Retrieved 12 December, 2018. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/church-gives-scandal-hit-indonesian-bishop-second-chance/84092>; Mathias Hariyadi. "Bishop of ruteng resigns over illicit affair and financial scandals". Retrieved December 10 2017. <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Bishop-of-Ruteng-resigns-over-illicit-affair-and-financial-scandals-42029.html>; Ryan Dagur. "New era beckons scandal-hit Indonesian Diocese". Retrieved 11 March 2020. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/new-era-beckons-scandal-hit-indonesian-diocese/87428>; bbc.com. "Indonesia Bishops Hubertus Leteng resign amid scandal". Retrieved 11 October 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41587850>.

apostolic letter, that is, before the end of March, 2020. Upon Pope Francis's letter, the ordination committee started planning a series of events, to be held over a period of one month, between February 26 and March 25, 2020.

On February 26, Reverend Siprianus Hormat, arrived in West Manggarai from Jakarta. He was welcomed by over 1,000 locals and government officials. Between February 28 and March 14, the prospective bishop went on various visits with a social and ecological agenda. Meanwhile, Indonesia announced the first confirmed case of COVID-19, on March 2, in Jakarta.

The celebrations peaked in the week of March 15–22. An exhibition was held in the courtyard of the Cathedral to showcase the history and the works of the Church. Various performances were held to entertain the people, with hundreds attending daily. The Church also announced a *triduum* (three days of prayer) preceding the ordination mass, between March 16 and 18. Hundreds of people gathered in the old Cathedral to pray daily.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 situation in Indonesia had become increasingly worrisome, with cases concentrated mainly in Jakarta and surrounding cities. On March 16, the ordination committee announced that the ordination mass on the 19th would follow a tighter health protocol because of the COVID-19 epidemic, including mandatory temperature screening for people coming from outside Manggarai; sick people would not be allowed to attend; handshaking in the Church would be prohibited, including during “the peace,” and hand sanitizers would be provided at Church entries. The mass would be streamed online for people to watch at home.

On the last day of the *triduum*, there was a consecration of ordination equipment led by Monsignor Ignatius Suharyo, the Head of KWI and the Indonesian Cardinal. On the same day, there was a book launching event attended by hundreds of VIP guests and government officials, including the Ruteng-born Minister of Communication and Informatics, Johnny Plate. On the same day, Doni Monardo, the head of the Task Force, sent a letter to the Cardinal advising the cancellation of the ordination mass. A similar message was conveyed by the Governor of East Nusa Tenggara Province. Despite the advisories, the ordination committee decided to proceed with the ordination mass, with a tighter health protocol. The event was limited to 4,000 attendees, much lower than the initial target of 10,000.

4 Discussion

The ordination quickly gained media attention and received harsh criticism. It became a hot topic in news broadcasts on national TV stations and newspapers

in Indonesia. A few English-language foreign media also picked up the story. The media continued reporting the event with a tone of disapproval of the decision of the Church. Social media netizens also showed their disapproval. The Catholic Church was called irresponsible for acting rashly, without consideration of the risk to public health. Some national politicians condemned the decision of the Church, and likened the event to the situation in South Korea, where new COVID-19 cases arose from Church clusters because stubborn religious leaders failed to adhere to government advisories. Some opinion pieces in national newspapers cited the event as an example of the failure of religious institutions to protect the health of the people.¹³

In a pandemic,¹⁴ the logic of public health and safety must override all interests, and religion must obey the logic of science and government rules. In the case of COVID-19, gatherings of people have been subject to public criticism. An Italian journalist, Mattia Ferraresi, criticized Church-goers who have blatantly disregarded calls to maintain physical distancing: “Holy water is not a hand sanitizer, and prayer is not a vaccine. Political decisions aimed at guaranteeing public safety should be based solely on scientific evidence.”¹⁵ The WHO encourages religion to help governments and communities prevent the spread of COVID-19. The role of religious leaders is considered essential in ensuring that religious activities do not become a cluster of coronavirus distribution.¹⁶

Public criticism of the Indonesian Church and Manggarai is understandable. According to Taylor, pandemic diseases have broad and massive psychological effects. Pandemics affect the way of understanding information about health and illness, and social behavior (avoidance, stigmatization, healthy behavior), causing emotional changes (fear, worry, anxiety). Pandemics also create prejudice and outgroup discrimination, which can potentially cause hatred and social conflict.¹⁷

The decision of the Church to ordinate the bishop appeared to the public as irrational and inconsiderate. The Church followed health protocols to minimize the risk of spreading the virus, suggesting that it had not disregarded the

13 See *supra* note 1.

14 Mika Aatola, *Understanding the politics of pandemic scares: An introduction to global politosomatics* (London, New York: Routledge, 2011); Mika Aatola, *Western spectacle of governance and the emergence of humanitarian world politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

15 Mattia Ferraresi, “God vs. Coronavirus”, *The New York Times*. Retrieved 10 March 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/opinion/coronavirus-church-religion.html>.

16 WHO, “Practical Considerations and Recommendations for Religious Leaders and Faith-Based Communities in the Context of COVID-19. Interim Guidance” (2020).

17 S. Taylor, *The Psychology of Pandemics: Preparing for the Next Global Outbreak of Infectious Disease* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019).

risk of COVID-19. After the ordination mass, the Church actively engaged the community in programs aimed at educating the public about the risk of the virus. A study by Erb, Widyawati, and Steenbrink¹⁸ of the history of the Church in Manggarai, has shown that the Church has always been an essential institution in the development and advancement of Manggarai society, including in the health sector. The commitment of the Church to fighting COVID-19 after the ordination mass suggests its intent in this regard.

The ordination during the COVID-19 pandemic must be seen as transcending health concerns and as reflecting the internal problems of the Church regarding the crisis of authority. The Catholic Church in Manggarai faced an internal crisis that had weakened its power, and was desperate for renewed public recognition. Lasswell and Kaplan¹⁹ noted that authority must be formalized and legitimized to be recognized. The process of legitimization symbolizes public acknowledgment and recognition. Legitimized leadership leads to stability of power. According to Gatano Mosca,²⁰ acknowledgment of the power of the elite is a “political formula” that results in respect towards the rulers. Ordination is the way of gaining power and recognition of political formulas. In Weber’s concept, ordination makes the Church regain its traditional authority.

In Manggarai, ordination was to strengthen the position and power of Church institutions. Classical studies have shown that the Church has never been free from seeking and legitimizing its authority. For the Church in Manggarai, resolving its internal crisis was critical at the time, and ordination was the culmination of all efforts to restore its damaged good name.

In Indonesia, the Church is a minority group, but in Flores it has been a significant force, and possess what Gramsci²¹ called a strong hegemony before state and society. This enabled it to defy the requests of the central government. Local authority that was subject to Church authority was also on the side of the Church. Their support and that of national figures, including a former Minister of Health, underscored the recognition of Church authority.

18 Karl Steenbrink, *Catholics in Indonesia, 1808–1942: A Documented History. Volume 2: The Spectacular Growth of a Self Confident Minority, 1903–1942* (Netherland: Brill, 2007); Fransiska Widyawati, *ibid.*; Maribeth Erb, *ibid.*

19 Harrold D. Lasswell & Abraham Kaplan, *Power and society: A framework for political inquiry* (USA, London: Transaction Publishers, 2013).

20 Claudio Martinelli, “Gaetano Mosca’s political theories: a key to interpreting the dynamics of power”, 1 *Italian journal of public law* (2009), 1–44.

21 Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, hegemony and international relations: an essay in method”, 12(2) *Millennium* (1983), 162–175.

Nevertheless, the Church could have compromised and conducted the ordination mass online. The Catholic Church in Mindanao, the Philippines, did so in May 2020, when celebrating the bishop's ordination.²² This event occurred two months after the ordination at Ruteng, when general understanding of the pandemic was far better. In Ruteng, however, the Church had no previous experience with online mass and lacked the necessary technological infrastructure. Following the ordination, the Bishop of Ruteng conducted mass without people and provided opportunities for online mass. To the best of our knowledge, no more than three out of 80 parishes in this region conducted mass online during the pandemic. This was a function of the infrastructure of the Church, and of the fact that many people had limited access to online technology. A small group of people attended online mass at parishes outside Flores, in more developed areas. Most people prayed at home.

It is therefore understandable why, at the time of ordination, people preferred to attend the mass in person. The presence of 4000 people at the celebration reflected the prominence of the Catholic Church as an institution for society and the people. Previous studies on Catholicism in Flores, by Widyawati and Erb,²³ showed that Catholicism is ingrained in the people of Flores, who supported the decision of the Church to hold the ordination amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Two weeks after the ordination, many Catholics who were originally criticized because of the event, flooded the social media with posts claiming that they had won and that the ordination did not cause a new cluster in the spread of COVID-19.

5 Conclusion

The study showed that the ordination of the Bishop of Ruteng during the COVID-19 pandemic was not only a health issue. It reflected the internal crisis of the Catholic Church in Indonesia in general, and in Manggarai in particular. The history of the Manggarai Church shows that its power had been misused by its bishops before, resulting in loss of confidence and authority. The Church needed ordination to gain new power and legitimacy. Therefore, it risked confrontation with the government and society, and endangering the health of the people rather than lose an opportunity to resolve its internal crisis. As a

22 Roy Lagerde. New Mindanao Bishop Ordained amid Lockdown due to COVID-19 Pandemic. Retrieved 22 May 2020. <https://philippines.licas.news/2020/05/22/new-mindanao-bishop-ordained-amid-lockdown-due-to-covid-19-pandemic/>.

23 Maribeth Erb, *ibid.*; Fransiska Widyawati, *ibid.*

compromise, the ordination was carried out with due regard to strict health protocols, consistent with the commitment of the Church to public health. Following the ordination, the new bishop and the Church played an active role in preventing the spread of COVID-19 and overcoming its effects.

Author Queries:

AQ1: Please provide the complete Author Affiliation details.

AQ2: Please provide the complete Author Affiliation details.