Assessing and Mitigating Conflicts amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia

By
Mohammad Hasan Ansori
Director for Program and Research at The Habibie Center
ansori@habibiecenter.or.id

Introduction

Conflict as a universal phenomenon is a fact that cannot be denied. All human or social relations cannot avoid conflict. Conflict is always present and inherent in every human relations and social systems,[1] both under normal conditions as well as extraordinary conditions such as the current COVID-19 pandemic or other disasters, including natural disasters. The phenomenon of such conflict and violence has emerged for centuries and become a global agenda. Conflict analysts have generally considered Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines as ASEAN member-states with long histories of violent conflict and massive consequences, whether in terms of death, injuries, or destruction to buildings.[2]

Graph 1: Violent conflict related to identity in Indonesia (1998-2014)
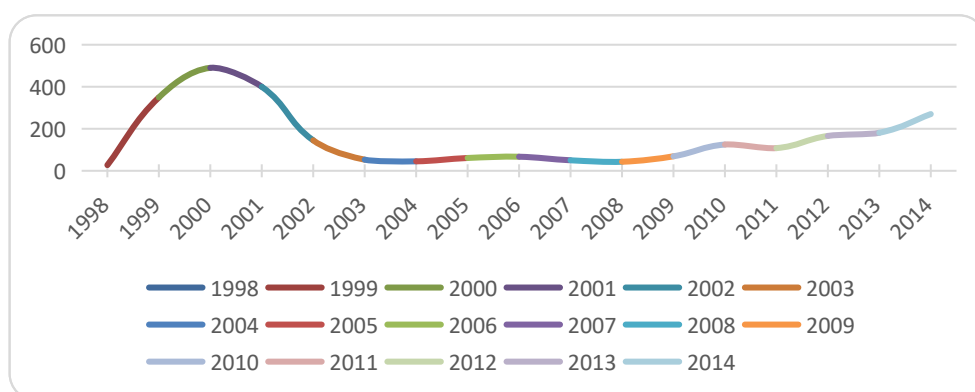
Source: The Habibie Center, National Violence Monitoring System (NVMS) program.

Government Regulation Number 21 Year 2020 (*Peraturan Pemerintah Nomor* 21/2020) formally

established a large-scale social restriction (*Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar* or PSBB) status in the framework of accelerating the handling of the coronavirus through a COVID-19 preventative and mitigation policy. This was despite the fact that many provinces and cities/regencies had already introduced their own policies in the form of separate territorial quarantine measures such as 'Work From Home' and 'Stay At Home.' Alongside the aforementioned implementation of COVID-19 preventative and mitigation policies, a number of conflict and violent incidents have taken place amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, including those that were directly caused by those policies as well as those that were not directly related, as will be explained in the following section. Later, several violent conflict mitigation options will be presented.

Assessment and Mitigation Strategies for Violent Conflict amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

An assessment or analysis of conflict amidst the COVID-19 pandemic can be analytically divided into vertical and horizontal conflicts. Vertical conflicts refer to conflicts that take place between a community and the government, or involves elements of the government with all the form of the state apparatus, whereas horizontal conflict refers to conflict that takes place between communities themselves or when a community fights within itself.

The first type of vertical conflict during the pandemic situation was conflict between informal workers and the state security apparatus. Data shows that more than 60 percent or around 70 million Indonesian workers are employed in the informal sector,[3] namely as small traders or street hawkers, online and conventional *ojek* (motorcycle taxis) drivers, domestic helpers, rickshaw drivers, and the like. Such workers in the informal sector are uniquely characterized by the fact their income is in the form of daily subsistence. Restrictions against activities outside of the home and appeals to 'stay at home' results in them not being able to earn income to eat on that particular day.[4] Many among them remain insistent to continue working in the informal sector, especially street hawkers, for the sake of earning enough to eat and survive amidst the pandemic. As a result, conflict often occurs between them and the state security apparatus or law enforcement officials conducting raids as part of preventing and mitigating COVID-19.

The chaotic scenes between street hawkers and state security apparatus at Tanah Abang, Jakarta on 27 March 2020 is just one among many striking examples.[5] Given that incidents in Tanah Abang regularly repeats itself, violent conflict mitigation measures should be conducted by prioritizing an Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) approach. The state security apparatus should act more proactively by carrying out negotiations and holding dialogue with the aforementioned workers in

the informal sector and convincingly explain about the threat of COVID-19, as well as the avoid using violence as much as possible. Aside from that, as part of the compensation for informal workers, the government should take responsibility for strengthening their social safety net.[6]

The second type of vertical violent conflict refers to rising criminality amidst this pandemic. There are two important assumptions to explain the rise in criminality. First, policies to prevent and mitigate COVID-19 which relies heavily on restricting activities outside of the home has resulted in major consequences in terms of economic stability for most of the public, especially those from the lower class. As a result of the aforementioned policies, several among them have resorted to criminal acts as a shortcut to secure their stability.[7] Second, as part of the policy to prevent and mitigate COVID-19, the government has also released more than 30,000 prisoners.[8] Those that have been released not only do not have any work or fixed income upon their assimilation with the public, but at the same time they are also faced with the difficulties of trying to find a job and income amidst the reality caused by the COVID-19 mitigation policies.[9] They then take a shortcut by carrying out criminal acts again in order to find food. So far, the National Police estimate more than 27 released prisoners have re-offended.[10] Regarding efforts to mitigate this criminality, stronger emphasis should be placed on the aspect of rule of law that is more serious and firm as opposed to ADR.

The third vertical conflict pattern that has emerged is several acts of terror amidst the COVID-19. Whist the government and state security apparatus has been largely focused and concentrated on preventing and mitigating COVID-19, terrorist groups have been attempting to take advantage of the moment to carry out attacks. Such groups observe greater space to operate as the state's resources are more maximized to handle COVID-19. One case of a terrorist attack amidst the COVID-19 pandemic that attracted large attention was a shooting carried out by two terrorists from the *Mujahidin Indonesia Timur* (MIT) group.[11] In relation to mitigating such terrorist threats, a similar approach to rising criminality should be applied, namely stronger emphasis on the aspect of the rule of law that is more serious and firm, such as already legally regulated in Law Number 5 Year 2018 on Criminal Acts of Terrorism (*UU Nomor 5 Tahun 2018 tentang Tindak Pidana Terorisme*).

The fourth type of vertical conflict is related to the distribution of social assistance that is provided by the government to the public. This source of conflict refers specifically to the distribution of social assistance that is uneven and inaccurate (given to the wrong target). An important example is related to the rejection by village heads in Sukabumi regency of social assistance from the West Java governor. The village heads felt that the data of recipients for social assistance was overlapping and inaccurate.[12] An ADR approach should be prioritized to mitigate conflict, especially in the form

of dialogue and providing clarification regarding data about which communities are truly entitled to receive social assistance so that it is given to the relevant target.

The next type of conflict is horizontal. The first type of this conflict is the rejection by some communities to bury victims of COVID-19 in their neighborhood. As a consequence of the increasing number of such incidents, the central government and local administrations as well as several socio-religious organizations have had to intervene in order to calm such conflicts. One case of community rejection of burying victims of COVID-19 that received a lot of attention took place in Banyumas, Central Java.[13]

The second type of horizontal conflict that attracted no less attention was the refusal of some residents for COVID-19 medical workers to live or stay in their areas or to stigmatize those that remained. One case that received a lot of national attention and coverage was the rejection of COVID-19 medical workers at RSUP Persahabatan hospital by their neighbors in East Jakarta that took place since 22 March 2020.[14] ADR should be prioritized – especially negotiations, dialogue and mediation, as well as avoiding the legal path – in order to best mitigate such conflict, except in cases when individuals deliberately use such issue to provoke the public and cause a riot.

The third type of horizontal conflict refers to conflict that took place between laborers and business owners and relates to the rights of laborers/workers who have experienced layoffs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from the Indonesian Ministry of Manpower as well as the Workers Social Security Agency (*BPJS Ketenagakerjaan)* reported that 2.8 million workers have been affected by the COVID-19 as per 13 April 2020.[15] A similar approach should be deployed to mitigate this conflict. The legal path and referring to Law Number 13 Year 2003 on Manpower (*UU Nomor 13 Tahun 2003 tentang Ketenagakerjaan*) should be carried out if an ADR approach hits a dead end.

Analysis/The Verdict

Alongside the implementation of policies to prevent and mitigate COVID-19, several violent conflicts have emerged, both vertical and horizontal ones. Several conflicts have involved violent dimensions and been full of aggression whilst others have not. The government and interested stakeholders should quickly carry out strategic and measured steps to prevent and handle the various violent conflicts. If violent conflicts are not handled adequately, accurately, and efficiently, it may potentially disturb the process in handling COVID-19 that is currently taking place and is becoming increasingly heavy, especially if we refer to the increasing number of positive COVID-19 cases. In mitigating violent conflicts, the government should wisely consider and carefully measure the cost benefit of the two approaches in mitigating violent conflict, namely ADR and legal paths.

Endnotes

1   Luis A. Coser, Continuities in the study of social conflict. New York: The Free Press, p. 25; Christopher.W. Moore, The Mediation Process: practical strategies for resolving conflict. San Francisco: Josse-Bass, 2003, p. 3; Ralf Dahrendorf , Conflict after class: new perspectives on the theory of social and political conflict, p. 3.

2   Luca Mancini, Horizontal inequality and communal violence: evidence from Indonesian districts. In Stewart, F. (ed.). Horizontal inequalities and conflict: understanding group violence in multiethnic societies, 2008, p. 112. See also Michail L. Ross, Resources and rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia. In Collier, P. & Sambanis, N. (eds.). Understanding civil war: evidence and analysis, p. 36.

3   Lokadata (Undated). 'Jumlah pekerja formal dan informal, 2012-2019'. Retrieved from: https://lokadata.beritagar.id/chart/preview/jumlah-pekerja-formal-dan-informal-2012-2019-1565591307#

4   CNN Indonesia (2020, Maret 24). 'Keluhan pedagang pasar kehilangan omzet karena Virus Corona.' Retrieved from: https://www.cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20200323180528-92-486184/keluhan-pedagang-pasar-kehilangan-omzet-karena-virus-corona

5   Liputan6.com (2020, Maret 27). 'Pasar Tanah Abang ditutup akibat Corona, PKL nekat berjualan dibubarkan satpol PP.' Retrieved from: https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4212736/pasar-tanah-abang-ditutup-akibat-corona-pkl-nekat-jualan-dibubarkan-satpol-pp

6   Regarding the various approaches to mitigating conflicts, see: Bernard Mayer, The dynamics of conflict resolution: a practitioner's guide, 2000, dan Christopher.W. Moore, The Mediation Process: practical strategies for resolving conflict. San Francisco: Josse-Bass, 2003; Roger Fisher dan William Ury, Getting to yes: negotiating agreement without giving in, 1991.

7   Republika.co.id (2020, April 23). 'Wabah Covid-19 dan Kriminalitas.' Diunduh dari https://republika.co.id/berita/q98ji4318/wabah-covid19-dan-kriminalitas

8   Kompas.com (2020, April 12). 'Pembebasan 30 ribu narapidana akibat virus Corona.' Retrieved from: https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/01/09314561/pembebasan-30000-narapidana-akibat-wabah-virus-corona

9   Kompas.com (2020, April 19). 'Mengapa Napi Asimilasi Kembali Berbuat Kriminal? Ini Analisisnya...' Diunduh dari https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2020/04/19/130400565/mengapa-napi-asimilasi-kembali-berbuat-kriminal-ini-analisisnya

10   Kompas.com (2020, April 21). 'Polri: 27 Napi yang Bebas Lewat Asimilasi Covid-19 Kembali Lakukan Kejahatan.' Diunduh dari https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/21/15431491/polri-27-napi-yang-bebas-lewat-asimilasi-covid-19-kembali-lakukan-kejahatan

11   Kompas.com (2020, Maret 15). 'Teroris penembak polisi di Poso berhasil ditangkap, keduanya tewas.' Retrieved from: https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/15/13510841/teroris-penembak-polisi-di-poso-berhasil-ditangkap-keduanya-tewas

12   Detiknews.com (2020, April 29). 'Kades di Sukabumi klarifikasi soal penolakan paket bantuan Ridwan Kamil.' Retrieved from: https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-barat/d-4995768/kades-di-sukabumi-klarifikasi-soal-penolakan-paket-bantuan-ridwan-kamil

13   Detiknews.com (2020, April 16). 'PNS-Perangkat desa jadi tersangka penolakan jenazah COVID-19 di Banyumas.' Retrieved from: https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-tengah/d-4978870/pns-perangkat-desa-jadi-tersangka-penolakan-jenazah-covid-19-di-banyumas

14   Tirto.id (2020, Maret 26). 'Anies siapkan hotel untuk istirahat tenaga medis tangani Corona.'. Retrieved from: https://tirto.id/anies-siapkan-hotel-untuk-istirahat-tenaga-medis-tangani-corona-eHMT

15   Dwi Hadya Jayani (2020, April 18). 'Wabah PHK akibat COVID-19.' Retrieved from: https://katadata.co.id/infografik/2020/04/18/wabah-phk-akibat-covid-19, 28 April 2020.

Bramasta, D. B. (2020, March 31). "Virus Corona, Korea Selatan, dan Bantuan Rp. 13 Juta untuk Warganya." Kompas. Retrieved from https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2020/03/31/090200765/virus-corona-korea-selatan-dan-bantuan-rp-13-juta-untuk-warganya?page=2

THC INSIGHTS