

Hope in the Time of Corona: Indonesia

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We were supposed to have a family dinner. In three days, I will be departing back to Germany. I was coming home for a few weeks to Indonesia in the middle of writing my Ph.D. thesis. Suddenly, during the motorcycle ride to my family's apartment, my body ached unbearably. My temperature shot up. It felt extremely exhausting even to simply stand up and keeping my attention focused.

As we arrived in my family's apartment building, I asked my girlfriend to keep her distance from me. I told her about my condition. Without the need to explain anything, we knew what had happened. She immediately stayed away from me. She insisted that I do not enter my family's apartment building and get checked in the nearest hospital. She called the emergency Covid-19 service numbers provided by the Jakarta government but was only told to wait for them to call back. They never called back.

My mother was unnerved when she heard about me. I eventually had to be brought to my family's apartment unit because I had to lie myself down. Everyone was concerned for me but also startled with my presence. Later, my fever turned out to be caused by salmonella infection. I was contracting a Typhoid

fever...the diagnosis strangely delighted us. "You need to get yourself tested for Covid-19 if the test for typhoid or dengue fever came out negative," my physician told me before I was tested.

It was mid-March. The world was already engulfed by the paranoia toward Covid-19. The news of tens of thousands of new confirmed cases and hundreds of death were presented to us on daily basis. Indonesia had hundreds of confirmed cases. But its death rate was almost ten percent of the total confirmed cases. Moreover, the distrust toward how the government handled the problem had already established. The health ministry was reportedly trying to cover up the first and second confirmed cases of Covid-19 infection in Indonesia. While countries started to close their borders, our president thought the Covid-19 outbreak in China, Japan, and South Korea would be a chance to attract tourists to Indonesia. Officials were routinely dismissing the gravity of the situation and making a joke of Covid-19.

A TikTok post reminiscing how a few weeks ago Jakarta's traffic was still jammed and the user prefers this chaotic mess rather than the desolating quietness of the city after the Covid-19 outbreak



The mood of everyday life in Jakarta was predominated by anxiety. As we heard more and more people we knew personally had been infected with Covid-19, the crisis felt more real. Typhoid, [a disease that causes a mortality rate of between 1-4 percent](#), turns into a much lighter matter in the face of a world-changing, still largely unknown virus whose grip gets nearer to us as days go by.

As I had to stay home to wait for my recovery—and, later, prolong my time in Indonesia indefinitely as flights become unavailable or outrageously expensive—I witnessed the absurdly intricate social problems Covid-19 outbreak unfolded. The government imitated other countries' policies of reducing public transportation but most people still went to work, making buses and trains even more overcrowded and people were helplessly crammed into them. Non-essential offices, shops, services are instructed to shut down their activities. Many of the workers, who are not paid in their absence and do not have the means to sustain their life in capital cities, returned to their hometowns, potentially carrying Coronaviruses to many Indonesian regions.

And as Jakarta is one of the most densely populated cities in the world, social distancing is a luxury only some sections of the society can afford. Markets are still crammed with people, jostling each other to find the groceries they are looking for and getting the seller's attention. Some are using delivery services, which flourished in Indonesia in recent years, to do their shopping. Yet, that means the delivery workers, usually the people who could not find better work to do, are blatantly more exposed to the risk of contracting Covid-19.

The impossible bureaucracy the country had for decades is taking its casualties now. Covid-19 swab samples had to be tested by the health ministry in Jakarta. The result had to go through its representative offices at the provincial and district level before being sent to the hospital which takes care of the suspected Covid-19 patient. As such, patients and hospitals could wait as long as one to two weeks before they knew the result. Occasionally, the test result was known by the hospital after the patient succumbed to their illness.



A Twitter user asked "What do you guys want to do if the Covid-19 pandemic is over?"

Now, I am supposed to continue writing my thesis. However, the incessant waves of bad news, the concern that Indonesia would become the new epicenter of Covid-19 (and the fact we do not have the sufficient infrastructure to deal with it), the fear that Covid-19 would take the life of my most vulnerable family members, the uncertainty of whether life can go back to the way it is had kept me overwhelmed. From time to time, I take a look at my laptop's screen. Microsoft Word with a blank new document is opened. Articles and books are on the tabs of my Chrome and PDF viewer. Yet, I cannot write the chapters I need to write nor read anything pertinent to my research. I cannot do anything other than keep exposing myself to the news or what the people shared on their social media pages.

"What am I doing?" I asked myself. "What am I looking for?"

I feel helpless and useless. For once in my life, I am regretting that I do not specialize in medical anthropology. I wish to write something that would benefit some people in this circumstance.

Indonesians are asking through their timeline and stories, "what do you want to do after the Covid-19 pandemic is over?"

"I want to get together with my friend again without any fear," someone answered.

"I want to participate in Friday prayer," said a friend who never presented himself as a religious person.

People are trying to keep their hope alive although there is no end in sight to this debilitating gloominess. I know two or three things about hope since I planned to write about it in my thesis. Hope sustains our laughter, joy, and other good experiences of life in the time of uncertainty. It renders the future worth our waiting despite we have all the reasons to despair about it. I am writing about the millenarian fervour of the migrants in Eastern Indonesia who had been humiliated by the locals for decades. Their way to grapple with their inescapable predicament is to religiously envisage a future where it is revealed that they are the true autochthonous of their island.

I have been attempting to grasp my interlocutors' millenarianism, which at some point appeared as a distant thing I could not immediately understand. Why expect a radical transformation occurring out of the blue and against all the more possible scenarios? Now, I need to cling to such a way of hoping more than writing about it.

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