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## **Shifting Strategy and Actor on Indonesia's Hajj Diplomacy in the era of Pandemic Covid-19**

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**Abstract.** Indonesia as a Muslim-majority country, the implementation of the Hajj pilgrimage is one of the policy priorities and state obligations that must be fulfilled. The limited quota of pilgrims provided by the Government of Saudi Arabia to be able to perform the Hajj pilgrimage each year causes the Indonesian government to carry out intense Hajj diplomacy. Indonesia's Hajj Diplomacy has been carried out toward the Government of Saudi Arabia, especially to obtain additional quotas and adequate Hajj services. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused the Government of Saudi Arabia to establish additional vaccine regulations, reduce the quota of pilgrims and even close its territory for the implementation of hajj for foreign citizens from abroad in 2020 and 2021. This has led to an increasingly long waiting period for Indonesian Muslims to be able to conduct the hajj pilgrimage. Using the concept of diplomacy, this paper finds that the Indonesian government has changed strategies and actors in the implementation of its hajj diplomacy during the pandemic. Indonesia's Hajj diplomacy during the pandemic is focused on negotiating vaccine requirements and involving non state actor.

**Keywords.** Hajj Diplomacy, Indonesia, Pandemic Covid-19, Quota, Saudi Arabia

### **1. Introduction**

Indonesia is one of the largest Muslim-majority countries in the world. Indonesia currently has a population of more than 270 million people, 87% of whom follow Islam. As adherents of Islam, all Muslims in Indonesia have the obligation to conduct the Hajj pilgrimage in accordance with the fifth pillar of Islam. This causes the Government of Indonesia, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, to have obligations and responsibilities, to ensure that the pilgrimage activities of Indonesian citizens can be organised regularly and smoothly [1]. The implementation of the Hajj has become a strategic national interest for the state to fight for its fulfilment. The government uses diplomatic instruments to ensure the fulfilment of its strategic interests in the issue of organising the Hajj.

The Indonesian government's Hajj diplomacy is carried out by establishing intensive cooperation with the Government of Saudi Arabia as the host in organising the Hajj. In addition, the Indonesian government also cooperates with other parties both domestically and abroad related to the provision of facilities and arrangements in the implementation of the Hajj. Hajj

diplomacy conducted by the government so far has focused on securing the number of annual Hajj quotas allocated to Indonesian pilgrims and fulfilling the standards of Hajj implementation [1]. Based on data from the General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT) in 2023, reported that the total number of pilgrims in 1444H/ 2023 was 1,845,045. The number of pilgrims from Asian countries reached 1,056,317, which is 63.5% of the total number of pilgrims. While the number of pilgrims from Arab countries reached 346,214, which is 21% of the total. Hajj pilgrims from African countries, excluding Arab countries, reached 221,863 people, which constituted 13.4% of the total. The number of pilgrims from Europe, America, Australia, and other unclassified countries reached 36,521, which is 2.1% of the total [2]. Hajj-related diplomacy between Saudi Arabia and Indonesia is important, and has played a major role in fighting for Indonesia's interests, especially in increasing the hajj quota [3]-[5]. The quota provided by the Government of Saudi Arabia is very important considering the number of queues of Indonesian Muslims who have registered in various regions has reached an average of more than 30 years. The reduction in the number of quotas causes a longer waiting time for prospective pilgrims. In fact, the policy of implementing the Hajj, including the determination of quotas and Hajj facilities, is a political policy that is the authority of the Saudi Arabian government. In the history of the implementation of the Hajj pilgrimage, the Government of Saudi Arabia has reduced the number of Hajj quotas for various reasons such as security factors and the comfort of pilgrims. For example, in 2013 the Saudi Arabian government reduced the quota of pilgrims by 20% due to the unfinished renovation of the Grand Mosque.

In 2019 the Covid-19 virus outbreak broke out all over the world. The spread of the virus that originally occurred in Wuhan China in a very fast time has spread throughout the world. Based on official data from the World Health Organization (WHO) as of January 30, 2020, 7,736 positive cases occurred in China. The Covid-19 virus even spread outside China from 68 cases in 15 countries to 82 cases in 18 countries in less than one month. Based on data from Worldometers, global Covid-19 virus cases as of October 2020 have reached 39 million cases in 189 countries worldwide. [6], [7] The WHO subsequently labelled Covid-19 a global epidemic[8]. A disease outbreak is classified as a pandemic when it concurrently impacts numerous individuals throughout a vast geographic region encompassing nearly all nations globally. In light of the pandemic status, the WHO, as a global authority in the health sector, urges all nations to enhance their emergency response to the Covid-19 epidemic. Furthermore, as a preventive measure, the WHO advocates for the implementation of social distance by restricting activities and interactions among individuals [9]. Nevertheless, the implementation of social distance adversely affects the economy, social interactions, education, and other sectors. WHO's instruction to implement social distancing is responded by world countries through different policies. Some countries implement strict social distancing through lockdown policies such as China, the United States, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Italy[10]

The government of Saudi Arabia also implements social distancing policies, especially in the Umrah and Hajj pilgrimages by strictly limiting the arrival of foreigners, prohibiting mass gatherings and providing interaction distance between worshipers when worshipping. This led to the implementation of umrah and hajj quota restrictions during the pandemic. In addition, the Government of Saudi Arabia requires all pilgrims to have the Covid 19 vaccine, in addition to the meningitis, influenza, or yellow fever vaccine that has long been applied as a prerequisite for worship in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Covid-19 vaccines that can be accepted by Saudi Arabia as a requirement for the Hajj pilgrimage only come from certain brands from Europe

and United States, among these vaccine brands are; Pfizer, Moderna, and Astrazeneca, some of these vaccine brands are not yet available in Indonesia [11].

This policy certainly has an impact on Hajj departures from Indonesia. The Indonesian government must prepare a special strategy to overcome the Saudi Arabian government's policy changes. Hajj diplomacy is of course the main strategy that is expected to unravel the issue of limited quota and vaccine requirements. If the government fails, it will have an impact on Indonesia's hajj departure queue which will increase in length, potentially leading to public anger in Indonesia. This paper will analyse what policy strategies the Indonesian government has implemented in dealing with the Saudi Arabian government's policies during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **2. Literature Review**

Indonesia's Hajj diplomacy is an important aspect in the implementation of Indonesia's foreign policy, as Indonesia has the largest Muslim population and is the largest Hajj sending country in the world [4]. In securing Indonesia's interests in the issue of organising the Hajj, the government carries out diplomacy by managing cooperation and good relations with the government of Saudi Arabia, especially since relations between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia have been established since colonial times [12]. The government seeks various mechanisms of co-operation and negotiation with the Saudi Arabian government. The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs actively conducts diplomacy to obtain additional Hajj quotas from both the Saudi Arabian government and seeks to utilise quotas from other countries. In addition, the Government must also ensure the quality of services for pilgrims in Saudi Arabia as mandated in Law No. 8 of 2019 concerning the Implementation of Hajj and Umrah.[1] Optimising the preparation of Hajj services such as the development of a digital technology-based reporting system and the formation of a team of Hajj consultants to improve supervision and services in the field are also the focus of Indonesia's Hajj diplomacy.[1]

Indonesian Hajj diplomacy also contributes to strengthening Indonesia's religious moderation in the international arena, strengthening Indonesia's image as a country that promotes moderate and inclusive Islam which in turn supports the smooth implementation of Hajj and Umrah [13]. The diplomatic process involving collaboration between the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also opens space for Hajj economic diplomacy, where business opportunities and long-term partnerships with companies in Saudi Arabia can be utilised to support the logistical and service needs of pilgrims while optimising the economic flow of pilgrims' expenditure into the country [13].

Hajj diplomacy can also strengthen Indonesia's bargaining power in multilateral forums such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). In this organisation, Indonesia plays an active role in seeking the redistribution of Hajj quotas from countries that do not use their quotas so as to reduce the very long waiting period for Indonesian pilgrims. This diplomatic approach also involves non-state actors such as ulama, Indonesian diaspora and community leaders who can strengthen public diplomacy, expand support and legitimacy of Indonesia's Hajj and Umrah policies.

On the issue of hajj management [14], [15] many studies highlight the weaknesses of the government in carrying out the mandate of the law to establish professional hajj management. Issues related to the management of Hajj funds, the bailout policy and various issues of Hajj fund management that arise have the potential to become a means of corruption [15]. In addition, almost all activities in the organisation of Hajj face various problems.

Problems are found from registration, BPIH determination, guidance, transportation services, accommodation, health, catering, protection of pilgrims, Hajj organising agencies, organising committees, and Hajj officers [14]. Meanwhile, the organisation of the Hajj in Indonesia is strongly influenced by bilateral relations between the two countries [16]. Moreover, the decision on the number of quotas set by the government of Saudi Arabia often changes by considering Saudi Arabia's domestic readiness and is influenced by international issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic which makes the government limit the number of hajj quotas.

### 3. Result and Discussion

To answer the question of what changes in Hajj diplomacy strategies were implemented by the Indonesian government during the pandemic, this section will review in two parts. First, it explains the changes in the Saudi Arabian government's policies in the implementation of the Hajj pilgrimage. Second, the changes in the Indonesian government's strategy in implementing its hajj diplomacy.

#### 3.1 Changes in Saudi Arabian Government Policy in the Implementation of the Hajj Pilgrimage during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Government of Saudi Arabia as the host of the Hajj pilgrimage has the authority to determine the implementation of the Hajj pilgrimage, such as determining the number of annual pilgrimage quotas for countries around the world, preparing supporting facilities and infrastructure for the implementation of the Hajj pilgrimage (such as lodging, transportation, health facilities, etc.) and preparing security for the arrival of guests from all over the world and the series of Hajj activities it will carry out. The readiness factor of Saudi Arabia as the host of the Hajj pilgrimage determines the number of Hajj quotas provided for Muslims around the world.

Through various considerations, the Government of Saudi Arabia provides a different quota each year. The following is presented in table 1 the number of Hajj quotas provided by the government of Saudi Arabia from 2017-2023:

**Table 1**  
**Number of Hajj Pilgrims by Year**

Year	Number of Hajj Pilgrims
2017	2,352,122
2018	2,371,675
2019	2,489,406
2020	10,000
2021	59,000
2022	926,000

2023	1,845,045
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Source: processed from various sources

As shown in the data on the number of pilgrims in Table 1 above, which shows a very small number of pilgrims in 2020 and 2021 because the government of Saudi Arabia decided to severely limit pilgrims from abroad when the Covid-19 Pandemic occurred. [17]

This quota reduction policy was initiated when Saudi Arabia detected the first case of Covid-19 on 2 March 2020. As a result, a series of strict health protocols were implemented, including for the Umrah pilgrimage. The Ministry of Hajj in coordination with the Saudi Ministry of Health then compiled a new guidebook containing health requirements and protocols that must be met by every pilgrim. This new guideline led to a limitation on the number of pilgrims for the hajj pilgrimage that was held in July 2020, which was only 10,000 pilgrims. The implementation of the hajj pilgrimage is also prioritized for local and foreign citizens who have settled in Saudi Arabia, with a maximum age limit of 65 years, and pilgrims do not have a history of chronic diseases.

Meanwhile, for the implementation of the hajj pilgrimage in 2021, the Government of Saudi Arabia has increased the quota of hajj pilgrims in 2021 to 59,000 pilgrims. In this year's implementation, there is an additional requirement that each prospective pilgrim must have received two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine with proof of a vaccination card provided by the authority, hospital, or ministry. The vaccines received by the pilgrims must also be included in the list of vaccines approved by the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Health. The vaccine brands approved by the Government of Saudi Arabia are vaccines produced by the United States and Europe such as Pfizer, Moderna, and Astrazeneca [11].

The policy of reducing quotas and setting additional vaccine requirements issued by the Government of Saudi Arabia has caused great losses for foreign governments that have long queues of pilgrims, such as in Indonesia or Malaysia. Moreover, the addition of the Covid-19 vaccine requirement also increases the burden on prospective pilgrims because it only recommends certain brands. The Indonesian government is one of the countries hit by this provision. This is because the majority of its citizens get Covid-19 vaccine injections from the Sinovac brand, which is not included in the Saudi Arabian Government's vaccine list.

### **3.2 Changes in Indonesia's Hajj Diplomacy Strategy During the Covid-19 Pandemic**

As a result of the Saudi Arabian government's policy of closing the Hajj pilgrimage to foreigners in 2020 and 2021, the Indonesian government issued Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia Number 494 of 2020 and Number 660 of 2021 concerning the cancellation of the Hajj pilgrimage for Indonesian citizens. This decree stipulates that in the period of 2020 and 2021 there will be no departure of Indonesian pilgrims. This caused disappointment to pilgrims who were scheduled to depart in that year and had an impact on the waiting period for Indonesian pilgrims which was getting longer.

However, the Government of Indonesia did not stop making diplomatic efforts through lobbying and negotiations with the Government of Saudi Arabia. Diplomacy for the addition of the hajj quota and improvement of hajj services is still carried out to maintain the determination of quota distribution and services in accordance with government expectations if the Covid-19

emergency condition has been lifted. In addition, the Government of Indonesia is also intensely seeking changes to the vaccine requirement policy for prospective pilgrims for Hajj and Umrah.

### **3.2.1 Vaccine Requirements Diplomacy**

The vaccine requirements that must be used by prospective pilgrims stated by the Saudi Arabia Food and Drug Administration (SFDA) are Pfizer, Moderna, and Astrazeneca. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were developed with the same technology, namely mRNA technology, while the Astrazeneca vaccine, was developed with Simian Adenovirus vector replication technology. The three types of brands in early 2021 have fulfilled the EUL (Emergency Use Listing) certification issued by WHO and are considered to meet the effectiveness standards in providing immunity and protection for individuals from the spread of the Covid-19 virus [18]. EUL is the authority of WHO as a global health policy maker, by considering the use of the Corona virus vaccine based on the percentage of safety and efficacy, or the level of vaccine efficacy during clinical trials before it can be distributed to recipient countries. In addition, WHO also collects data from countries with low and middle income levels to be able to consider whether the Coronavirus vaccine can be distributed and then used safely by the population of these countries [18].

If the WHO has declared a particular brand of vaccine in accordance with its eligibility standards, then the determination of what brand of vaccine will be used in a country's territory is the authority of the country's government itself. The government has the authority to authorize what health products can be used, so any health issue under the authority of the government of a country is a domestic issue and does not need to involve interference and approval from WHO [10]. So that in the case of the Government of Saudi Arabia setting the Pfizer, Moderna, and Astrazeneca brands as a prerequisite for being able to conduct the Hajj pilgrimage is the authority and authority of the Government of Saudi Arabia itself.

For the Government of Indonesia, the decision of the Government of Saudi Arabia can be an obstacle for the Indonesian Muslim community to be able to conduct the Hajj pilgrimage if the ban on the Hajj pilgrimage for foreigners has been lifted. This is because the majority of Indonesians get vaccines from Sinovac, which is still in the process of applying for an EUL at WHO in 2021. Sinovac vaccine is one of the first vaccines obtained by the Government of Indonesia since December 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out and the most widely used vaccine brand by the Indonesian people. Therefore, an intense diplomacy strategy is needed to negotiate and lobby the Saudi Arabian government to include the Sinovac vaccine as a requirement for pilgrims.

Diplomacy efforts made by the Indonesian government include ensuring that the EUL process for the Sinovac Vaccine at WHO can be completed immediately, so that the government can negotiate directly with the Government of Saudi Arabia to accept Indonesian pilgrims who have been vaccinated against Sinovac. The second alternative step is that while waiting for the EUL process at WHO, the Indonesian government can negotiate with the Government of Saudi Arabia to continue to accept Indonesian pilgrims who have been vaccinated with Sinovac, with the addition of the Government's commitment to require pilgrims to add one dose of vaccine from brands that have been recommended by the Government of Saudi Arabia, namely Pfizer, Moderna, Astrazeneca. The results of the negotiation process between the Indonesian and Saudi Arabian governments finally reached an agreement that the Sinovac Vaccine can be used by Indonesian pilgrims provided that two doses have been injected and one dose of vaccine booster from one of the brands required by the Government of Saudi Arabia.

### **3.2.2 Vaccine Requirements Diplomacy's Actor**

Indonesia's Hajj diplomacy, which originally focused on increasing quotas and improving Hajj services, has shifted to diplomatic efforts to relax vaccine requirements for Indonesian pilgrims who have been vaccinated with two doses of Sinovac to add one dose of vaccine recommended by the Government of Saudi Arabia to be able to perform the Hajj. This diplomacy effort did not only involve state actors, but also non-state actors. In the diplomacy of quotas and Hajj services, the main actors are the Government of Indonesia through the Ministry of Religious Affairs and its various staff as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Indonesian Consulate General in Jeddah. These two ministries spearhead Indonesia's diplomacy to obtain adequate Hajj quotas and services. The diplomacy strategy through the government to government contact mechanism is the main strategy of the Government of Indonesia in building communication and cooperation with the Ministry of Hajj Affairs and the Ministry of Health of Saudi Arabia.

However, during the Covid-19 Pandemic, Indonesia's diplomatic efforts did not stop even though Saudi Arabia was closed and limited the number of pilgrims for the implementation of the hajj pilgrimage from abroad in 2020 and 2021. The Government is maintaining intense communication with the Government of Saudi Arabia to update the Government of Saudi Arabia's policies in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The vaccine and health check requirements added by the Government for pilgrims are an opportunity for other actors to get involved in Indonesia's Hajj diplomacy.

One of the actors involved in government diplomacy is the Bio Farma Company, an Indonesian pharmaceutical company that successfully made an MOU with the Sinovac China Company. This company was able to supply the first vaccine needs in Indonesia in December 2020. Until the end of 2021, Bio Farma has brought in 219.5 million doses of Sinovac vaccine to be distributed throughout Indonesia. When Indonesian hajj pilgrims were constrained to go on hajj because the Saudi Arabian government's vaccine requirements did not include Sinovac in the list of recommended vaccines, Bio Farma was involved in Indonesia's diplomatic efforts to convince the Saudi Arabian government.

Bio Farma together with the Government of Indonesia developed a strategy to negotiate with the Government of Saudi Arabia by preparing various strategic steps. For example, helping the Indonesian government to communicate with authoritative institutions in the health sector such as BPOM, and the National Commission for Post-Immunisation Adverse Events (KIPI) as well as the Indonesian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ITAGI). This communication aims to consider whether the administration of the Astrazeneca vaccine to fulfil the requirements of the Hajj pilgrimage can still be carried out to prospective pilgrims who will go to Saudi Arabia, even though they have initially received the Sinovac vaccine first.[18] In addition, Bio Farma is also involved in efforts to monitor the EUL certification process that is running at WHO. Together with the Sinovac China Company, Bio Farma conducts intense communication and monitoring so that the certification process at WHO can run faster.

Until 1 June 2021, WHO officially issued an EUL certificate for the Sinovac vaccine, which became a license for the Sinovac vaccine to be used by countries in the world including Saudi Arabia. The issuance of the EUL certificate shows that the Sinovac vaccine is in accordance with international standards in its efficacy and production. The EUL certificate is awarded by taking into account the quality, safety, efficacy of the vaccine and also management related to the risk of vaccine use after the vaccine is administered. This calculation is carried

out by a product evaluation group consisting of world health experts, and the Technical Advisory Group (TAG), which is tasked with carrying out risk calculations before recommending vaccines to be used in emergencies [10]. The WHO EUL certification result for Sinovac opens a new way for the government to conduct further negotiations with the Government of Saudi Arabia in determining vaccine requirements for pilgrims, especially those from Indonesia.

#### 4. Conclusion

Indonesia's Hajj diplomacy in the era of the Covid-19 Pandemic shows a significant transformation from emphasising on the aspects of increasing quotas and improving services to being more adaptive by emphasising health aspects and collaboration with other actors. Changes in the policy of the Government of Saudi Arabia that added vaccine requirements to perform the Hajj demanded a quick and flexible response from the Government of Indonesia by strengthening negotiations and cooperation at various levels. Despite facing major challenges such as quota restrictions and strict requirements, Indonesia's Hajj diplomacy was able to implement the right strategy by involving more diverse actors. Overall, Indonesia's Hajj diplomacy during the Covid-19 Pandemic can not only maintain the achievement of the country's strategic interests but also ensure the safety of pilgrims in carrying out the pilgrimage.

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