



Snatchings of COVID-19 Corpses in Indonesia: More than Meets the Eye?

By

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Introduction

Since 2020, incidents involving the snatchings of deceased COVID-19 patients have dismayed the Indonesians and invoked a narrative of bizarreness in the country's struggle against the pandemic. In these incidents, deaths of COVID-19 positive patients have instigated the "snatching" of their corpses from health facilities by relatives or acquaintances of the deceased, landing perpetrators in hot water with law enforcement.

They typically storm hospitals, ambulances, or even disturb the deceased's graves hoping to perform a burial ritual that is acceptable to them, albeit ignoring the established health protocol for the pandemic. The media have sometimes labeled these incidents as cases of "body-snatching", but perpetrators are unlikely to consider the deed as an act of "stealing" in the first place.

Of course, not all these incidents were successful, but the fact that some individuals even made the attempts indicates the extreme lengths of what they were willing to act on their beliefs. They could have been motivated by their grief or resolve to give the deceased a burial in line with traditional practice, but denial of COVID-19 and mistrust in the authorities might also be at play.

These incidents have shocked the people and political elites alike that the current Speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly had to mention it in his August 16 speech,² thus validating the significance of the phenomenon in the country's COVID-19 dynamic. There are some reasons for this.



One is the frequency of the incidents. These are not isolated incidents that only took place while people were still wrapping up their minds around this pandemic. In my research alone, there have been at least 13 reported incidents since June 2020, with the latest one occurring in the same month as at the time of writing.³ There are probably more unreported or low-profile cases out there. Two, the peculiar nature of these incidents. These were highly unusual acts that the public may deem repulsive, often associated with abject criminal cases in the nation's past which fit the term "body-snatching" better. The legal and medical consequences of such activities during the pandemic further stress the aversion against them. Three, the widespread cases across the country. Several cases took place in South Sulawesi, but there were other occurrences in Sumatra, Nusa Tenggara, and Java as well.

Perhaps these reasons also lend greater significance to the incidents in Indonesia than in other countries, such as Malaysia⁴ or Cameroon.⁵ These cases' frequency and widespread features suggest an ongoing situation in Indonesia's society that is worth further investigation. However, the acts themselves are being considered repulsive by the general community.

Interestingly, the reported cases share some similarities with each other, but almost all carry unique characteristics on their own. Several trends are presented here to showcase the differences.

These incidents could arise from communication failure between medical officers and the deceased's relatives. A crowd in Bekasi⁶ forcefully collected the body of a person under investigation (PUI) in June 2020 out of concern that COVID-19-protocol burial is inconsistent with religious tenets. They apologized afterward when the deceased's test came out negative, but only after they performed the burial.

Communication in such a distressful setting could be further hampered by the incitement of irresponsible actors. A large family in Makassar⁷ was provoked to retrieve the body of their deceased relative despite initially accepting the officers' handling of the matter. Linked to that is the involvement of mobs and violence. In Lombok,⁸ Makassar,⁹ and Pamekasan¹⁰, the cases depicted violent altercation between – sometimes – armed mobs and *Satuan Petugas COVID-19* (Satgas – officer unit), the police as well as the military, demonstrating an intense anti-authority sentiment in these cases. Not only was the health protocol ignored, but these clashes also added further stress to the already thin frontline forces. Political power can play a role too. A legislator in Makassar's Regional Peoples' Representative Council was declared a suspect in an incident in which he strong-armed a hospital's management to bring back a dead patient.¹¹ This phenomenon is thus not exclusive to the grassroots – the politician's move could have validated the act in the minds of the people and motivated further incidents.





These incidents can also be associated to the metaphysical spectrum. 6 People were arrested in Parepare for disturbing seven graves and snatching away the bodies beneath.¹² When questioned by the police, the suspects claimed the deceased spoke to them through dreams, demanding that their bodies be transferred elsewhere.

Analysis

Perpetrators seem undeterred by a host of laws encoded in the country's penal code and the 2018 Law on Health Quarantine that could see them imprisoned for five years or more. They also openly defied the health protocol, which has been reinforced by the ruling of *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI – Indonesian Ulema Council).¹³ What could possibly account for their dismissal of the legal and religious authorities in the country?

Psychological and cultural perspectives could offer some explanations for this phenomenon.

Satgas COVID-19's handling of COVID-19-positive bodies requires strict isolation to prevent the disease from spreading. This means the whole procession of bathing, shrouding, and praying (for Muslims) of the bodies is conducted without the presence of family members. These relatives may only see the deceased during the burial, where they still have to maintain social distancing.

Despite its necessities, the protocol essentially robs the family's opportunities to spend their last time closely with the deceased and to pay their final respect in the form of a traditional or religious burial ritual. In pragmatic terms, grieving in this period is important for the survivors, as they need to process the loss, express sorrow, and make sense of the volatile emotion they are experiencing. They also need to properly attribute the cause of death to certain subjects which is an important process to move on with their lives.

Perhaps a sense of guilt and the need to honor the deceased is also relevant here. Many relatives could only see the deceased during the burial, having missed their final hours due to the imposed social distancing. Performing traditional or religious burial could function as a means for the survivors to atone for their absence from the deceased's deathbed as well as to pay their final respect. These intense humane incentives could easily instigate any bereaved families from doing the unthinkable.





Traditional or religious burial procession is also an important aspect of preserving cultural heritage.¹⁴ Activities during this occasion, such as bathing the deceased, sermons by religious leaders, sending food, and donating money to bereaved families, actually enforce the community's sense of unity. A wake is also an important space to formally declare someone's death and reaffirm the deceased's linkages with mourners, thereby preserving the deceased's social identity even in death.¹⁵

Additionally, protocol burial denies the private space for the mourners to undertake all of these activities and to process the psychological impacts of the deaths caused by the dreaded virus. It also precludes the deceased from receiving treatments that carry social functions and memorialize their place among the community. Some may argue that these could trigger anxiety that the deceased is not processed in the proper and humane ways that our social norms dictate.

Despite the apparent socio-cultural character of this snatching phenomenon, there are some potent socio-political undertones that need to be considered as well. These incidents highlight the difficulty in the ongoing process to reconcile science and tradition among the population. Many Indonesians remain deeply spiritual and believe in metaphysical phenomenon despite their fascination for development and modernity. Their beliefs in some tradition and metaphysics often trump science-based imperatives that are meant to preserve their lives in the first place.

The snatching incidents are just one example; others include praying at houses of worship or conducting religious gatherings while ignoring the health protocol. These things lead us to question whether parts of the society continue to approach religion from a one-dimensional approach and are still struggling to apply the ideals of religious teachings in the complex maze of life.

Linked to that is the mistrust in the authorities. Protocol-breaking phenomena are essentially a denunciation of the scientific regime of Satgas COVID-19 in particular and the authority of the government in general. This rejection could have been seeded by years of perception of the government's inefficiency and ineffectiveness, especially in delivering goods and services. Rampant cases of corruption and a distaste in Indonesia's muddled bureaucracy could have compounded this mistrust as well, which manifested in a number of anti-government activities. Snatching of the bodies are emblematic of this, though it is the perpetrators who would ultimately pay the price – be it the legal or medical consequences.





This anti-government sentiment, in turn, highlights the growing chasm between the government and the population, which may also partly explain the lack of compliance to the health protocol throughout this pandemic. It is difficult to manage any nationwide crisis without high participation from the people in resolving the problem. With four million cases and over 140,000 deaths (at the time of writing-September 2021), Indonesia's pandemic struggle cannot be overstated. This gap is, therefore, a great stumbling block that has not only inflicted losses to the country in this pandemic but also impeded Indonesia's potential to develop further.

Ultimately, snatching incidents are an immediate response to the tragedies of this pandemic that carries the images of grassroots empowerment and anti-authority sentiment. But with a death count that is so high, only time could tell if the people's grief would emerge as a political currency in the country's future contests.

This is a highly emotive substance, as the people might need a sense of closure to the deaths in their circles. However, it could have been preventable if only the society could observe the protocol better or the country's medical service and infrastructure is more advanced. Without it, any opportunist could easily exploit the situation and engage in a blame game or other tactics to rally people to their side.

While these are potential research questions down the lane, one question is worth asking more than the rest: do we have a good picture of how people process the COVID-19-related deaths of their relatives and friends?

Conclusion

To conclude, three recommendations need to be considered. First, President Joko Widodo was right to propose the involvement of sociologists and anthropologists to deep dive into the various implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁶ Second, there needs to be a shift in paradigm in perceiving the impacts of the pandemic, which at the moment leans too heavily towards medical and economic dimensions only. Third, there is a necessity to reconcile between the people's tradition and science-based imperatives, so that any national-scale crisis management strategy can be implemented comprehensively.





Endnotes

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