



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

INDONESIA'S COVID-19 INFODEMIC

A Battle for Truth or Trust?

Yatun Sastramidjaja

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Indonesia's COVID-19 Infodemic: A Battle for Truth or Trust?

By Yatun Sastramidjaja

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Besides being one of the countries most severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesia also experienced a severe “infodemic”: an overabundance of contradictory information—including misinformation and disinformation—on COVID-19. This infodemic hampered pandemic mitigation efforts, resulting in non-compliance with public health measures and delays to the national vaccination programme in the first six months of the pandemic due to widespread vaccine hesitancy or vaccine refusal. Furthermore, it fomented public distrust of the government and other institutions.
- On Indonesian social media, this infodemic engendered a peculiar type of hybrid narrative, combining global conspiracy theories with local moral economies and religious sentiments. Religious micro-influencers were particularly influential in spreading the narrative that the government's COVID-19 policies could not be trusted, and that COVID-19 vaccines were dangerous and *haram*. Such posts were often removed in line with the social media platforms' policies to combat false information on COVID-19, and the individuals who created such content risked prosecution in line with the government's punitive approach to “hoaxes”. However, this did not lessen the prevalence of anti-vaccine narratives, nor did it mitigate public distrust of the government.
- The government also contributed to the spiral of distrust through its inconsistent policies, lack of transparency, and mixed messages. Especially in the pandemic's early phases, government officials themselves were found spreading misleading information, first to downplay the severity and risk of COVID-19 in order to avoid

social unrest, and subsequently to push for a quick reopening of the economy. In prioritizing the economy over public health, considerable resources were spent on influence campaigns to persuade the public to continue business as normal.

- The influence campaigns appeared to succeed in persuading people to return to work and to get vaccinated eventually. However, public distrust remained and was easily reactivated on social media in response to inconsistencies and double standards in the government's enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions.

Indonesia's COVID-19 Infodemic: A Battle for Truth or Trust?

By Yatun Sastramidjaja¹

INTRODUCTION

On 30 December 2022, many Indonesians breathed a sigh of relief, as their government lifted all remaining COVID-19 measures that day, including restrictions on social gatherings, mandatory mask-wearing indoors, and mandatory use of the COVID-19 tracking app PeduliLindungi (“to care and protect”) in public venues. According to President Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”), the situation was now “under control”, and the Indonesian population had built sufficient immunity to the virus.² Indeed, a study from July 2022 conducted by the Health Ministry and the University of Indonesia found that 98.5 per cent of the population had antibodies against COVID-19, either from vaccination or past infections.³

Still, President Jokowi advised the people to remain vigilant and to mask up in crowded places as a precaution. On 30 January 2023, the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, also called on the global community to exercise constant vigilance, since new virus variants were continuing to emerge, while the

¹ Yatun Sastramidjaja is Assistant Professor in Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, and an Associate Fellow with the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

² Niniek Karmini, “Indonesia Lifts All COVID Curbs, Shifts to Endemic Approach”, AP News, 30 December 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/health-indonesia-covid-19-pandemic-joko-widodo-government-e067abcd6406ab1915c923a90a732fdf>

³ “98.5% Indonesians Have COVID Antibodies, Third Serosurvey Finds”, Antara News, 12 August 2022, <https://en.antaranews.com/news/244069/985-indonesians-have-covid-antibodies-third-serosurvey-finds>

efficacy of administered vaccines was gradually waning. Moreover, the lagging vaccine uptake in low- and middle-income countries remained a source of concern.⁴ Despite the WHO declaring the COVID-19 pandemic officially over on 5 May 2023, Tedros urged the world to stay alert for a possible resurgence, and to heed and act upon the lessons learned from the COVID-19 emergency.⁵

On Indonesian social media, Jokowi's announcement in December 2022 and the WHO's announcement in May 2023 led to a surge of posts on the topic, with thousands of netizens welcoming the news.⁶ But not all reactions were positive. Some doubted the wisdom of lifting restrictions or declaring the pandemic to be over, arguing that doing so could lead to public laxness. Others found reason to criticize Jokowi's government or administrators, accusing them of mismanagement, corruption, or other faults unrelated to the news. There were also netizens posting and sharing variants of conspiracy theories that had circulated since the start of the pandemic—alluding, for example, that “Big Pharma” would profit even more in an endemic phase of COVID-19; or mocking China, which was just experiencing a surge in cases, for lagging behind, and warning of Chinese citizens trying to illegally enter Indonesia; or claiming that COVID-19 was a “hoax” to begin with and that vaccination must be halted immediately.

Thus, while the COVID-19 pandemic has been declared over, the accompanying infodemic—including a cacophony of opposing views, politicized or racialized blame games and conspiracy thinking—has not abated, flaring up instead with each subsequent virus-related news.

⁴ “Tedros: COVID-19 Remains an International Health Threat”, UN News, United Nations, 30 January 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/01/1132977>

⁵ “WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing – 5 May 2023”, World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing--5-may-2023>

⁶ On 29 and 30 December 2022, Indonesian Twitter posts containing the word “COVID” surged to 3,057 and 2,823 posts respectively, and on 5 May to 5,123, compared to an average of around 1,500 in the period 1 December 2022 to 1 June 2023 (author-compiled data).

From the outset, this infodemic not only hampered pandemic mitigation efforts, but also fomented public distrust of the government and other institutions. How the infodemic developed and was counteracted are key lessons to be taken from the COVID-19 crisis, as suggested by Director-General Tedros of the WHO. The question remains: What has Indonesia learned from the infodemic raging within its borders, both online and offline?

This article examines how the COVID-19 infodemic played out in Indonesia and why it found fertile ground on Indonesian social media. It illustrates how the infodemic engendered a peculiar type of hybrid narrative in Indonesia, where global conspiracy theories seamlessly combined with local moral economies and religious sentiments to highlight a deep distrust of the government. In some countries with high levels of public trust in the government, mostly in Western Europe, the pandemic spurred a collective “rally-round-the-flag” response, invoking a sentiment of war-time crisis which led to increased support for government intervention.⁷ In contrast, in Indonesia and other countries with low levels of public trust prior to the pandemic—often due to a culture of corruption within the government—misinformation and disinformation on COVID-19 were rampant, further fomenting public distrust.

Further to this, the Indonesian government itself also contributed to the spiral of distrust due to its indecisive pandemic response. Inconsistent policies, lack of transparency and mixed messages from state officials, heightened the public’s confusion and hence distrust. Moreover, the government itself was found to spread misinformation in its public communications on COVID-19, which led some citizens to believe—and to spread the idea on social media—that the government was the biggest “hoax” spreader of all. In addition, the government’s punitive handling of false information on COVID-19 did little to convince paranoid citizens otherwise. Neither were the government’s perceived double standards

⁷ Daniel Devine et al., “Trust and the Coronavirus Pandemic: What are the Consequences of and for Trust?”, *Political Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (2020): 274–85.

in enforcing COVID-19 restrictions useful, even after these restrictions were lifted in December 2022. All in all, the government’s handling of the pandemic, as well as the infodemic thereafter, does not bode well for its ability to respond to new COVID-19 waves or future pandemics. Valuable lessons can be learned, however, from local practices of good governance occurring in various regions across the country.

TOO MUCH INFORMATION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the success of public health interventions hinged on effective information provision and public communication. The public’s receptiveness to health protocols was strongly influenced by the information it received from various sources. Because social media plays a vital role in information and communication flows, the WHO and other stakeholders in the battle against COVID-19 made strategic use of social media and other online platforms for knowledge dissemination from the outset, to provide the public with the latest information and proper guidance amidst the volatile conditions of the pandemic. However, social media was also the arena for a COVID-19 infodemic and vehement information wars.⁸ In Indonesia, one of the most severely affected countries by COVID-19, this infodemic was among the most virulent.

The WHO coined the term “COVID-19 infodemic” on 2 February 2020, before declaring the pandemic on 11 March, to describe “an overabundance of information—some accurate and some not—that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it”.⁹ Amidst the uncertainties, people scrambled to fill

⁸ Neil F. Johnson et al., “The Online Competition Between Pro- and Anti-Vaccination Views”, *Nature* 582 (11 June 2020): 230–34.

⁹ World Health Organization, “Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report, No. 13”, 2 February 2020, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>; World Health Organization, “Health Topics: Infodemic”, https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1

gaps in their knowledge and understanding of the situation. As they took to social media, they found a plethora of information purporting to provide answers, but most of it was unverified or false.¹⁰ Untruths—due to their often simplistic and sensationalist nature—are known to spread more rapidly than truths on social media,¹¹ and COVID-19 created fertile ground for untruths to go viral. Therefore, the WHO established social media teams to detect false information on COVID-19 and refute it with evidence-based facts. They found false information to recur on four themes: the cause and origins of the virus; transmission patterns and symptoms; available cures and treatments; and the efficacy and impact of public health interventions.¹² These themes were also present in Indonesia’s infodemic. Most false information was found to be simply incorrect, or *misinformation*, which may result from a lack of access to knowledge, exposure to patchy information, or a misinterpretation of facts to fit familiar interpretive frames and narratives. But the pandemic also spurred a significant increase in *disinformation*; that is, manipulated or fabricated information, deliberately spread with malicious intent. Indubitably, the lines between mis- and disinformation are often vague. As Merlyna Lim wrote, rather than resulting from malicious disinformation campaigns, such conspiracy theories thrive due to the algorithmic dynamics and affective affordances of social media that enable the emergence of “conspirational echo chambers”, or “communities of like-minded people who reinforce their conspirational beliefs by repeated exposure to information that confirm their existing beliefs”.¹³

¹⁰ Mattio Cinelli et al., “The Covid-19 Social Media Infodemic”, *Scientific Reports* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–10.

¹¹ Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, “The Spread of True and False News Online”, *Science* 359, no. 6380 (2018): 1146–51.

¹² World Health Organization, “Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report, No. 95”, 24 April 2020, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200424-sitrep-95-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=e8065831_4

¹³ Merlyna Lim, “#Coronaconspiracy: Algorithms, Users, and Conspiracy Theories in Social Media”, *M/C Media Culture Journal* 25, no. 1 (2022), <https://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/2877>

The high frequency of social media usage in Indonesia,¹⁴ yet low digital literacy across the population (especially in poorer areas), raised concerns among health experts about Indonesians' susceptibility to fake news on COVID-19 and how it might cause people to make unwise, health-threatening decisions.¹⁵ The government, on the other hand, was especially concerned about the panic that misinformation and disinformation might cause. On 7 March 2020, five days after the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in Indonesia, the Information and Communication Ministry claimed that the spread of COVID-19 "hoaxes" was "far more dangerous than the virus itself", especially for stirring panic in society.¹⁶ Combating the spread of COVID-19 hoaxes therefore became a top priority for the government.¹⁷

In this effort, the Information and Communication Ministry worked together with the National Police and with civil society organizations, notably MAFINDO, the Indonesian Anti-Slander Society.¹⁸ A "hoax buster" section was added to the government's official COVID-19

¹⁴ "Digital 2021: Indonesia", Data Reportal in association with We Are Social and Hootsuite, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-indonesia>

¹⁵ "Many Indonesians Unable to Identify Online Misinformation: Survey", *Jakarta Post*, 29 November 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/11/29/many-indonesians-unable-to-identify-online-misinformation-survey.html>; Dessy Harisanty et al., "Digital Literacy for Covid 19 Information in Indonesian Society", *Library Philosophy and Practice* (e-journal), No. 5379 (2021), <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/5379>

¹⁶ "Kemenkominfo: Hoaks Lebih Berbahaya dari Virus Corona", *Republika Online*, 7 March 2020, <https://republika.co.id/berita/q6t6lr354/>

¹⁷ Indonesia co-initiated the Cross-Regional Statement on Infodemic in the Context of COVID-19, which was endorsed by 132 countries at the United Nations General Assembly on 12 June 2020. "Indonesia and 12 Other Countries Initiate Joint UN Statement against Dissemination of Misinformation", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 15 June 2020, <https://kemlu.go.id/ankara/en/news/7127/indonesia-and-12-other-countries-initiate-joint-un-statement-against-dissemination-of-misinformation>

¹⁸ MAFINDO was founded in 2016, with the objective of advancing Indonesians' digital literacy and resilience to online hate speech and fake news. See <https://www.mafindo.or.id/>

website, where debunked hoaxes were added almost daily, and continue to be added today.¹⁹ From the first entry on 16 March 2020 to a recent entry on 6 August 2023, it contains 127 pages exposing fake news items circulating on Indonesian social media. This includes the claim that COVID-19 vaccines cause infertility and impotency (and other ailments or disabilities, if not death); advice to consume boiled eggs at midnight to cure COVID-19; videos showing heads of states of non-Muslim countries performing Islamic prayers to defeat COVID-19; stories of China experimenting with its vaccine in Indonesia since its labs had run out of test monkeys; rumours of doctors purposely misdiagnosing non-COVID illnesses, or even injecting the virus into patients; and global conspiracy theories claiming COVID-19 to be a lie concocted by the world's elites. The Information and Communication Ministry detected 1,735 such hoaxes in the first half of 2021 alone.²⁰ Once a hoax spreader or producer is identified, the police would press criminal charges under anti-fake news laws, which carries a maximum sentence of six years in prison. Dozens of suspects were arrested for spreading COVID-19 hoaxes in March 2020, and by May 2020, the number had risen to more than 100.²¹ Despite this, fake news on COVID-19 continued to run rampant on Indonesian social media.

¹⁹ See <https://covid19.go.id/p/hoax-buster>

²⁰ “Kominfo Temukan 1.735 Hoaks COVID-19 Beredar di Media Sosial”, *Liputan6.com*, 12 July 2021, <https://www.liputan6.com/cek-fakta/read/4605283/kominfo-temukan-1735-hoaks-covid-19-beredar-di-media-sosial>

²¹ “Police Name 30 Suspects for Allegedly Spreading COVID-19 Hoaxes”, *Jakarta Post*, 20 March 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/20/police-name-30-suspects-for-allegedly-spreading-covid-19-hoaxes.html>; “COVID-19: National Police to Take Legal Action against 41 People over Internet Hoaxes”, *Jakarta Post*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/24/covid-19-national-police-to-take-legal-action-against-41-people-over-internet-hoaxes.html>; “Polisi Sudah Tetapkan 107 Tersangka Kasus Hoaks Terkait Corona”, *Liputan6.com*, 20 May 2020, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4259573/polisi-sudah-tetapkan-107-tersangka-kasus-hoaks-terkait-corona>

MISINFORMATION, MIXED MESSAGES AND MANIPULATION

In Indonesia, COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation have been rife since the start of the pandemic, triggering panic-buying and even denial of the existence of the virus.²² A poll conducted in April 2020 by Nasir, Baequni and Nurmansyah indicated that many Indonesians held false assumptions about the virus, purportedly influenced by online stories. Notably, the poll report mentioned that:

As many as 13.2% expressed that the SARS-CoV-2 virus cannot live in the Indonesian climate, while 17.2% of them were not sure about that issue. Furthermore, 27.7% of them stated that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was a biological weapon of a particular country. Moreover, 36.2% of them believed that exposing money or goods to the sun for about 30 minutes can kill the virus. There were 19.6% of respondents who thought that gargling with salt water or vinegar can kill the virus, while 3.47% were not aware of that issue. The last issue is that 12.1% of the respondents did not know whether or not spraying disinfectant on the body is safe or not.²³

Misinformation can be harmful when causing people to neglect health protocols, but it often has innocent origins. For example, Indonesians' faith in the health benefits of *jamu* (traditional herbal medicine) led

²² Quinton Temby and Benjamin Hu, "The Coronavirus Infodemic in Southeast Asia: Panic Buying and Mis-/Disinformation", *Fulcrum Commentary*, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 28 April 2020, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/the-coronavirus-infodemic-in-southeast-asia-panic-buying-and-mis-dis-information/>; Ika Ningtyas, "Indonesia Battles Spread of Vaccine Misinformation", *AA*, 27 January 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/indonesia-battles-spread-of-vaccine-misinformation/2124319>

²³ Narila Mutia Nasir, Baequni, and Mochamad Iqbal Nurmansyah, "Misinformation Related to Covid-19 in Indonesia", *Jurnal Administrasi Kesehatan Indonesia* 8, no. 1 (2020): 51–59.

many to believe that its regular consumption could prevent or even cure COVID-19. Hence, “anti-COVID” *jamu* recipes were shared in family groups on WhatsApp and on other social media platforms with the honest intent to share beneficial traditional medicinal knowledge. Accordingly, there was a surge in Google searches for *jamu* after Indonesia’s first COVID-19 cases were announced.²⁴ Growing demand for *jamu* ingredients then prompted online rumours of shortages, which led to panic-buying that caused the prices of main ingredients such as red ginger and turmeric to skyrocket. This indicated that people were anxious to protect themselves and their loved ones against the new disease, and in doing so, relied on trusted knowledge—even though the government was still downplaying the risk of COVID-19, as further discussed below. Thus, increased faith in *jamu* seemed to correlate with decreased trust in government statements on the pandemic being “not too bad” in Indonesia. Yet, it did so in paradoxical ways, for example, President Jokowi also commended the health benefits of *jamu* to protect against the disease.

Alarmed by the terrifying situation in Wuhan and the rapid global spread of the virus, many Indonesians did take the public health risk seriously from the outset. They resorted to taking their own precautionary measures to protect their community; people initiated neighbourhood lockdowns, and in different parts of the country, regional heads established local public health and social safety measures.²⁵ They did so in the absence of a clear pandemic response from the central government; few Indonesians looked to the central government for guidance, since there was little guidance and information to go by.²⁶ At

²⁴ Temby and Hu, “The Coronavirus Infodemic in Southeast Asia”.

²⁵ Rebecca Meckelburg and Charan Bal, “As COVID-19 Escalates in Indonesia, Responses Are Fractured and Fractious”, *Melbourne Asia Review*, 5 October 2020, <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/as-covid-19-escalates-in-indonesia-responses-are-fractured-and-fractious/>

²⁶ “COVID-19: Public Fend for Themselves amid Scarcity of Information from Government”, *Jakarta Post*, 18 March 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/17/covid-19-public-fend-for-themselves-amid-scarcity-of-information-from-government.html>

the same time, citizens were confused by the mixed messages coming from the government. By 15 March 2020, the government saw itself forced to implement a national lockdown, euphemistically called Large-Scale Social Restrictions (Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar), or PSBB. However, this was enforced unevenly in the country, mainly depending on the decision of regional governments, while the central government kept downplaying the gravity of the situation.

President Jokowi's main concern seemed to be the pandemic's economic impact, fearing repercussions on trade, investment and tourism. In February 2020, while strict travel restrictions began to take hold in many countries, Jokowi reportedly allocated Rp72 billion to stimulate tourism, with subsidized flight discounts and funds for foreign influencers to promote Indonesia as a safe destination for tourism.²⁷ Government officials echoed this, ignoring the risks to public health. Before COVID-19 cases were detected in Indonesia, various ministers of state maintained that the virus was unlikely to spread in Indonesia, claiming it could not thrive in the country's tropical climate. Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto dismissed a report from Harvard University warning of the likelihood of unreported cases in Indonesia, calling it "insulting".²⁸ Even after COVID-19 had settled in Indonesia, he claimed it could be warded off by prayer, healthy lifestyle habits and positive thinking. Vice-President Ma'ruf Amin similarly recommended prayer and other ministers advised increased vegetable consumption, while Jokowi, as noted, "sang the praises of *jamu*".²⁹ As late as July 2020,

²⁷ "Pemerintah Anggarkan Rp72 Miliar untuk Bayar Influencer demi Tingkatkan Pariwisata", *Kompas.com*, 25 February 2020, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/02/25/20380521/pemerintah-anggarkan-rp-72-miliar-untuk-bayar-influencer-demi-tingkatkan>

²⁸ "Respons Terawan Soal Penelitian Harvard University Terkait COVID", *Tirto*, 11 February 2020, <https://tirto.id/respons-terawan-soal-penelitian-harvard-university-terkait-corona-eyiV>

²⁹ Tim Lindsey and Tim Mann, "Indonesia Was in Denial over Coronavirus, Now It May Be Facing a Looming Disaster", *The Conversation*, 7 April 2020, <https://theconversation.com/indonesia-was-in-denial-over-coronavirus-now-it-may-be-facing-a-looming-disaster-135436>

the agriculture minister promoted a necklace made from eucalyptus that could eliminate the virus if worn for 30 minutes.³⁰ Meanwhile, the public was left guessing. On 14 March 2020, Jokowi admitted that the government withheld “some information” on COVID-19 cases in Indonesia to prevent the public from panicking; he said that the public would be informed eventually, but social unrest needed to be avoided since this could hurt the economy.³¹

The prioritizing of economic interests was clearly manifested in Jokowi’s New Normal policy. Launched on 26 May 2020 with Jokowi’s symbolic visit to a shopping mall, it targeted a quick reopening of the economy and resumption of businesses as “normal”, amidst the ongoing pandemic.³² According to Jokowi, this was possible provided that citizens remained disciplined in following basic health protocols.³³ The responsibility for keeping the pandemic under control thus fell on the shoulders of citizens and their level of discipline. To guard discipline, police and military personnel were deployed to enforce compliance in public spaces. This often took the form of raids on busy markets, thus targeting the poor. Among middle-class citizens, this approach nurtured a discourse that the “undisciplined masses” were at fault for the spread of the virus in Indonesia.³⁴ On social media, they began blaming and

³⁰ “Indonesia Minister in Row over Eucalyptus Necklace COVID-19 Claim”, *The Guardian*, 7 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/07/indonesia-minister-in-row-over-eucalyptus-necklace-covid-19-claim>

³¹ “‘We Don’t Want People to Panic’: Jokowi Says on Lack of Transparency about COVID Cases”, *Jakarta Post*, 14 March 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/13/we-dont-want-people-to-panic-jokowi-says-on-lack-of-transparency-about-covid-cases.html>

³² “Jokowi Declares ‘New Normal’ with Help from Military and Police”, *Jakarta Globe*, 26 May 2020, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/jokowi-declares-new-normal-with-help-from-military-and-police>

³³ Called “5M”, the basic health protocol consisted of five guidelines: wear face masks, wash hands with soap, keep social distance, avoid crowds and reduce mobility.

³⁴ Prio Sambodho, “Class and Privilege: Being a Good Citizen During a Pandemic”, *New Mandala*, 14 May 2020, <https://www.newmandala.org/class-and-privilege-being-a-good-citizen-during-a-pandemic/>

mocking those “stupid” people, furthering “the frame of thinking that posits citizens’ ignorance as the main reason behind the spread of COVID-19”³⁵—absolving the government from accountability.

This frame of thinking found expression in the hashtag #IndonesiaTerserah (or #TerserahIndonesia), “Indonesia? It’s up to you!” Started by overburdened healthcare workers on 14 May 2020, the hashtag was made viral by netizens to express frustration at the “irresponsible behaviour” of people seen flouting public health protocols.³⁶ Some netizens, however, used it to criticize people’s negligence as well as the government’s inaction, indicating that the hashtag allowed for multiple interpretations. This could also be seen from the two waves by which it topped Twitter’s trending topics. The first wave occurred between 15 and 26 May 2020; the second wave occurred six months later, on 15 November. The first wave coincided with the push for the New Normal, which led netizens’ opinions, while using the same hashtag #IndonesiaTerserah, to move in two directions. Those supporting the economy’s reopening stressed people’s irresponsibility as being to blame for the protracted PSBB restrictions that were putting livelihoods at risk. On the other side were those viewing a hasty return to “normal” as irresponsible, and holding the government accountable for the

³⁵ Ibnu Nadzir, “Conspiracy Theories and Modern Disjuncture amidst the Spread of Covid-19 in Indonesia”, *Masyarakat Indonesia: Majalah Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial Indonesia* 46, no. 2 (2020): 150–67, p. 151.

³⁶ “Hashtag ‘#Indonesia? Terserah!!!’ Takes the Country’s Social Media by Storm”, *The Star*, 27 May 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/tech/tech-news/2020/05/27/hashtag-indonesia-terserah-takes-the-countrys-social-media-by-storm>; “Indonesia Terserah, Kebijakan Plin-Plan, dan Pembiaran Negara”, *Kompas*, 18 May 2020, <https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2020/05/18/093500665/indonesia-terserah-kebijakan-plin-plan-dan-pembiaran-negara->. See also Ismail Fahmi’s social media analysis of the first week in which this hashtag became trending on Twitter, <https://twitter.com/ismailfahmi/status/1262430285661999104?fbclid=IwAR2Fon1n20twpHOLS6oYmtLfiGnU2vuhxSSfNCpXqIbTMdkLia3vo-6OeL0>

worsening COVID-19 crisis.³⁷ Some netizens paired #IndonesiaTerserah with the hashtag #IndonesiaAbnormal, emphasizing that Indonesia was not ready for a “new normal” (although many netizens simply used the latter hashtag to indicate any absurd situation in the pandemic). By the second time #IndonesiaTerserah went viral, criticism of the government was growing. The hashtag action now focused on the government’s arbitrariness and double standards in enforcing discipline, as raids on the poor remained common, and government officials and other elites were seen breaking the PSBB rules without consequences.³⁸

Meanwhile, since May 2020, the government undertook a concerted influence campaign to convince the public of the wisdom of Jokowi’s New Normal policy, which lasted several months. The Ministries of Economics, Health, Tourism, and Information and Communication each contributed considerable resources to the campaign, which was carried out through the mass media and on social media. On social media, not only were the government’s official accounts used, but also the services of famous influencers and those of anonymous “buzzers”—that is, fake account operators hired to manipulate conversations and trending

³⁷ The latter opinion was widely shared by health experts and civil society activists who decried the government’s pro-business stance being taken at the expense of public health and social safety. See I Nyoman Sutarsa, et al., “Why a ‘New Normal’ Might Fail in Indonesia and How to Fix It”, *The Conversation*, 25 June 2020, <https://theconversation.com/why-a-new-normal-might-fail-in-indonesia-and-how-to-fix-it-140798>; and Felix Nathaniel, “New Normal Pertama: Pemerintah Plin-Plan Tangani Wabah sejak Awal”, *Tirto*, 31 December 2020, <https://tirto.id/new-normal-pertama-pemerintah-plin-plan-tangani-wabah-sejak-awal-ffzr>

³⁸ “Tagar #IndonesiaTerserah Kembali Viral di Twitter, Ini Kata Satgas COVID-19”, *Kompas.com*, 15 November 2020, <https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2020/11/15/180300765/tagar-indonesiaterserah-kembali-viral-di-twitter-ini-kata-satgas-covid-19?page=all>

topics on social media to influence public opinion.³⁹ Their task was to flood social media with messages masked as personal views and memes promoting the New Normal. In doing so, they used a specific set of hashtags including, #NewNormalPulihkanEkonomi, “the New Normal restores the economy”, #NewNormalCegahPHK, “the New Normal prevents layoffs”, and #DisiplinKunciNewNormal, “discipline is the key to the New Normal”, which tied the frame of economic prosperity to that of discipline, creating the narrative that Indonesia could prosper under the pandemic. To lessen public concerns about the severity of the pandemic and doubts about the official figures of COVID-19 cases and deaths, buzzers also spread positive news stories and figures of recovered COVID-19 patients. Finally, they trolled and attacked critics of the New Normal, labelling them as “hoax spreaders” and “slanderers”, which made them liable for criminal charges under anti-fake news and defamation laws. Partly due to the role of buzzers, the campaign seemed to accomplish its objective to manufacture consent on policy decisions framed as the New Normal. By August 2020, most netizens welcomed the reopening of shopping malls and other public venues, echoing the message that this saved the livelihood of many.

The examples discussed above show that Indonesia’s COVID-19 infodemic was significantly shaped by the government’s own role in influencing public discourse. In the end, however, the buzzer operations, the mixed messages from state officials and the overall lack of transparency only deepened the public’s confusion, anxiety and distrust. Instead of rousing a “rally-round-the-flag”-type of public participation in the collective battle against COVID-19, it created fertile ground for panicky reactions at the community level and alternative truths going viral on social media.

³⁹ For more detailed discussion, see Yatun Sastramidjaja and Wijayanto, *Cyber Troops, Online Manipulation of Public Opinion and Co-optation of Indonesia’s Cybersphere*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 7/2022 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022); Pradipa P. Rasidi and Wijayanto, “Normalising the New Normal”, *Inside Indonesia* 146 (Oct–Dec 2021), <https://www.insideindonesia.org/normalising-the-new-normal>

VACCINE HESITANCY AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Amidst the dearth of reliable information, COVID-19 rumours and denial quickly gained traction in Indonesia.⁴⁰ According to a survey conducted in September 2020 by Indonesia’s Central Bureau of Statistics, 17 per cent of the population—some 45 million Indonesians—did not believe in COVID-19.⁴¹ By 2021, various surveys indicated that full denial of COVID-19 had decreased but remained significant in some regions, while a growing number of Indonesians no longer considered COVID-19 a potentially deadly disease, viewing it instead as a harmless type of flu.⁴² This led to decreasing compliance with public health protocols, and growing scepticism and frustration about the ongoing public health interventions and restrictions.

Some of this frustration was targeted at healthcare workers. Similar to other countries with low levels of public trust, Indonesian healthcare workers were subjected to severe COVID-19 stigmatization,⁴³ bearing

⁴⁰ “Mengapa Masih Banyak Masyarakat Tidak Percaya Penyebaran COVID-19”, *Merdeka.com*, 5 September 2020, <https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/kenapa-masih-banyak-masyarakat-tidak-percaya-penyebaran-covid-19.html>

⁴¹ “Anggota Satgas: Survei BPS, 17 Persen Masyarakat Indonesia Tak Percaya COVID-19”, *Kompas.com*, 2 October 2020, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/10/02/16414751/anggota-satgas-survei-bps-17-persen-masyarakat-indonesia-tak-percaya-covid?page=all>

⁴² “Survei LSI Sebut 30% Masyarakat Tak Takut COVID-19”, *SindoNews.com*, 22 February 2021, <https://nasional.sindonews.com/read/343398/15/survei-lsi-sebut-30-masyarakat-tak-takut-covid-19-1613998944>; “Survei Pandangan Terhadap COVID-19: Masih Banyak Yang Menyepelekan”, *Tirto*, 3 August 2021, <https://tirto.id/survei-pandangan-terhadap-covid-19-masih-banyak-yang-menyepelekan-gh9U>. See for all Central Bureau of Statistics surveys on COVID-19 attitudes in Indonesia, <https://covid-19.bps.go.id/>

⁴³ Abdulqadir J. Nashwan et al., “Stigma towards Health Care Providers Taking Care of COVID-19 Patients: A Multi-Country Study”, *Heliyon* 8, no. 4 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e09300>

the brunt of the people's resentment at interventions that did not visibly offer relief. By September 2020, rumours abounded on social media that medical staff were over-diagnosing COVID-19 for financial gain, given the costly charge (Rp150.000) for COVID-19 testing.⁴⁴ It led many Indonesians to avoid hospitals and health centres “out of fear of expensive misdiagnoses or unnecessary tests”.⁴⁵ In some regions, misgivings about healthcare workers turned hostile; medical teams were blocked from entering neighbourhoods or chased out, health centres were attacked, and corpses were forcibly seized from hospitals and morgues to prevent them from getting buried according to strict COVID-19 protocols that precluded religious burial protocols. As Haryanto argues, such incidents were most prevalent in regions where public distrust was high, such as Makassar, going hand in hand with widespread disregard for public health protocols. This was partly due to a “widespread belief that COVID-19 was a conspiracy designed to generate income for hospitals”, but “[a]t the root of this public response was the failure of governance”, which “fuelled a cycle of public distrust”.⁴⁶

In addition, conspiracy theories in Indonesia tapped into religious sentiments—including anti-Chinese sentiment. This was a legacy of the New Order regime's culture of anti-Communism, where Islam was pitched against Communism as fundamentally opposed ideologies, and ethnic Chinese minorities were stigmatized by association and often scapegoated for economic woes. Anything related to China,

⁴⁴ “COVID-19: Public Urged to Stop Accusing Medical Workers of Profiting from Outbreak”, *Jakarta Post*, 11 September 2020; <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/09/11/covid-19-public-urged-to-stop-accusing-medical-workers-of-profiting-from-outbreak.html>

⁴⁵ Najmah Usman, Sari Andajani Kusnan, Sharyn Graham Davies, and Tom Graham Davies, “COVID-19 Denial in Indonesia”, *Inside Indonesia* 144 (April–June 2021), <https://www.insideindonesia.org/covid-19-denial-in-indonesia>.

⁴⁶ Haryanto, “Public Trust Deficit and Failed Governance: The Response to COVID-19 in Makassar, Indonesia”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 43, no. 1 (2021): 45–52, pp. 49–50.

from Communism to COVID-19, could thus be framed as anti-Islam. Hence, COVID-19 conspiracy theories were often couched in anti-Chinese discourse. Besides the story that China had spread the virus deliberately, or that it originated as a biological weapon that had escaped from Chinese laboratories—which was a common theory in the United States and Southeast Asia, reflecting China’s role in geopolitical tensions in the region⁴⁷—in Indonesia, the Chinese conspiracy was seen to specifically target the Muslim community. One rumour circulating online held that Islamic clerics were the prime target. Other rumours focused on Chinese migrant workers; this became a source of social tensions, especially since Jokowi’s increased courting of Chinese investment was raising concerns about China’s growing influence in the country. Rumours of Chinese migrant workers spreading the virus were rife—as was criticism of Jokowi’s approval of large numbers of their arrivals amidst the pandemic.⁴⁸ Hundreds of Chinese migrant workers were said to have been furtively shipped into the country. Adding insult to injury, this allegedly happened at a time when Eid ul-Fitr homecomings and festivities, an important annual ritual for Indonesian Muslims, were prohibited following the nationwide interstate travel ban.⁴⁹

Given the presence of strong anti-China sentiments, Indonesia’s COVID-19 vaccination drive was bound to meet with resistance, as it predominantly relied on vaccines produced in China by the Chinese pharmaceutical company Sinovac Biotech, and later, the Chinese state-owned Sinopharm. Similar to other developing countries, Indonesia initially had limited access to Western-produced COVID-19 vaccines. China filled this gap, providing vaccines to more than 80 countries, in a

⁴⁷ Temby and Hu, “The Coronavirus Infodemic in Southeast Asia”.

⁴⁸ Leo Suryadinata, “Tensions in Indonesia over Chinese Foreign Workers during COVID-19 Pandemic”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2020/73, 6 July 2020.

⁴⁹ “As Indonesia Bans Eid Homecomings, Chinese Worker Arrivals Raise Questions”, *South China Morning Post*, 12 May 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3133153/indonesia-bans-eid-homecomings-chinese-worker-arrivals>

“vaccine diplomacy” mission to boost its soft power across developing regions.⁵⁰ Indonesia received its first 1.2 million doses of Sinovac vaccine in December 2020. By September 2021, 215 million Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines had arrived—both finished vaccines and bulk raw materials to be processed by Indonesia’s pharmaceutical company Bio Farma—accounting for 80 per cent of Indonesia’s vaccine supply.⁵¹ It was enough to meet Jokowi’s ambitious target to inoculate 181.5 million of the 270 million population by March 2022. However, surveys conducted in September and December 2020 indicated that only 31 to 37 per cent of Indonesians were willing to get vaccinated.⁵²

Clearly, the government faced an uphill battle against vaccine hesitancy, all the more as a significant proportion of the population outrightly refused COVID-19 vaccines, often for religious reasons mixed with belief in some conspiracy theory. In Indonesia as elsewhere, vaccine refusal was fuelled by global “anti-vaxx” propaganda circulating on social media, which in its extreme form, claimed that the inoculation drive was orchestrated by a secret society of global elites (including world leaders, the “Big Pharma” and “Big Tech” corporations, and Jewish elites) to control humanity.⁵³ However, the majority of vaccine-hesitant Indonesians simply questioned the safety of COVID-19 vaccines which were developed in such a short time. Safety concerns were occasionally

⁵⁰ Khairulanwar Zaini, “China’s Vaccine Diplomacy in Southeast Asia—A Mixed Record”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/86, 24 June 2021.

⁵¹ “More Than 80 Percent of Indonesia’s Vaccine Supply Comes from China”, *Benar News*, 24 September 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/indonesia-overreliance-on-chinese-vaccines-09242021164036.html>

⁵² “Majority of Indonesians Unsure about COVID-19 Vaccination, Survey Finds”, *Jakarta Post*, 23 December 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/12/23/majority-of-indonesians-unsure-about-covid-19-vaccination-survey-finds.html>; “Kurang dari Separuh Masyarakat Mau Menerima Vaksin COVID-19”, *LaporCovid-19*, 13 October 2020, <https://cms.laporcovid19.org/post/kurang-dari-separuh-masyarakat-mau-menerima-vaksin-covid-19>

⁵³ Center for Countering Digital Hate, *The Anti-Vaxx Playbook* (2020), <https://www.counterhate.com/playbook>

mixed with extreme conspiracy thinking, but more commonly, they were framed in local religious terms rooted in distrust of the government, and reinforced by aversion to the idea of dependency on Chinese vaccines.

Rumours about the Sinovac vaccine were rife on Indonesian social media. One recurring theme was that it contained ingredients that were prohibited by Islamic law, or were *haram* and included pork or pork derivatives. In response, Western vaccine producers such as Pfizer and AstraZeneca declared that their vaccines were free of pork products; Sinovac refused to disclose its ingredients, hence fanning Muslims' distrust.⁵⁴ Even the granting of the official *halal* (permissible according to Islam) certification by the Indonesian Ulema Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia) on 11 January 2021 to vaccines produced by Sinovac and Bio Farma did not convince all Indonesian Muslims, since other rumours circulating on social media further fed into beliefs that the vaccine was unsafe as well as "unclean". Most common were stories about the dangerous side-effects of the vaccine, which was rumoured to contain toxic substances such as mercury and borax. Numerous pictures and videos on social media showed people collapsing after taking the vaccine. Although many were proven to be fake, such posts easily went viral, especially when they featured Muslim victims; for example, one viral post in July 2021 shared an image of five coffins in a mosque, with a caption stating that they were members of one household who had just been vaccinated.⁵⁵ As this example illustrates, the association with Islam and Muslim identity was often present, if only subtly, in anti-vaccine messages.

In other cases, however, Islamic sentiment was the driving force of anti-vaccine propaganda, as we found in our previous study on the role of

⁵⁴ "Vaccine Hesitancy Rises in Indonesia amid COVID-19 Pandemic", *AlJazeera*, 4 January 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/4/vaccine-hesitancy-rises-in-indonesia-amid-covid-19-pandemic>

⁵⁵ "Indonesia and Philippines Face Persistent Anti-Vax Hurdle", *Nikkei Asia*, 14 September 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Indonesia-and-Philippines-face-persistent-anti-vax-hurdle>

religious micro-influencers on Indonesian TikTok.⁵⁶ There, we discussed the case of a TikTok video that went viral in the first three months of 2021, which featured a scathing rant in parliament against Indonesia’s vaccination programme by PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) member Ribka Tjiptaning on 12 January 2021, the day before the start of Indonesia’s vaccine roll-out. Besides doubting the safety of a vaccine that had not gone through all clinical trials, she asserted that “forcing the people to get vaccinated is a violation of human rights”, and that the government should not be profiting off its citizens by making business deals with pharmaceutical multinationals. Tjiptaning’s fiercely moralistic tone resonated with the public, and lent itself well to anti-vaccine propaganda. While the original clip of the speech was among the top ten videos on TikTok using the hashtag #tolakvaksin (“reject the vaccine”), it was the edited clip—in which Tjiptaning’s message acquired distinctly religious overtones—that made the bigger impact. The edited video was uploaded on TikTok in February 2021 by an Islamic micro-influencer using the name @adab.ulama, “ulama’s (religious scholar) conduct”. Featuring only Tjiptaning’s bolder claims, with a filter added and a dramatic Islamic song embedded into the background, it became the top trending video on TikTok with the hashtag #vaksin.

The frame of Islamic resistance was also palpable in other anti-vaccine videos posted by Islamic micro-influencers on TikTok. In another viral video, for example, a religious teacher called “Coach” (@coach_dive) echoed Tjiptaning’s criticism of the government for profiting off its citizens, illustrating that Islamic resistance often intertwined with the familiar frame of public distrust towards a corrupt government. Other videos, however, are closely aligned with the repertoire of global conspiracy theories. For example, one religious micro-influencer named @insyaAllah.istiqomah, posted a TikTok video that went viral, which featured a dramatically edited rendition of a sermon by a preacher

⁵⁶ Yatun Sastramidjaja and Amirul Adli Rosli, “Tracking the Swelling COVID-19 Vaccine Chatter on TikTok in Indonesia”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/82, 17 June 2021.

named Ustadz Ihsan, who denounced the vaccine, claiming it changed the recipient's DNA. It turned out that the video had a sequel, but as @insyaAllah.istiqomah explained in a later video, TikTok had deleted "Part 2" and temporarily suspended her account because of it. The deleted video was a continuation of Ustadz Ihsan's sermon, where he reasoned that the vaccine was a Big Tech conspiracy to implant microchips into people. Like the story of genetic modification, this claim came straight out of the anti-vaxxer repertoire, illustrating how seamlessly global conspiracy theories merged with local religious sensibilities on social media platforms like TikTok.

Besides @insyaAllah.istiqomah's "Part 2" video, @adab.ulama's video was also removed by TikTok, while @coach_dive's account was shadow-banned (concealed from users' feeds). This indicates the social media platforms' commitment to countering anti-vaccine propaganda and fake news on COVID-19. However, especially on TikTok, censorship has been enforced inconsistently. Thus, TikTok videos of religious sermons denouncing the vaccine as an evil conspiracy against humanity—or, specifically, against the *ummah* (global Islamic community)—have continued to appear. Likewise, hashtags encapsulating anti-vaccine discourse have also remained popular on TikTok, Instagram and other social media. In the second half of 2021 and in 2022, these included the new hashtags #tolakmandatorivaksin⁵⁷ ("reject mandatory vaccine", referring to the mandatory vaccination certificate required for interstate travel, public services and an increasing number of professions), #tolakbooster ("reject the booster"), #vaksinekspemen ("the vaccine is an experiment") and #stopkebohonganvaksin ("stop the vaccine lie"). Many of the TikTok videos using these hashtags were accompanied by religious slogans and songs, pronouncing Islamic resistance. Others used patriotic songs, and were paired with such hashtags as #peoplepower, indicating that the resistance was not limited to a Muslim identity. Frequently, these posts managed to evade and trick the social media platforms' (automated) algorithms meant to catch them by altering

⁵⁷ This particular hashtag was also popular on Malaysian social media.

words; for example, anti-vaxxers were able to slip through by typing “vaccine” as “V4K51N” and “Sinovac” as “51NOV4C”. This indicates that censorship was not entirely effective in the information war on social media.

The government’s highly polished pro-vaccination campaign has proven to be more effective; not so much in countering anti-vaccine propaganda, but rather, in persuading the majority of vaccine-hesitant citizens. After the New Normal campaign, the government invested heavily in promotional efforts to convince the public to get inoculated. Besides media advertisements, a weekly prime-time television show was created, called *Vaksin untuk Indonesia* (Vaccine for Indonesia), which aired from April 2021 until the end of the year. Presented by the popular rock band Slank and featuring national celebrities, it is likely that the show helped to convince many Slank fans and TV viewers to get vaccinated. In addition, influencers and buzzers were mobilized again to spread the narrative on social media that Indonesia can overcome COVID-19 through mass inoculation. By the second half of 2021, anti-vaccine messages on TikTok and other social media were overwhelmingly drowned out by pro-vaccine messages posted by national athletes, pop stars and other national celebrities, amplified by buzzers. Tapping into a sense of national pride, these pro-vaccine videos engendered a positive collective sentiment based on trust in the nation’s capabilities, contrary to the anti-vaccine messengers’ prevailing negative sentiment of distrust. However, this public trust was brittle, and was easily broken whenever the government demonstrated a lack of sensibility towards citizens’ needs or fair judgement.

FROM VIRAL DISTRUST TO GOOD GOVERNANCE

In the past year, the highest peak by far in social media conversations on COVID-19 did not relate to the lifting of restrictions in Indonesia on 30 December 2022, nor the WHO’s declaration of the end of the pandemic on 5 May 2023. Rather, it was from a Twitter storm that erupted on 23 March 2023, the first day of the holy month of Ramadhan; this was triggered by Jokowi’s decision to prohibit civil servants from breaking

the fast together to prevent the spread of COVID-19.⁵⁸ This irked many netizens, who particularly criticized Jokowi's double standards: thousands of guests had attended the wedding party of Jokowi's youngest son Kaesang on 10 December 2022 (before COVID-19 restrictions were lifted), and massive events such as the Blackpink concert in Jakarta on 11 March 2023 could also proceed, as could mass gatherings of Jokowi's supporters. Opposition figures, as well as Islamic micro-influencers and the online group Muslim Cyber Army (MCA), instantly jumped on the issue. The former mainly highlighted Jokowi's "hypocrisy"; as Democratic Party member Yan Harahap tweeted (receiving 901 likes and 312 re-tweets and quote-tweets), "What's the deal, Mr Jokowi, officials cannot break the fast together due to COVID-19 but inviting thousands of guests to Kaesang's wedding is fine?"⁵⁹ Hypocrisy (a common theme in Islamic anti-government criticism) was also emphasized by the latter group, who added the familiar narrative that "Jokowi's regime" is "anti-Islam". MCA tweeted:

Islamophobia in the biggest @Muslim country. Jokowi regime shows #islamophobia towards Muslims in the holy month of Ramadhan. Muslims are prohibited from breaking the fast together for the reason of COVID-19.⁶⁰

This sentiment was also spread and amplified by anti-Jokowi influencers and buzzers, whose online discourse often overlapped with that of Islamic micro-influencers. As one of the most re-tweeted and quote-tweeted posts put it:

⁵⁸ Approximately 25,800 posts on Twitter mentioned the issue on 22–23 March 2023, of which the majority consisted of re-tweets or quote-tweets of negative or sceptical reactions to Jokowi's decision (author-compiled data).

⁵⁹ Twitter, @YanHarahap, 23 March 2023.

⁶⁰ Twitter, @MCAOps, 23 March 2023.

Jokowi's regime shows Islamophobia towards the Muslim community that is fasting in the Holy Month of Ramadhan. The Islamic community is being prohibited from breaking the fast together in public places on the pretext of COVID-19 [sceptical emoticon]. Didn't President Jokowi already lift the COVID-19 emergency [sceptical emoticon]. #RegimePKI #IslamPhobia⁶¹

This type of controversy could undercut any progress the government had made in gaining the public's trust in its COVID-19 policies. Throughout Indonesia's experience with the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen public sentiments wavering between trust and distrust, clearly influenced by the infodemic and information wars taking place on social media. The government's approach in attempting to rally the population behind its policies has also wavered between punitive measures (clampdown on hoaxes, police raids to enforce discipline, and fines or dismissal for those refusing vaccination) and "soft" public persuasion by means of slick mass media campaigns and aggressive influencing campaigns on social media with the use of buzzer armies. In the end, however, citizens made their own decisions, and it was the everyday reality of the pandemic that had the strongest impact on the choices they made; for instance, on whether to get vaccinated.

Acute danger was perhaps the most significant factor in persuading Indonesians to get vaccinated. This was the case during a terrifying period, from June to August 2021, which became known as Indonesia's "summer of death", in which many thousands of Indonesians succumbed to COVID-19; the exact numbers remain unknown as COVID-19 deaths in Indonesia remain vastly underreported.⁶² This grim reality had an

⁶¹ "PKI" in the hashtag "#RezimPKI" refers to the Indonesian Communist Party. This post on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/GheaJhanaLie7/status/1638629100997980160>) had around 114,700 views and received 1,660 Likes and 2,550 comments, with 542 re-tweets and 35 quote-tweets. It was posted by an account named @GheaJhanaLie7, which appears to be one of the larger fake "buzzer" accounts from the opposition.

⁶² For the most reliable figures, see the website of *LaporCovid-19*, a grassroots-driven civil society organization formed in March 2020 to fill the gaps in Indonesia's official COVID-19 figures, <https://laporcovid19.org>

acute effect on Indonesians' perceptions of vaccination. On one hand, the Sinovac vaccine was now widely perceived as inadequate, as it did not prevent the fatalities. On the other hand, the awareness hit home that one needed to protect oneself by getting inoculated as soon as possible, and that a Sinovac vaccine was still better than nothing. Most Indonesians thus came to accept COVID-19 vaccination as a life-saving necessity. By the second half of 2021, as Indonesia began receiving large batches of AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Moderna vaccines under the WHO's global redistribution programme COVAX (COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access), vaccine hesitancy significantly dwindled. By January 2023, 75.6 per cent of the total population had received their first dose and 64.8 per cent was fully vaccinated with two doses.⁶³

Nonetheless, Indonesia's relatively successful vaccination programme did not entail the end of the COVID-19 infodemic. COVID-19 conspiracy theories continue to thrive on Indonesian social media, as evidenced by the frequency of new additions to the hoax buster section on the government's COVID-19 website. It is likely that new COVID-19 waves will also drive new waves of public scepticism, rumours and conspiracy theories, so long as public distrust of the government's COVID-19 policies persists. Perceived hypocrisy or double standards also do not help in gaining the public's trust. Neither does the lack of transparency in reporting official figures of COVID-19 cases and deaths. If the government is serious about increasing the public's trust and confidence during a deadly pandemic, it needs to focus less on promotional or propaganda campaigns and more on providing reliable information and proper guidance. In addition, the government would do well to take people's anxieties and concerns seriously during a pandemic, rather than taking a strictly punitive approach to non-compliance and false information.

⁶³ World Health Organization Indonesia, "Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report, No. 98", 24 January 2023, https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/searo/indonesia/covid19/external-situation-report-98_24-january-2023.pdf?sfvrsn=110014fe_12

Lessons can also be learnt from best practices in pandemic response, which in Indonesia, can be found at the regional level. From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, local governments in various regions have demonstrated that a form of “collaborative governance”—based on social solidarity and active community engagement—is the most effective approach in heightening the public’s trust and participation;⁶⁴ this proved to be vital in combating both the pandemic and the infodemic. In Salatiga, for example, the municipal government used social media productively, providing accurate information in daily COVID-19 updates and practical guidance on social services, while actively soliciting comments from residents who received direct responses from officials. Residents were also asked in online surveys about further information and assistance they might need, which officials then acted upon in collaboration with community organizations.⁶⁵ This kind of community-oriented consultation and collaboration can significantly alleviate citizens’ anxieties and concerns, which naturally reduces the inclination to search social media for answers and alternative truths.

The central government could learn from such examples of good governance at the local level and how these demonstrate that information cannot be a top-down process that is not followed up by action.

⁶⁴ Rebecca Meckelburg, “Indonesia’s COVID-19 Emergency: Where the Local is Central”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 43, no. 1 (2021): 31–37; Haryanto, “Public Trust Deficit and Failed Governance”.

⁶⁵ Meckelburg, “Indonesia’s COVID-19 Emergency”.

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