

The Role of Religious Leaders in Handling Covid-19 Pandemic in Sikka Regency, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explain the role of religious leaders in Sikka Regency, Indonesia in handling the Covid-19 Pandemic and their impacts on people's behavior, especially in compliance with the Covid-19 Protocols. Using a mixed method approach, this study compares Catholic and Moslem communities in the regency. Measuring quantitatively and qualitatively how they influence the behavior of the people during the Covid-19 Pandemic, this study shows that the religious leaders played a role as "intermediary elites" with a number of distinctive characteristics. Considering this important role in handling and preventing Covid-19 Pandemic, this study recommends that policy makers in Indonesia at all levels should take into account the role of religious leaders as determinant factors, especially as "intermediary elites" in making their policies work more effectively at grassroots level in dealing with other social issues or problems in the future.

Key words: intermediary elite, religious leaders, Covid-19 Pandemic, grassroots

INTRODUCTION

The role of religious leaders has been greatly acknowledged and appreciated in handling various social issues. Studies by M. Muchammadun, et al. [1], S.K.N. Aula [2], A.N. Dewi et al. [3], and S. Bahrudin, et al. [4] showed that religious leaders had played significant role in in Indonesia in facilitating and implementing government's policies in dealing with certain issues at grassroots level. The positive impact of their involvement could be clearly identified and measured.

This is also true when we speak about the role of religious leaders in regards to Covid-19 Pandemic in Sikka Regency, Indonesia recently. Government's policies could only have been effectively imposed if the religious leaders were included in the process of implementing them through concrete actions. In this case, the religious leaders have played a role as "intermediary elites", the ones who occupy positions as elites in society, are outside political power, but can collaborate and partner with the government. Since the official announcement by the Indonesian government in March 2020 through *Presidential Decree No. RI. 7 of 2020*, (13 March 2020) concerning the Establishment of the Task Force for Handling the Covid-19 Pandemic [5] and its derivatives, various stakeholders have been aware of this challenge while providing responses and concrete steps to deal with it. The leaders of the Catholic Church and Moslem community in Sikka Regency were no exception; they became part of the "intermediary elites" to collaborate and partner with the government in the region to tackle it, without whom the local government of the regency could have failed to implement the national policies to combating Covid-19 on the ground.

What is the role of the religious leaders in Sikka Regency and what changes have occurred within the Catholic and Moslem communities in that area as a result of the "intervention" of these "intermediary

elites”? These are two main questions that will be answered in this study.

So this study aims, first, to explore the role of religious leaders in handling the Covid-19 Pandemic in Sikka Regency; and second, to find out what kind of behavioral changes have occurred within the Catholics and Moslems in worship activities as a result of the influence of the Catholic leaders in handling the Covid-19 Pandemic in Sikka, Indonesia; and finally, what are the implications of this study for the future collaboration between government and religious leaders in handling other social issues in Indonesia as a whole, and in Sikka in particular.

This study uses a mixed method approach where quantitative and qualitative approaches will be employed together. For a qualitative approach, data collection and analysis is carried out using the document study by tracing written policies and interviewing religious leaders and some people from the two religious communities in Sikka Regency. Meanwhile, to find out changes in the behavior of the people, a survey was conducted by taking samples in St. Thomas More of Maumere and Wuring Ward, 60 respondents each. The data was analyzed descriptively in order to get information about the correlation between religious leaders' influence and people's compliance with Covid-19 Protocols.

This paper will be discussed in four parts: the first part discusses about some theoretical framework about the role of religious leaders and Covid-19 Pandemic. The second part describes and analyzes the role of religious leaders in handling the Covid-19 Pandemic in Sikka Regency; and the third discusses about level of compliance of people in Thomas More Parish of Maumere and Wuring Ward with the Covid-19 protocols. This article ends with a number of conclusions and recommendations.

SOME BASIC CONCEPTS

To understand the role of religious leaders in Sikka Regency, three basic concepts will be explained in this part, namely “elite”, “intermediary elite” and “Covid-19 Pandemic”.

“Elite”

The concept of “elite” is found in the works of several social and political thinkers. Classically, this term appears in the political theory of two Italian socio-political thinkers, namely Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca. Both define elite as a small group of people who control the crowd.[6] Mosca in his book *Elementi di scienza politica* in 1896 (which was later translated into English as *The Ruling Class*, 1939) defines elites as leaders who have political domination over others in an organization. This dominance lasts as long as it is supported and in line with the values that are considered by society; otherwise, sooner or later they will soon be replaced by others who adhere to the prevailing values. Mosca makes no distinction between elite classes.[6]

Meanwhile, Pareto defines “elite” as “a class of the people who have the highest indices in their branch of activity, and to that class give the name of elite” (a class of people who have the highest index in their branches of activity).[7] Furthermore, Pareto distinguishes two classes within the elite group, namely the ruling elite (governing elite), namely individuals who directly or indirectly play a certain part/role in government, and the “non-governing elite”, consisting of those left over from the elite group. If there are elites, then there are also non-elite groups who have lower strata.

To overcome the economic reductionism of Karl Marx, an American social thinker, Charles Wright Mills in his book *The Power Elite* (1956) also put forward his theory of elites, which states that in society there are three main elite groups, namely the military elite, political rulers and elites of economy (owners of capital). So, for him, the elites are not only the owners of capital (bourgeois-capitalist) as Marx said, but also the military and political elites. All three determine political, economic and social events in society. These three ruling groups unite and exchange roles in exercising power in society.[8]

Piotr Sztompka, a Polish sociologist, in his book *The Sociology of Social Change* (1993) argues for the role of “big people” (elites) in social change. According to him, there are many agents of social change, ranging from ordinary people to extraordinary actors. They play a role in bringing about change at different levels or scales. He argues that “big people” could be groups or individuals in various fields, including the world of art, sports, and religion. Thus, he rejects the view that elites only apply to the world of politics, military and economics. [9]

From some of the thoughts above, it becomes clear that there is an evolution in thinking about elites in society. This study agrees with Pareto, that the elite consists of the ruling elite (governing elite) and the non-governing elite. This study also agrees with Sztompka that elites can be group elites or individual actors and that they play a role in bringing about change and creating history at different scales and contexts. [9]

In the context of Pareto and Sztompka’s thinking, this study tries to place the religious elites as a non-governing elites, because they are outside the political power of the government, but they enjoy a number of privileges both socially and economically, and have certain authority in the government within a certain scope.

“Intermediary Elite”

The social thinkers that have been stated above do not even discuss the concept of “intermediary elite”, although in reality and daily practice, this term is very suitable for the roles and positions of certain elite groups in society. Borrowing Pareto’s term, the position of the “intermediary elite” is held by an elite group that is outside the government, which does not exercise political power (non-governing elite), but enjoys certain privileges and a lifestyle that is different from the lifestyle of the common people. These include religious leaders, traditional leaders, community leaders, certain professional groups.[9]

In this study, religious leaders are included in the category of “non-governing elite” who act as “intermediary elite”. Their position is more than just “agents” or “actors”, because both terms have a more general nuance that can include anyone, while “intermediary elite” has a specific nuance, because the word “elite” reveals the existence of a number of privileges and authority in the context of social relations.

What are the characteristics of the “intermediary elites”? Summarized from various sources, a number of characteristics of the “intermediary elites” can be identified. The first characteristic, as the name implies, is that they are part of the “big people” in society, but not part of formal political power. Second, they do not have the authority to make policies related to the lives of many people (public sphere). Third, they can be invited to help implement State (government) policies for handling certain problems in society. Fourth, they can act as catalysts, facilitators and mediators for the interests of the State and society. Fifth, intermediary elites in a number of cases can also act as social control over both government performance and people’s behavior. Sixth, intermediary elites can function as educators. And seventh, they can make policies for the interests of the people who are in or covered by their authority and guidance as the implementation of State/political elite policies for the public interest. [1] [2][3][4]

Overview of Covid-19

Since December 2019, our world has been rocked by the Corona Virus (Covid-19) Pandemic. This epidemic swept across the world and affected people of all ages, from all nations, ethnicities, races, religions, classes, and gender. The plague, which is thought to have originated in Wuhan, China, has spread rapidly throughout the world, to all urban and rural areas.[10]

COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) is a new type of disease caused by a virus from the coronavirus class, namely SARS-CoV-2 which is also often called the Corona virus. COVID-19 is caused by SARS-CoV-2, which is a new type of coronavirus (a group of viruses that infect the respiratory system). Corona virus

infection can cause mild to moderate respiratory infections, such as the flu, or infections of the respiratory system and lungs, such as pneumonia. At the end of 2020, several case reports stated that the Corona virus had mutated into several new types or variants, for example the delta variant.[10]

According to experts, COVID-19 was initially transmitted from animals to humans. After that, the disease also spread from human to human. Transmission can be through the following ways: first, accidentally inhaling droplets that come out when a COVID-19 sufferer sneezes or coughs; secondly, holding your mouth, nose or eyes without washing your hands first, after touching an object affected by droplets of a COVID-19 sufferer, for example money or doorknobs; third, close contact (less than 2 meters) with a COVID-19 sufferer without wearing a mask; fourth, the CDC and WHO state that COVID-19 can also be transmitted via aerosols (particles of substances in the air). However, this mode of transmission only occurs in certain medical procedures, such as bronchoscopy, endotracheal intubation, suctioning of mucus, and administering inhaled drugs via a nebulizer. [10]

According to World Health Organization (WHO), several variants/types of SARS-CoV-2 that cause COVID-19 have been found as follows: Variant Alpha (B.1.1.7) which was originally discovered in England since September 2020; Variant Beta (B.1.351/B.1.351.2/B.1.351.3) initially discovered in South Africa since May 2020; The Gamma variant (P.1/P.1.1/P.1.2) originally discovered in Brazil since November 2020; Delta variant (B.1.617.2/AY.1/AY.2/AY.3) initially discovered in India since October 2020; The Eta variant (B.1.525) whose distribution has been found in many countries since December 2020; The Iota (B.1526) variant originally discovered in America since November 2020; The Kappa variant (B.1617.1) originally discovered in India since October 2020; Variant Lamda (c.37) originally discovered in Peru since December 2020; and finally, the Arcturus Sub-Variant (XBB 1.16) which was detected in several countries in January 2023 and is now starting to spread to many countries, including Indonesia.[10]

In general, there are three general symptoms that can indicate someone is infected with COVID-19, namely: fever (body temperature above 38°C); dry cough; and shortness of breath; tired easily; muscle ache; chest pain; sore throat; headache; nausea or vomiting; diarrhea; runny or stuffy nose; chills; sneezing; loss of ability to taste; and loss of the ability to smell (anosmia).[10]

Other impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic are as follows: first, the emergence of the long haul of COVID-19. This term refers to someone who has been declared cured through a negative PCR test result, but still feels complaints such as weakness, coughing, joint pain, chest pain, difficulty concentrating, palpitations, or intermittent fever. Second, socio-economic impacts such as poverty, unemployment, tenuous social relations; third, psychological impacts such as fear, anxiety, stress, depression, suspicion among residents; fourth, the impact on the world of education such as dropping out of school and the administration of complicated education; fifth, political impacts such as suspicion and accusations between countries; and sixth, health impacts such as vulnerability to infection with other diseases.[10]

THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON PEOPLE'S COMPLIANCE WITH COVID-19 PANDEMIC PROTOCOLS IN SIKKA REGENCY

As stated in the previous section, religious leaders as part of the "elite" group play a certain role in changing people's behavior in dealing with the social problems. In this section, the role of the Catholic and Moslem leaders in Sikka Regency is explained in implementing government's policies within their own religious communities during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Written Policies by Catholic and Moslem Leaders

Two main things have been done by Catholic and Moslem leaders in Sikka Regency in response to the

Covid-19 Pandemic, namely issuing written policies and implementing them with concrete actions.

Written Policy by Catholic Bishop of Maumere Diocese of Sikka Regency

A written policy was an arrangement for worship that could prevent the transmission of Covid-19. The Bishop of Maumere, Mgr. Edwald Sedu, issued three documents in response to the Indonesian government's policy for handling the Covid-19 Pandemic. The first was "The 2020 Pastoral Appeal on Covid-19"; secondly, "General Guidelines for Worship and Sacrament Service Protocols in the New Normal Period in Maumere Diocese"; and third, "The Lenten Pastoral Letter 2021."

1. "Pastoral Appeal 2020 (Covid-19)"

In short, the Pastoral Appeal is an 8-page document issued by Bishop Ewaldus Sedu, Pr of Maumere Diocese on March 20, 2020 in facing the Covid-19 Pandemic. This pastoral appeal is the response of the leader of the Catholic Church to the Indonesian government's official statement that Indonesia was nationally experiencing the Covid-19 Pandemic as a national disaster (pandemic). This call is directed to the interests of the Catholics of Maumere Diocese of Sikka Regency to regulate Catholic worship during the Covid-19 Pandemic until other policies were regulated by the government. Three important points covered in this appeal are as follows:

1. As of Friday, March 20, 2020 until Friday, April 3, 2020, all church activities that involve many people are AVOID. These activities include the Celebration of the Eucharist on all occasions and various other services; the service of the sacrament of penance/confession; choir practice; Lenten catechesis; provision of pastoral commissions, bureaus and institutions at the diocesan level and pastoral sections in parishes.
2. If within these 14 days (20 March – 3 April 2020) someone dies, then the service is limited to blessing the body. Families and mourners are expected to continue to pay attention to health provisions regarding the spread of the corona virus (Covid-19).
3. Regarding the celebration of the Eucharist and other services, after April 3 2020, unless otherwise determined by the government, there will be information on a number of practical matters, including people returning to worship and attending Eucharistic celebrations in churches and communities, but if there are symptoms of respiratory diseases such as cough, runny nose, sore throat, fever and high fever, so pray and just rest at home. [11]

It is clear that this document is both a response and an implementation of the responsibilities of a religious leader as an "intermediary elite" in Sikka Regency for the policies of the Indonesian government during the Covid-19 Pandemic. This document was sent and distributed through social media to the Catholics in the region. The people were obliged to share this information with one another as a collective responsibility of church members.

2. "General Guidelines for Worship and Sacrament Service Protocols in the New Normal Period in Maumere Diocese" [12]

The second document is the "General Guidelines for the Protocol for Worship and Sacrament Services During the New Normal Period in Maumere Diocese (Sikka Regency)", [12] which was issued on June 24, 2020, three months after Bishop Ewald issued a Pastoral Appeal. This document refers to a number of written policies of the Indonesian government starting from the central level to the Sikka Regency area. [13] [14] [15] [16] [17] [18] [19] [20] [21]. This document also refers to the NTT Province and Sikka Regency written policies. [22] [23] [24] [25] [26] [27] [28] [29].

Several important points included in this guideline, which regulate the religious life and worship of

Catholics in Sikka Regency, namely guidelines relating to the readiness of parish life, which consists of 7 (seven) points; guidelines related to “general matters” consisting of 11 (eleven) points; guidelines related to “Sunday and Holy Day Eucharistic Celebrations” consisting of 10 (ten) points; and “Guidelines for the Ministry of Sacraments and Other Worship”, such as Baptism, Reception of First Communion, Sacrament of Confirmation, Sacrament of Marriage, Sacrament of Reconciliation, Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, Funeral Mass and Remembrance of the Dead, Blessing of Bodies and Funerals, Obligatory Evening Prayer/Prayer BEC/spiritual group; and fifth, Guidelines related to “Ordination and Monastic Vocations.” [12]

At least three interesting points from this document need to explain. First, Maumere Diocese of Sikka Regency issued these Guidelines by studying the legal bases, namely various written policies made by the government at national and regional levels. With this, the issued Guidelines have a legal basis. This legal reference shows obedience, loyalty and shared responsibility of religious leaders towards the context of State and nation life for the general welfare, especially the welfare of Catholics who are within the scope of the bishop’s responsibility. Second, these Guidelines as a whole and in detail describe the ability of a religious leader as an intermediary elite to cover everything possible to be considered and implemented by all Catholics in their area to prevent and deal with the spread of Covid-19 in the region. Finally, these Guidelines also reflect the sensitivity of religious leaders regarding the dynamics of the development of the social situation during the Covid-19 outbreak, in which the government applies special regulations for the context of the “New Normal” situation—a new context during the Covid-19 Pandemic that also demands regulation. The leaders of the Catholic Church realized this and made internal policy adjustments for Catholics for their common good.

3. Lenten Pastoral Letter 2021

In 2021 the Bishop of Maumere issued a pastoral letter with the theme: “The More Faith, The More Solidarity. Letter from the Bishop of Maumere Diocese for Lent 2021.” The brief contents are as follows: first, the bishop of Maumere reminded again that Lent 2021 was still in the atmosphere of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Bishop Ewald stressed that the Covid-19 Pandemic had caused many people to fall into poverty, being marginalized economically and unable to rise again. Thus, an attitude of care and solidarity among fellow believers was needed, regardless of their religious, ethnic, racial and social class backgrounds. He emphasized that:

.... solidarity or caring attitude towards others is the highest ethical imperative in the life of every Christian. At the final judgment, as told in the Gospel of Matthew 25, the measure of human salvation is largely determined by a caring attitude towards the suffering of others. All questions at the final judgment relate to solidarity with the suffering of others: “For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me; while I was in prison, you visited me,” (Matthew 25: 35). [30]

This pastoral letter also invited Christians to be able to see God’s presence in the spirit of Easter—the Lord’s Resurrection; that God is still present in human life and suffering, in solidarity with humans and trying to bring humans out of suffering to resurrection:

In the midst of the onslaught of this pandemic that has yet to end, we may be wondering: Where is the God who liberated it and why does God allow this suffering to continue for so long? God is present among us and takes part in the history of human suffering. God is present in the scientists who work hard day and night to carry out research so that in a short time they can find a Covid-19 vaccine. God is also present in the doctors and medical personnel who are dedicated and sacrifice their lives to treat Covid-19 patients. Of course, God is present when we show solidarity with one another. [30]

Finally, this pastoral letter invited Christians to express this caring and solidarity attitude in concrete actions, especially helping those who were really helpless, poor, sick and suffering around their lives, both those they could reach directly and those who were unreachable and could only be helped with remote assistance.[30]

Written Policies among Moslems in Sikka Regency

After several coordinating meetings with Sikka Government and local police, and leaders of other religions, and referring to government policies at national, provincial and local levels, the Majelis Ulama Indonesia [(Council of Indonesian (Moslem) Scholars] (MUI) in Sikka Regency issued at least two appeal letters regarding the implementation of prayers during the Holy Month of Ramadhan, and prayers and takbiran on Eid al-Fitr 1442 Hijriah 2020 [31] and 2021[32] in Sikka Regency. These two appeals allowed people to gather together in mosque for prayer and worship but were not allowed to hold a “victory” parade on the street as used to be done on the night of Eid al-Fitr. The main points of the three appeals are as follows: first, worship in mosques could be carried out provided that people followed the health protocols of washing hands, wearing masks, maintaining distance, reducing crowds, and using hand sanitizer; secondly, it was prohibited to parade on the streets on takbiran night, to avoid crowds and prevent the spread of Covid-19; and third, it was prohibited to visit each other from house to house to stay in touch and wish each other a happy Eid al-Fitr, where people greeted each other by shaking hands, ate together and touched each other [31]. The aim is to prevent Covid-19 infection or its possible spread. These three advisories were valid until there were further changes regulated by the government.

Implementation of Religious Policies into Concrete Actions in Communities

As implementation of the written policies by the bishop of Maumere and MUI of Sikka Regency, concrete actions at community/grassroots level accompanied them. Among the Catholic communities, the first thing to do according to Laurensius Noi, Pr, was to coordinate with the local government, both the district head and the health service and the Regional Covid-19 Task Force to obtain accurate information regarding the situation of the Covid-19 Pandemic and appropriate directions on how the communities could prevent or hinder its spread. In this regard, five mechanisms had been implemented: first, the local government invited various stakeholders, including religious and community leaders to take part in the socialization process of government (state) policies from the central to regional levels; secondly, community and community leaders were encouraged to participate in socializing this government policy to the Catholic community; third, informal leaders (religious leaders and community leaders) facilitated the presence of the government and officers for handling the Covid-19 Pandemic in their areas; fourth, accompanying the victims/patients of Covid-19 pastorally; fifth, in a spirit of solidarity providing material assistance to families who had lost their jobs as a result of the large-scale restriction policy implemented by the government; and sixth holding a special funeral service for Covid-19 patients who died in accordance with the health protocol. [33]

This was also true about the Moslem Community in Sikka Regency, especially in Wuring and Maumere, two most populated Moslem areas in the regency. Moslem local leaders advised people through loud speaker from the mosques to comply with Covid-19 Protocols as Ihsan Wahab, Head of MUI of Sikka Regency states: “As a Moslem leader, I stood in front of a mosque in Maumere town every morning to remind people to comply with the Covid-19 Protocol; and they they did follow me.” [34]. This was amended by Siti Korinah [35], Abdul Kasim [36], Ismail Hamzah [37] and Hafsyah Melati [38]. Siti Korinah, a citizen of Perumnas Maumere and head of Moslem women organization in the town, said: “I reminded my own family members and my neighbors not to hang around during this pandemic situation. And they listened to me.” [35].

Quirinus Galmin, Pr, Fellow Parish Priest of St. Thomas Morus, Maumere, stated that it is difficult to

imagine the successful handling of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Sikka Regency without involving the “intermediary elites”, namely religious leaders. Why? Because religious leaders, according to him, are very close to the community and even blend with the community. People really believe in them. Second, religious leaders are generally seen as setting good examples in terms of behavior in dealing with the Covid-19 Pandemic in terms of compliance with health protocols such as wearing masks, washing hands, maintaining distance, avoiding crowds, using hand sanitizers, and avoiding unnecessary and not important mobility. Concrete things that are being done are reading on the radio or distributing via social media the Guidelines, Pastoral Exhortations and the Bishop’s Pastoral Letter to the people in the parish down to the households. Also, parish officers occasionally go around the parish to remind parishioners in homes, streets and markets, that they wear masks, keep their distance, stay away from crowds and wash their hands. [39]

A similar statement was also made by Gregorius Luli Sabon, SVD pastor-Parish Priest of St. Yosef Wairpelit. According to him, the involvement of community leaders by the government in joint handling of the Covid-19 pandemic in Sikka Regency has been very effective, because Catholic religious leaders already have a very neat structure to reach the grassroots community, so efforts to socialize and handle Covid-19 cases can be done easily. People generally listen to the voice of their shepherd and obey him. In spiritual reflections, whether via radio or social media, church leaders and community leaders always inform them of the importance of maintaining health protocols during the Covid-19 pandemic as a form of real faith. [40]

The similar statement came out of Ihsan Wahab, who stated that “it is because of my authority that people listened to me and followed my advice. But I believe that they also watched tv and read newspaper and other media about the severity of this pandemic that they didn’t want to take a risk of being infected and suffering from it.” [34]. The similar statement was given by a Moslem cleric of Darussalam Mosque of Maumere, Haj Muhammad Tato: “Every morning I reminded people through loud speaker to pray from home during Covid-19 Pandemic. If they wanted to come to mosque for prayer, they had to wear musk and keep distance from each other.” [41].

Changes in People’s Behavior

What kinds of changes occur when religious leaders carry out awareness raising activities to the people about the dangers of the Covid-19 Pandemic and how to react to it? For this reason, this study distributed questionnaires to 120 respondents in two different communities, namely Thomas Morus Maumere Parish and Wuring Moslem Community, 60 respondents in each. Data was collected from 12 to 15 March 2024. The first thing asked was: Where did they get information about the Covid-19 Pandemic? Table 1 below shows that they obtained information from various sources, but more than 55 percent stated that they obtained it from religious/community leaders (56.0%); the second from medical personnel (45.0%). Others were received from government officials, police/army, and the mass media. Though the percentage of response for each source is slightly higher among the Catholics, this doesn’t show a significant difference between the two communities. This means that both among the Catholic and Moslem communities religious leaders have been considered one of the main source of information for the people about Covid-19 Pandemic. For more details about the distribution of respondents’ answers on this matter, see Table 1 below.

Table 1: Source of Information about the Covid-19 Pandemic by Religion

Sources of Information about the Covid-19	%		
	Catholic	Moslem	Total
Government officials	36.3	25.8	32.1
Medical officers	45.4	44.6	45.0
Religious/community leaders	56.3	55.7	56.0
Police/army	18.2	13.6	15.9

Mass/social media	34.6	27.4	31.0
Others	13.1	11.6	12.4

N = 120

One Catholic respondent stated that she and her community often got information from the church because the church distributed leaflets; apart from that, the church had also created a parish Whatsapp group, so that they could inform each other about matters related to the situation during the Covid-19 pandemic. [42]

Respondents were also asked how often they followed health protocols (wearing masks, washing hands, keeping distance/away from crowds, using hand sanitizers, and limiting travel). In general, data in Table 2 shows that the majority (between 80.0 – 95.0%) of respondents stated that they “always” or “often” comply with health protocols with the highest percentages frequently or always “washing their hands” (93.7%) and “keeping distance” (92.0%). The lowest was “using hand sanitizer” where those who stated “always” or “often” only (22.0% and 35.0%, while 23.0% stated “sometimes” and 20.0 percent stated “rarely”. In general, 82.7% said they “always” or “often” comply with health protocols. If we compare respondents’ response by religion, this data shows that there is no significant difference between the two communities in complying with Covid-19 Health Protocol. Among the Catholics, 82.9% said they “always” or “often” comply with health protocol, while among the Moslems, 81.0% said the same. This means that the majority of people in the two communities tend to practice what was advised by their leaders and government. For more details, see Table 2 below.

Why is the percentage of respondents’ adherence to health protocols high, one respondent stated that this happened because religious leaders collaborated with health workers, local government officials and police/army to go around every day and provide advice and awareness and warnings to those who are negligent.[43]

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents’ Implementation of Health Protocols during the Covid-19 Pandemic by Religion

Health Protocol Items	Implementation by Religion (%)																	
	Always			Often			Sometimes			Rarely			Never			TOTAL		
	C	M	ST	C	M	ST	C	M	ST	C	M	ST	C	M	ST	C	M	ST
Wearing mask	47.4	45.4	46.2	41.5	39.5	40.0	12.3	11.7	12.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Washing hands	42.0	42.7	42.7	52.3	49.7	51.0	16.3	18.3	17.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Keeping distance	52.2	51.8	52.0	39.8	40.2	40.0	8.5	7.5	8.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Crowd avoidance	40.1	39.9	40.0	45.2	42.8	44.0	17.1	18.9	16.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Using Hand sanitizers	22.3	21.7	22.0	34.6	35.4	35.0	22.6	23.4	23.0	23.0	17.0	20.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Average	40.2	39.1	40.7	42.7	41.3	42.0	15.4	15.9	15.3	4.6	3.4	4.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

N = 120.

Note: C = Catholic; M = Moslem; ST = Sub-Total

Another reason is the existence of strong trust from the people towards religious leaders in Sikka Regency. The trust level is very high. As seen in Table 3, 70 percent of respondents strongly believe and 24 percent believe in the authority of religious leaders in the delivery and handling of the Covid-19 Pandemic, though this tendency is much higher among Moslems. If the two are put together, then 94% of Catholics believe in their religious leaders. Even though there was a slight difference between the percentage of Catholic and Moslem respondents' answers, where 97% of Moslems stated that they "believed" or "strongly believed" in their religious leaders and 91% of Catholics stated the same thing, both figures indicated a very high level of trust. This high level of trust has caused them to adhere faithfully to calls from religious leaders to comply with health protocols during the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, level of trust to civil leaders and others are much lower. As seen in Table 3, in average, only 45.9% of Catholics and Moslems "strongly believe" or "believe" in civil leaders and only 30.9% of them who "strongly believe" or "believe" in the other type of leaders. For complete data on this matter, see Table 3 below.

Table 3: Level of trust in civil, religious, and other leaders by religion, 2023 (%)

No.	Confidence level	Type of leader								
		Civil			Religious			Other		
		C	M	T	C	M	T	C	M	T
1	Strongly believe	22.5	18.2	20.4	66.0	74.0	70.0	12.5	13.2	12.9
2	Believe	25.2	26.7	25.5	25.0	23.0	24.0	18.2	17.7	18.0
3	Moderately believe	44.3	45.1	44.6	8.0	3.0	5.5	39.31	53.3	46.2
4	Don't believe	8.0	10.0	9.0	1.0	0.0	0.5	34.0	10.0	22.0
5	Strongly don't believe	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.2	5.8	6.0

N = 120

Note: C = Catholic; M = Moslem; T = Total

Interviews with a number of respondents revealed that they believed in religious leaders, because they considered religious leaders to speak in the name of truth and in the name of God. Apart from that, the closeness factor of local government leaders and religious leaders in Sikka Regency also contributed to determining the level of public compliance with health protocols during the Covid-19 Pandemic. It is undeniable that the relationship between local government and religious leaders is very close. In many ways they can collaborate and partner in addressing social issues. [35] [36] [37] [38] [41] [42] [43]

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reinforce the findings of previous studies regarding the role of religious leaders as "intermediary elites" in handling social problems in general as well as the Covid-19 Pandemic and in changing the behavior of people of faith in dealing with this outbreak. One study that supports the findings of this study is conducted by Muchammadun Muchammadun, et al. who examine the role of religious leaders in dealing with the spread of Covid-19 in a number of regions in Indonesia. According to them, in the context of a religious society, religious leaders can take on a socio-religious role through public health education. Second, their role will be effective if religious leaders analyze the media for delivering da'wah material according to the characteristics of the population. The results of the study show that religious leaders can act as social agents in preventing Covid-19 through their religious activities. The effectiveness

of this role is influenced by social media as a medium, the demographic characteristics of the population and the strictness of the policies implemented. Here they use the term “social agent” for religious leaders. The author feels that this term is too weak, because it places religious figures/leaders in a subordinated way and does not give the impression that they have authority and privileges that allow them to influence the behavior of the people/society. Therefore, I tend to stick to the term “intermediary elite” as emphasized from the beginning in this study. [1]

Siti Khodijah Nurul Aula in her 2020 study on Media Online Indonesia discovered the role of religious leaders as “intermediary elites” in breaking the chain of the spread of the Covid-19 Pandemic. In particular, she highlighted the response of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) to government policies in handling the Covid-19 pandemic by issuing fatwa number 14 of 2020 of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) which contains the implementation of worship in a situation where there is a Covid-19 pandemic, namely an explanation of kayfiah implementation of Islamic worship. The policy consists of 11 points to regulate procedures for performing Friday prayers as well as provisions for treating the bodies of victims of the Covid-19 virus. This study clearly reveals similarities with the response of the bishop of Maumere who has issued 3 (three) documents to respond and address concretely the problem of the spread of the Covid-19 Pandemic while strengthening the findings of this study. [2]

Andini et al. in their study in Gersik Regency, East Java, Indonesia in 2021 also highlighted the role of Religious Leaders in increasing the religiosity of Giri Village residents during the Covid 19 pandemic. This study shows that in the current pandemic situation, religious leaders in Giri Village play an important role in inviting villagers to continue trying to implement health and worship protocols to God. In addition, this study also found that people can follow directions from religious leaders who have a role in increasing residents’ worship activities. Study by Andini et al. once again supports the findings in this study that religious leaders/figures play an important role as “intermediary elites” to make people aware and direct how they behave as believers in facing the Covid-19 pandemic. [3]

Finally, Sholeh Bahrudin et al. in their studies in the Pasuruan Region, East Java, Indonesia emphasized that religious leaders as “intermediary elites” have a communication model in reducing the stigma and discrimination of Covid-19. By using a qualitative descriptive approach and interactive model data analysis with the opinion leader theory approach from Paul Lazarfeld, this study shows that religious leaders as “intermediary elites” have a strong role in influencing society both in terms of knowledge, attitudes and behavior. Every religious leader becomes an effective communicator in preventing stigma and Covid-19 in society through communication messages in their respective religious pulpits. In addition, the synergy of communication between religious leaders and the government is an effective model in preventing Covid-19 discrimination in society. Of course the study of Sholeh Bahrudin et al. is very similar to the findings of this study where religious leaders play an active role in communicating information to the faith community about how to deal with the Covid-19 Pandemic to prevent them from being victims and spreaders of the virus. Catholic bishop and priests in Sikka Regency are truly intermediary agents in bridging the government/state with their community of faith. [4]

CLOSING

Conclusion

From this study it can be concluded that the concept of “elite” in social thought has undergone an evolutionary development, from Gaetano Mosca to Piotr Sztompka today. Although Pareto distinguishes between “governing elite” and “non-governing elite” and C.W. Mills distinguishes three kinds of elites, namely the military, political rulers and entrepreneurs, but they have not yet arrived at the concept of “intermediary elite”, namely elites who are outside political power who have certain privileges and authority

in society. This includes religious leaders/figures. They have a special role in relations with the State (government) and society. They are “middlemen” but not only as agents or actors, but determinants of change because they can play a role that can influence the attitudes, behavior and lives of other people.

This study is one of the efforts to find evidence that the “intermediary elite” really exists in society and is influential. The role and influence of religious leaders (bishops and priests) in Maumere, Sikka Regency during the Covid-19 pandemic as found in this study proves the existence of “intermediary elites” in society. They have a certain position (privilege) and authority which can be more influential and have a stronger role in society compared to other elites. Their position and privilege as teachers of truth and faith make people really believe in them and obey their appeals or teachings.

However, the “intermediary elites” have their limits of authority that make them only able to play a role in certain social spheres. This study proves that the “intermediary elites” in Sikka Regency, Indonesia has an influence and plays a significant role as far as the scope of their authority is concerned. This has also been proven by other previous studies on the role of religious leaders in handling the Covid-19 Pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With the above conclusions, an effort is needed to develop the concept of “intermediary elite” in studies of elites in society, especially religious figures/leaders who have privileges and authority within certain limits but can have a significant impact on society. Since they have their own class and position in society, more academic studies could be developed to compare the characteristics of elites this kind in comparison with other kinds or types of elites in society.

In addition, political elites pragmatically need to always take into account the existence and role of the “intermediary elites” and include them in community development efforts or in handling social problems. This has been proven from the handling of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Indonesia which has shown to be effective thanks to collaboration with multi-stakeholders, including religious leaders/figures as shown in this study. In Indonesian context in particular, it should be mentioned that the Indonesian government at all level must consider the position and role of religious leaders and include them in government’s development planning to strengthen their implementation in the field in the future.

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