

PERSPECTIVE

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How have Two Years of Pandemic Affected Indonesian Political Life?

Max Lane*



Indonesia's President Joko Widodo, dressed in a traditional costume of the Baduy tribe from Banten province, gestures during his state-of-the-nation address at a general assembly of parliament in Jakarta on August 16, 2021. Photo: Bagus INDAHONO/POOL/AFP.

** Max Lane is Visiting Senior Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. He is the author of *Decentralization and Its Discontents: An Essay on Class, Political Agency and National Perspective in Indonesian Politics* (ISEAS 2014) and *An Introduction to the Politics of the Indonesian Union Movement* (ISEAS 2019) and the editor of *Continuity and Change after Indonesia's Reforms: Contributions to an Ongoing Assessment* (ISEAS 2019).*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Indonesian political dynamics have not been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. On balance, the government has been perceived as ultimately successful in managing the pandemic.
- By December 2021, Covid-19 cases, hospitalisations and deaths in Indonesia had decreased and stabilised after a major surge in July 2021. By January 2022, 52 per cent of the population were fully vaccinated and a very large number of people had natural immunity from being infected.
- A more fundamental reason why the pandemic has not significantly altered Indonesian political life is that Indonesia's underlying political structure reinforces policy homogeneity within the broad ruling elite. The primary focus of contestations remains the manoeuvring and positioning in relation to the 2024 elections, both presidential and parliamentary.
- In the longer term, vulgar monetisation in the form of profiteering of many aspects of the pandemic management could deepen the alienation of sections of society from the elite, especially in the context of recent opposition to policies weakening the Corruption Eradication Commission and to weakening protections of employee rights in the Job Creation Law.
- This could be exacerbated if worsening economic conditions for those negatively affected by the pandemic are not remedied.
- Depending on how the ongoing pandemic evolves, such alienation from perceived profiteering or mismanagement of the pandemic could be exploited for political mileage by those parties aspiring to displace the current regime.

INTRODUCTION

As we start 2022, it has almost been two whole years that the world, including Indonesia, has been managing the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout the world, to varying degrees, the pandemic has not only been disruptive to health, but to economic, social and also political life. Worldwide, 5.5 million people have died. 305 million people have been infected and probably at least 60 million people have required serious treatment. In Indonesia, there are just over 140,000 confirmed deaths and just over 4 million confirmed cases.¹ Given that testing in Indonesia has not been widespread, this may be an underestimation of the number of positive cases.

While these are very small percentages of the overall populations, there are two things to be noted. First, in most cases, these figures represent the outcome after the implementation of a series of policies to manage the pandemic, including, in 2021, widespread vaccination programmes in some countries, including to a more modest but important extent in Indonesia. By the end of January 2022, 53% of Indonesia's population was fully vaccinated.²

For the 4 million people who were infected, and more so for the 140,000 people who died, including family members, the illness brought uncertainty or trauma at the very least, and at worst, suffering, pain and grief or death. But since those who suffered illness or death made up a tiny percentage of the population, the direct impact of the illness on society was minimal. The exception has been the medical sector where death and illness were high among doctors, nurses and health workers, especially in the early phases and during the big peak of cases in mid-2021. It is estimated that around 2,000 health personnel died from Covid.³ As in most, if not all, countries around the world, rich and poor, hospitals were exposed to be inadequate for coping with the high levels of demand.⁴

POLITICAL IMPACTS

In assessing political impact, it has not been the illness itself that has had the main thrust but rather both government management of the impact as well as society's own direct responses. Both short term and medium to long-term political impacts have to be considered, and sometimes assessed in relation to economic impacts, especially into the future.

Short-term impacts

It would seem, for the moment at least, that there has been very little impact from the government's management of COVID-19 or from societal responses on the immediate patterns of political activity. These patterns, including rivalries and political debate, have not changed substantially from the period prior to the start of the pandemic. The primary political focus soon after the 2019 election has been the manoeuvring and positioning by actors in relation to the 2024 elections, both presidential and parliamentary.⁵ Interestingly, the same absence of policy debate from the period prior to 2020 has remained. The political figures who have been at the centre of speculation as regards standing for President in 2024

– Joko Widodo (although there would need to be legislative amendments to allow that to happen), Prabowo Subianto, Puan Maharani, Anies Baswedan, Ganjar Pranowo, Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono and Airlangga Hartarto have not changed, nor have their general rankings, in any substantial way. No figure has emerged as a spectacular winner or loser through the issue of the management of the pandemic.

The specific major policy decisions of the government and the parliament which have attracted public controversy have also remained the same: corruption and the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK)⁶ and the Job Creation Law (the Omnibus Law).⁷ As of the end of 2021, these two issues remain central to public debate, albeit that it is carried out between civil society and its spokespeople and the political elite, including the government, but not among parliamentary parties.

The law weakening the KPK was a subject of protest from the end of 2019 and all through 2020 and 2021. Decisions such as the appointment of a new KPK head who had been the subject of criticism on corruption and then the dismissal of scores of staff after a political vetting kept the controversy very much alive. As of November 2021, the issue was still alive in the media as the Police announced that they had not gone ahead to employ some dismissed investigators,⁸ while others of those dismissed have formed an organisation located in the outspoken Jakarta Legal Aid Office to keep a watch on the KPK.⁹ As regards the Omnibus Law, it is even more controversial now after the Constitutional Court declared the legislation unconstitutional, because of the way the law was drafted and passed. The Court has given the government two years to revise the law to meet legal standards and has forbidden the government to issue any new regulations for the purpose of implementing new laws.¹⁰ This Court decision has, as one would expect, helped boost the morale of its critics, even though the decision does not criticise any of the contents of the law.¹¹

No new policy questions have obtained the same level of centrality in societal discussion as these two issues. The influence of the coal and palm oil lobbies on the government perhaps ranks as the question one notch down, but these are not new issues.¹² Most recently another round of public debate has emerged around the Bill in parliament which is aimed against domestic violence. Following the issuance of a Ministerial Regulation for the management and redress of cases of sexual harassment on university campuses, a quite prominent polemic has arisen.¹³ Some oppose the Bill on the grounds that making consent to sexual activity central in such a Law is the equivalent of legalising or blessing ‘free sex’ which, it is argued, is against religious morality.¹⁴ The controversy around this Bill also predates the pandemic. It is the only ongoing political controversy that is taking place not only between civil society and the elite, but even among the elite and its parliamentary parties.

In other words, there have been no new alignments, no newly prominent political figures, no significantly changed ranking of political figures, and no policy questions or polemics due to the pandemic.

This is not because there has been no criticism of the government’s management of the pandemic. Since the very first months, there have been criticisms, perhaps not from among the parliamentary parties, but from medical experts and a wide spectrum of civil society.

This includes the early criticisms of statements by Coordinating Minister ex-General Luhut Panjaitan that the virus would die out in the tropics or that deaths from Covid would number no more than from car accidents, as well as of President Widodo's first Agricultural Minister who declared that Indonesia would produce pandan leaf necklaces that could protect the wearer from Covid.¹⁵

There were criticisms of late supply of PPE for medical workers, bad management of quarantine venues and a host of other technical issues. Probably, the biggest criticism of any *policy strategy* was in relation to the government's reluctance to declare and enforce serious lockdowns. There were even tensions between local and national governments, when some local governments locked down more heavily than was sought by the government. In 2021, when Indonesia experienced a very serious surge of Delta infections, the Widodo government also only opted for a partial, "micro level" lockdown, which was also criticised for being only loosely enforced.¹⁶ Again, these criticisms did not primarily come from among the parliamentary parties and elite actors, but from civil society actors. None of these controversies or criticisms brought to the political stage any new high-profile political figures, nor prominent civil society figures. While there have also been anti-vaccination voices in the social media,¹⁷ as in other countries albeit with a different religio-cultural background, this has not polarised politics as it has in the United States or Europe, for example.

The absence of immediate impacts from pandemic management on Indonesian politics should not be surprising. Indonesian political parties are remarkably homogenous in their outlook on social, economic and political issues, as is reflected in the lack of sharp controversy in parliament on any major issue. The one cleavage is that manifested in the strong opposition from a minority with the parties, such as the Welfare and Justice Party (PKS), to the Bill against domestic and sexual violence. Perspectives different from these parties still come from parts of civil society that do not yet have parliamentary representation, although, as has been noted elsewhere, there are some new parties oriented to if not based in civil society trying to break into the electoral arena.¹⁸ Competition between the existing parties is more about personal rivalries and access to resources than anything related to policies, and this is reflected in the responses to COVID management strategies.

There is an additional, more specific pandemic-related development that needs to be noted as something which, at the end of 2021, has defused the pandemic as a political issue. This is the massive drop in cases and deaths in the wake of the Delta surge, and the vaccination campaign in Indonesia. Indonesia has experienced one of the greatest drops in the world in cases and deaths, after its Delta surge peak: a more than 90% drop.¹⁹ Medical expert research and analysis will need to explain this; however, the 50% vaccination of the population in the big cities combined with the very large number of people infected in the Delta surge may be a part of this explanation.²⁰ Serious illness from Covid-19 has not become huge in rural and village Indonesia, which may partly be explained by the more outdoor life style, including social life. One reflection of this is the very low bed-occupancy, including in Jakarta.²¹ In any case, life being reported as returning to "normal" and daily cases being so low as to now be ignored, are undoubtedly muting all past criticism of both policies and management. There are signs that the vaccination programme is slowing and

that has been the subject of concern.²² But there are no signs of this issue being a serious source of any new oppositional energy from political figures among the elite or from outside elite circles. On January 4, at the first day of trade at the Jakarta Stock Exchange, President Widodo strongly presented this situation as proof of his government's success.²³

Medium and Long Term Impacts

One area of impact which is still not clear, and perhaps won't be clear for some time, is in relation to the economy. The extent to which economic stability can be maintained, both as relates to macro-economic statistical measures as well as daily economic life for the tens of millions of families with modest incomes, always impacts on politics.²⁴ Notwithstanding the stresses of the pandemic, the economy has remained stable despite drops in the GDP and rises in poverty measurements and unemployment. There have been no shocks that have provoked any wide unrest. While there can be little doubt that a big percentage of people remain on very low incomes and may have seen their income drop, there has been sufficient stability to enable predictability to be felt even among the worst affected. The absence of predictability of economic sustainability in low income strata is usually associated with social unrest.

While such stability underpins the current lack of any political challenges to the status quo, there have been simmering aspects of the management of the pandemic which are deepening alienation and discontent.

In a situation where issues such as corruption and protection of low income earners' rights have remained prominent, the palpable monetisation of pandemic management has thickened the sense that immediate financial benefit is the main priority of the broad elite now in charge of the country, including the government. In a general sense, this was also a feature in the questioning of why lockdowns were always partial and, in 2020, not even compulsory. The final decision was left to local governments. Was the government putting the desires of the business sector, who did not want to see lockdowns, ahead of public health? In some cases, this certainly was a key factor. During holidays, people were both urged not to travel but, at the same time, the aim was to boost domestic tourism. Partial lockdowns may have been put in place at tourist destinations but hotels were nevertheless allowed to open.

It is also the case that Indonesian economic life rests on the continual activity of the huge informal and micro-manufacturing sectors that cannot be easily ordered to close down and even if so ordered, their compliance can hardly be effectively monitored. For many people, the sense that the government prioritised business over public health was reflected in the reluctance to more severely lock down. However, it has been the more vulgar profiteering that has had the biggest impact. These include corruption of welfare funds for victims of Covid; the policy to allow (more well-off) people to buy vaccinations, a policy that was revoked after many protests;²⁵ allowing a raucous market in selling antigen and PCR tests; and charging high prices for some PCR tests, for example those required for domestic travel.²⁶ Even after the government lowered costs from 1,000,000 rupiah down to 200,000, public opinion saw it as price gouging.²⁷ Tempo magazine published a prominent story

about the involvement of cabinet officials, business tycoons and officials in the ownership of PCR test labs.²⁸ One of the companies doing this was revealed to have connections with a very senior cabinet minister,²⁹ although it was later stated by a spokesperson that the minister was receiving no profits and exercised no control³⁰. Two ministers, Luhut Panjaitan and Erik Thohir have been reported to the KPK on this matter by one of the new parties seeking to enter the electoral arena, Partai Prima.³¹

CONCLUSION

In both the cases of short term and likely long term political impacts of the two years of pandemic, there has been no qualitative shift in dynamics. In the longer term, it is likely that alienation from the current elite may have deepened. At this time, however, this would appear still to be an incremental quantitative deepening that has not reached a tipping point encouraging qualitative change. Such processes are difficult to measure, but it is worth noting that most polls had President Widodo at his lowest level in July this year, in the middle of the Delta surge. The polls were measuring his handling of the pandemic. That his popularity declined to its lowest point in six years obviously reflects a change in sentiment. However, polls in August gave him a 59 per cent approval rating³² By the end of 2021, some polls had Jokowi's popularity up to 70 per cent again, although others still had him at 60 percent.³³ Even at the end of 2021, there is still considerable *speculation* that Widodo might either try to extend his term of presidency or stand again. Some commentators have even mused whether his recent Armed Forces appointments of close associates or relatives of close associates as Commander-in-Chief and Commander of the Army is an indication of this.³⁴ Alternatively, Widodo could be helping shore up the position of his party, the PDIP, which has been aggressively promoting Puan Maharani as a national political figure whom the PDIP might nominate as President, or perhaps as Vice-President to Prabowo Subianto. Subianto recently created a small furore when he openly reprimanded a central figure in his Gerindra Party, Fadli Zon, for criticising President Widodo.³⁵ Fadli Zon then disappeared from social media for two weeks, where he is usually very prominent.³⁶ This fuelled further speculation that a Prabowo-Puan duet is one real possibility.³⁷

These speculations all confirm the assessment that the pandemic period has not brought any significant change to the current political terrain. The patterns remain the same. It is even likely that in the aftermath of the huge drop in Covid-19 illnesses, the status quo will stabilise even further. In these circumstances, the polarisation that is likely to continue – even if incrementally – is that between the broad elite governing Indonesia, and what has become to be called “civil society”,³⁸ namely those partly organised, articulate and discontented sections of society that as yet have no representation in the electoral system. The pace of this sociologically structured polarisation deepening may be affected by how the economy fares in the next few years, noting that at least 50 per cent of the population have experienced worsening economic conditions, even if so far their situation is viable and predictable.³⁹

¹ These statistics are taken from <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/indonesia>

² Ibid.

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- ⁴ <https://newssetup.kontan.co.id/news/rumah-sakit-masih-kewalahan-menghadapi-lonjakan-kasus-corona>
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- ⁶ <https://fulcrum.sg/the-kpk-controversy-keeps-corruption-a-central-issue-in-public-consciousness/>
- ⁷ See Max Lane, *Widodo’s Employment Creation Law, 2020: What Its Journey Tells Us about Indonesian Politics*, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/TRS13_21.pdf
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- ¹⁴ See <https://www.insideindonesia.org/the-fight-to-outlaw-sexual-violence-in-indonesia>
- ¹⁵ See Yanuar Nugroho and Sofie Shinta Syarief, “Grave Failures in Policy and Communication in Indonesia during the COVID-19 Pandemic” at <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-113-grave-failures-in-policy-and-communication-in-indonesia-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-by-yanuar-nugroho-and-sofie-shinta-syarief/>; also see Max Lane, “The Politics of National and Local Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia” at <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2020-46-the-politics-of-national-and-local-responses-to-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-indonesia-by-max-lane/>
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2020-82-tracking-the-swelling-covid-19-vaccine-chatter-on-tiktok-in-indonesia-by-yatun-sastramidjaja-and-amirul-adli-rosli/>
- ¹⁸ <https://fulcrum.sg/emerging-political-parties-in-indonesia-raising-the-water-level-of-policy-debate/>
- ¹⁹ <https://en.tempo.co/read/1533564/indonesia-among-five-countries-with-largest-drop-in-covid-19-cases-minister>; <https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/countries-and-territories/indonesia/>;
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