

PERSPECTIVE

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The Politics of National and Local Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- It took two months for the Indonesian government to settle on a stable management framework for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, and allowing large-scale social restriction.
- The narrow focus on achieving investment targets in government policy thinking has been a cause of the prevarication.
- Tensions emerged between local governments and the national government on the speed at which some kind of “lockdown” was to be implemented.
- Local-national tensions reflect both rivalries among political elite figures as well as a deeper sociological rift between the world of professional politicians and those engaged in the more immediate management of social problems at the local level.
- Local health and government authorities and community responses to the COVID-19 infection have been more impactful than the national level management of the crisis.

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INTRODUCTION

On March 31, President Joko Widodo issued Government Regulation No 21/2020 allowing Large Scale Social Restriction (Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar – PSBB) aimed at limiting the spread of COVID-19.¹ The event marked the beginning of a relatively stable approach to the national government’s management of the pandemic in Indonesia, coming after 3 months of prevarication. During that period, there had been signs of positive local government and community responses.

News reports on the emergence of the virus appeared in the Indonesia media during the last week of January 2020. The Indonesian Ministry of Health declared on February 4 that the virus had the potential to become an epidemic.² On February 28, the Disaster Management Agency issued a Declaration of Special Emergency Situation of COVID-19 Epidemic Disaster in Indonesia. The first official confirmation of a COVID-19 patient was on February 29, in Jakarta, after a misdiagnosis on February 16.³

On March 13, President Widodo established a Task Force for Rapid Response to COVID-19. On March 20, the Ministry of Communication and Information sent a letter to local governments providing information on the nature of the virus’s transmission. On March 24, village administrations were informed that they could use nationally-allocated funds for village development for activities associated with managing the pandemic in their communities instead. With the issuance of the abovementioned regulation on March 31,⁴ provincial governments had to seek permission from the Ministry of Health to implement PSBB. Provinces, however, were not allowed to quarantine their province as a whole, although travellers from one province travelling to another are to remain in voluntary self-isolation for 14 days.⁵

It took a full two months for any strategic national policy decisions regarding how the government and society would manage the epidemic⁶ to occur, and even then, it was left to Provincial Governors to request for permission to implement PSBB. As of April 21, 20 cities and residencies⁷ (kabupaten) had been given approval for PSBB, including Jakarta.^{8 9}

This delay also seems to be reflected in a major time lag in implementing large-scale testing, or purchasing necessary equipment, including personal protective equipment for medical workers.¹⁰ At least 32 doctors and 12 nurses had died of COVID-19 by early April.¹¹

THE ORIGINS OF PREVARICATION

There was an element of denial during the January-March period.¹² Officials either made claims that the virus would not enter Indonesia because of prayer or because of racial immunity or belittled the threat by suggesting that people use traditional dietary or herbal remedies to protect themselves from the virus.¹³ It would be superficial to put down these statements to either the prevalence of traditional superstition or religious conservatism. In fact, most of the major religious organisations, from all faiths, supported an approach based

on medical science.¹⁴ Most religious leaders agreed to the suspension of Friday prayers and other religious gatherings.

The explanation can be better found in the way the project of Indonesian development has been defined, both conceptually and in practice, and in how this pragmatic definition reflects the character and horizons in thinking of the Indonesian political and economic elite. After 2014, and with the essential stabilisation of the new political format, despite its various weaknesses, the narrowest ever definition of a national vision emerged. Rarely if ever using the word “development”, President Widodo repeatedly articulated his goal as the achieving of a high level of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, stated as 7% in 2014, and making Indonesia a “winning country” in a commercially competitive world. In this context, Widodo’s perspective is focussed almost entirely on attracting investments. There have been no other targets set for Indonesia’s progress: any educational vision that was expressed had been totally subordinated to investment and GDP growth targets.¹⁵

The sudden appearance of a major public health crisis would not register on the political radar they so vehemently use. Even as denial became impossible, fear of the economic impact of any policy framework with a “stay-at-home” orientation took hold. All governments are of course concerned about the economic impacts of lockdowns and ‘stay-at-home’ policies, but the fear of such impacts in Indonesia among the political elite is magnified several times over by the reality that they had been putting all their eggs – political and commercial (often personal ones too) – in one basket, namely the GDP growth basket. The early denial by national figures needs to be seen in this light – a panic reaction to something they could not imagine.

NATIONAL-LOCAL DISSYNCHRONIES AND WHAT THEY SHOW

The key dissynchrony within the policy framework was that between local (at district and provincial level) governments and the national government.¹⁶ The tensions have multiple-layered origins, relating to both the political economy of decentralisation as well as issues of political rivalry within the elite. During the first 15 years after the fall of Suharto in 1998, significant decentralisation of financial power and policy implementation to the municipal and district level governments¹⁷ took place.¹⁸ One of the many changes wrought by this decentralisation is that perceived success in managing one of these local governments has become a basis for launching a national political career. This is because it is possible, in some circumstances, for a district or town head to be perceived to have achieved something because of their direct control over local policy implementation and of them having been close to their inhabitants. Any of their achievements have therefore been more visible. Being Mayor of Solo was the basis for Joko Widodo’s own launch into national politics. Several other political figures are also clearly seeing their current positions as Governors, District Heads (Bupati) or Mayors as a basis for projecting themselves nationally, including Anies Baswedan as Governor of Jakarta and Ridwan Kamil as Governor of West Java.

The most obvious dissynchronicity during the first phase of managing COVID-19 was that between the Jakarta government and the national government. President Widodo was

nominated by the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) and leads a governing coalition of five parties. Anies Baswedan was nominated by the Justice and Welfare Party (PKS) which is outside the governing coalition and stands as a rival to it. As an ambitious and prominent political figure seen to have presidential ambitions for 2024, Baswedan is perceived to be differentiating himself from the Widodo government. This often means, explicitly or implicitly, challenging Widodo's decisions and, as a result, also having his decisions challenged by the national government.¹⁹ On occasion, Baswedan was direct in his criticism of national policies, such as over the slowness in approving the request for PSBB.²⁰

This tension cannot be explained simply by reference to the issue of Presidential ambitions within the political elite. The differences that have occurred between Jakarta and the national government were mainly over the speed and severity of imposing restrictions on mobility within Jakarta, and between Jakarta and other parts of the country. Governor Baswedan tried to implement severe restrictions and to quarantine Jakarta itself. These decisions were overridden by the national government. That these differences were not simply a manifestation of Baswedan-Widodo rivalry is shown in the fact that similar tensions, or variations of them, also developed between the national government and other provincial and district governments²¹. The first controversy centred on a decision by the Mayor of Tegal, in Central Java to shield the city from outside visitors.²² This was followed by more clashes between Jakarta and Maluku, and then Papua.²³ Even the Sultan of Jogjakarta, usually accommodating to the government, complained publicly that the government was not supplying the information about the infection spread which the Province required to protect itself.²⁴

As these tensions continued, the national government insisted that provincial governments abide by the policy set by the national government. This was motivated by fears regarding the economy. On March 31, when the PSBB Regulation was issued, President Widodo made it very clear that the national government was in control and that regions must not make big decisions "because the economy could stop."²⁵ Provinces must not go beyond the limits, he emphasised. It also took some time, confusion and debate for the government to finally issue a ban on people returning to their villages for Ramadan activities.²⁶

There is no doubt that some of the communications from the national government flowing from this emphasis have appeared callous. The Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment, Luhut Panjaitan, made a remark that "sorry, there weren't even 500 out of 270 million Indonesians who were dying", which received widespread criticism.²⁷ The fact that the parliament insisted that its members be tested for COVID-19 first, at a time when testing kits were still few, while they were focussing on discussing the unpopular Omnibus Law but ignoring the COVID-19 crisis reinforced the image that the country was being run by a callous, economy-oriented political elite.²⁸

IMPRESSIVE LOCAL INITIATIVES

The local levels, both district and provincial, have sometimes wanted to move more quickly than the national government. There are indications that the national political elite based in Jakarta is somewhat divorced from the life of society, unlike local leaderships, especially those with direct social management responsibilities (as distinct from the pure professional party politicians.) These indications are not limited only to the attempts by mayors and bupati to initiate various forms of ‘lockdowns’ but the apparent speed and effectiveness of other local infection control and management responses.

There are as yet no detailed reports on how local responses unfolded all across Indonesia. However, it is clear that despite very late and very minimal availability of the facilities to test for COVID-19, health management authorities have been able to identify large numbers of people suspected of having the disease or of having been in close contact to infected people. This has been on the basis of people reporting themselves as having symptoms. Many areas were able to relatively quickly establish and circulate COVID-19 hotline phone numbers. This seems to have been possible through the utilisation of pre-existing mechanisms that had been used to monitor other prevalent diseases, such as tuberculosis and malaria.²⁹ According to the prevailing provisions/regulations, the institutions that are required to conduct the surveillance are Community Health Centers, Public Hospitals, District/City Health Offices, Provincial Health Offices, and the Ministry of Health.³⁰ As Meckelberg explains for her location in Central Java:

There are daily updates from the city government regarding people who have positive diagnoses of COVID-19 (positive); people who are in hospital with medium to severe symptoms and suspected of being positive but test results have not yet been confirmed (PDP); people being monitored in self-isolation with mild to medium suspected COVID-19 symptoms and with a record of travel from a region with infections (overseas or anywhere in Indonesia) and waiting on test results (ODP); and people without symptoms (OTG) who are in self-isolation who have had close contact with someone testing positive for the virus and waiting on test results.³¹

This appears to be the case for most provinces.³²

In many areas, there have also been reports on social media that many villages have initiated their own lockdowns, barricading the entrances to their villages to ensure that only residents can enter and that they are aware of the social distancing and hygiene regulations. In some instances, they have been reported to be providing hand washing facilities at the point of entry. There have also been social media reports of such villages organising for food and other necessities for those staying at home.³³

All these local measures seemed to have occurred more rapidly than the decision-making process at the national level.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

To what extent these impressive local initiatives will help limit the spread of the disease despite the prevarication that occurred at the national level for almost two months, through February until the end of March, and the confusion during April will only be revealed over time and after detailed analysis by epidemiologists. The crisis, however, has started to reveal a socio-political cleavage that clearly is real but that has not yet made itself felt in mainstream or electoral politics. This is the cleavage between the world of the professional politicians, as represented in the ruling coalition and also across the parliament, and that of an extensive social layer of what might be called “society managers”, those in the lower levels of government and in community life who have to deal with the real-life problems of society. The absence of any kind of real political opposition in Indonesia, or even the image of it after the Widodo-Prabowo rapprochement, is a tension waiting to surface.

¹ <https://www.jogloabang.com/kesehatan/pp-21-2020-pembatasan-sosial-berskala-besar-rangka-percepatan-penanganan-covid-19>

² In a later press report, government officials stated that an emergency situation had been declared on January 28. See <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/03/17/16510921/bnpb-status-darurat-bencana-akibat-virus-corona-sudah-ditetapkan-sejak>

³ See <https://tirto.id/teledor-penanganan-wabah-covid-19-di-indonesia-eDPG> and <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/teknologi/20200420160222-199-495344/ui-ungkap-kronologi-negara-abai-virus-corona-masuk-ri-januari>

⁴ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/03/indonesias-strategy-to-combat-covid-19-what-we-know-so-far.html>

⁵ For a chronology of Indonesian Government policy decisions, see Riyanti Djalante and others, “Review and analysis of current responses to COVID-19 in Indonesia: Period of January to March 2020”, in *Progress in Disaster Science* 6, (2020) 100091 at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pdisas.2020.100091>

⁶ Some technical decisions were made earlier, such as the designation of testing laboratories. However, there have been many criticisms also of the government moving slowly on these issues. See <https://majalah.tempo.co/read/laporan-utama/160241/begini-kelangkaan-obat-dan-ancamannya-di-tengah-wabah-corona>

⁷ <https://tirto.id/update-corona-indonesia-daftar-20-wilayah-yang-terapkan-psbb-ePVK>

⁸ See https://jdih.jakarta.go.id/uploads/default/produkhukum/PERGUB_NO._33_TAHUN_20204.pdf for the full text of the implementing regulation for Jakarta, including the list of what is forbidden and allowed.

⁹ Tasking of hospitals to be COVID-19 testing laboratories or to specifically handle COVID-19 has been a national decision, although local governments often appear to make additional decisions.

¹⁰ For some examples regarding delays in technical decisions, see Dyna Rochmyaningsih, ‘Open the doors for us.’ Indonesian scientists say government snubs offers to help fight coronavirus”, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/04/open-doors-us-indonesian-scientists-say-government-snubs-offers-help-fight-coronavirus>, Apr. 18, 2020

¹¹ <https://katadata.co.id/berita/2020/04/12/44-dokter-dan-perawat-ri-meninggal-dunia-akibat-virus-corona>; <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/06/13425551/19-dokter-meninggal-selama>

[pandemi-covid-19-idi-rekomendasikan-platform](#); <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1332726/1-lagi-perawat-meninggal-karena-covid-19-total-13-orang>

¹² See <https://theconversation.com/indonesia-was-in-denial-over-coronavirus-now-it-may-be-facing-a-looming-disaster-135436> gives a sampling of such statements.

¹³ Symbolic of this attitude was the key official, the Minister of Health, Terawan Agus Putranto, making a call for the people to rely on prayer. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/02/17/its-our-nations-right-to-rely-on-the-almighty-minister-justifies-calling-for-prayers-in-coronavirus-battle.html>

¹⁴ See Syafiq Hasyim, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/fighting-covid-19-in-indonesia-the-nexus-of-religion-and-the-state/>

¹⁵ The Widodo government formally explains its policies in broader terms than only “investment”. However, it reduces the achievement of all stated goals to the achievement of maximum investments; this orientation has in effect overdetermined all else. For one early elaboration of this narrow agenda, see Eve Warburton, “Jokowi and the New Developmentalism”, in *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, Pages 297-320 | Published online: 15 Feb 2017.

¹⁶ The references in the following sections refer to Jakarta and other areas on Java. It may be some time before a clear picture can be gleaned for throughout Indonesians.

¹⁷ There are 514 district or town governmental units in Indonesia, all with their own parliaments and directly-elected heads. They have responsibility for many areas of policy implementation, including health.

¹⁸ Max Lane, *Decentralization and Its Discontents: An Essay on Class, Political Agency and National Perspective in Indonesian Politics*, ISEAS, 2014.

¹⁹ The manoeuvring already underway as regards the 2024 Presidential elections takes place in a very unclear and complicated context as Widodo cannot stand again as President while at the same time no absolutely clear candidate is yet visible from within the PDIP or any party that is a member of the governing coalition. The leader of one coalition party, Surya Paloh of the National Democrats, has made public statements that Anies Baswedan would make a good President. Baswedan or any non-PDIP figure wishing to be nominated will need to be supported by a coalition that would include parties from the current ruling coalition. See too, <https://www.tagar.id/jokowi-dan-anies-baswedan-mesti-padu-hadapi-covid19>

²⁰ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/05/covid-19-anies-slams-health-ministrys-requirements-for-large-scale-social-restrictions.html>

²¹ <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/03/16/19154241/tangani-covid-19-pemerintah-diminta-kuatkan-koordinasi-pusat-daerah>;

²² <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20200327104040-4-147878/terapkan-lockdown-pemkot-tegal-bantah-melawan-jokowi>

²³ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200327161721-20-487625/lockdown-daerah-simbol-karut-marut-penanganan-corona>; <https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/pemerintah-pusat-dan-daerah-harus-sejalan-melawan-virus-corona.html>

²⁴ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200330204136-20-488455/sultan-hb-x-minta-jokowi-berikan-data-zona-merah-corona>

²⁵ <https://tirto.id/jokowi-lockdown-bisa-hentikan-ekonomi-pemda-jangan-berlebihan-eKcD>

²⁶ <https://tirto.id/larangan-mudik-berlaku-mulai-24-april-2020-tapi-penerapan-bertahap-ePZX>

²⁷ <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4228122/dpr-ucapan-luhut-soal-jumlah-korban-corona-bertentangan-dengan-kewajiban-negara>;
<https://www.wartaekonomi.co.id/read281157/bandingkan-dengan-as-luhut-maaf-yang-meninggal-karena-corona-nggak-sampai-500>

²⁸ On 29 April, the President and the DPR decided to postpone debate on the labour elements of the Omnibus Law. This happened after sustained pressure from trade unions in the midst of the COVID-19 Crisis. Critics are still demanding the dropping of these clauses, and not just a

postponement of debate. See <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200429094903-20-498326/yibhi-batalkan-ruu-ciptaker-jangan-hanya-tunda-pembahasan>

²⁹ See Rebecca Meckelberg, “From the field: COVID-19 responses in Central Java” in *New Mandala*, 17 April 2020.

³⁰ Kementerian PPN/ Bappenas, *The Consolidated Report on Indonesia Health Sector Review 2018*, <https://www.unicef.org/indonesia/media/621/file/Health%20Sector%20Review%202019-ENG.pdf%20.pdf>

³¹ See Rebecca Meckelberg, “From the field: COVID-19 responses in Central Java” in *New Mandala*, 17 April 2020.

³² To follow data for Yogyakarta. See <https://corona.jogjaprov.go.id/>

³³ For a look at community responses in the Jakarta urban kampung sector, see <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/covid-19-inequality-and-jakartas-urban-poor-resilient-but-at-great-risk/>

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