

Research article

Taming Two Waves of the Covid-19 Pandemic: The Case of Indonesia

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Abstract. On 6 October 2021, the Nikkei Covid-19 Recovery Index ranked Indonesia as 54 out of 120 countries in the world. This placed Indonesia as the best ASEAN country in its response to the Covid-19 pandemic; this was compared to Malaysia which was ranked 102, Singapore at 70, and Thailand at 109. The Indonesian policy for the Covid-19 pandemic in principle consisted of two policies of guided lockdown: PSBB (in January 2021 when confronting the first wave of the pandemic) and PPKM (in July 2021 when confronting the second wave). The Covid-19 pandemic unveiled two concerning problems of national development in Indonesia: intra-ministry coordination and public communication. The success of the Government of Indonesia's policy to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic was mostly due to the determination of the Government directed by President Joko Widodo. On the other hand, as a consequence of these policies, the national development plan of Indonesia to realize the vision of 'Indonesia Maju' was disrupted. This success of addressing the problems of intra-ministry coordination and communication contributed to an important achievement for Indonesia.

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic affected Indonesia in two waves in different time period. The first wave happened on January 2021 while the second wave occurred on July 2021. In response to the first wave of Covid-19 pandemic, Indonesia implemented the policy called Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar or PSBB. This policy was then changed to Pemberlakuan Pembatasan Kegiatan Masyarakat or PPKM that is claimed to be more detailed and well-coordinated in facing the second wave.

Indonesian government under President Joko Widodo administration seems had learnt best practices on how to handle this pandemic as reflected in confronting the second wave. Thus, they were able to implement good response to this, better compare to the response for the first. This results in Nikkei Covid-19 Recovery Index that noted Indonesia as 54th rank out of 120 countries in handling Covid-19 pandemic. Putting

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Indonesia as the best country in Southeast Asia that can rebound from the pandemic effects.

The problem of the Indonesian government in responding the pandemic was not on the type or characteristic of the policy, but more on the problem of coordination and communication, as this article is trying to explain. Coordination in and between ministries (Kementerian) and institutions (Lembaga) is a long manifested problem in Indonesia. This problem made worst the situation when the country confronted the complex national scale of problem during pandemic. In addition to problem on coordination, there has been also problem on public communication.

2. Methods and Data

2.1. Methods

The method in this research used a qualitative approach. According to Creswell, it is used to delve deeper into social phenomena, emphasizing the researcher's interaction with the topic of study (1). By using the qualitative approach, the researcher tried to describe Jokowi's choice of policies in handling Covid-19 pandemic and how it translated and socialized to the public.

2.2. Data

Data in this research was collected by conducting document studies and interviews. Document study techniques will be obtained from government data, official reports from international organizations such as the United Nations, official reports from the related ministries, articles, and other supporting journals. News can be obtained through official sites such as the ministries news portal, print media, or those accessed through online sites.

3. Results

This section is divided into the following subsections: a) A Global Pandemic, b) First Wave of Pandemic in Indonesia, c) Second Wave of Pandemic in Indonesia, d) What Covid-19 Pandemic Unveiled.

3.1. A Global Pandemic

The new coronavirus – scientifically identified as Covid-19 – broke first in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province, China in December 2019. The Covid-19 disease spread widely in a short period of time. A week after the first case reported, there were more than a hundred new patients infected. The local government in Beijing, China finally decided to isolate Wuhan. People were restricted to transport in and out from this city. Few days later, the isolation policy widely implemented across Hubei Province. Anticipating massive confirmed cases, China even built hospital specifically designated for treating and doing quarantine to the infected patients, as the virus transmitted from people-to-people (2).

The World Health Organization on March 11 2020 declared Covid-19 as global pandemic. The status are announced after coronavirus infected 125 thousand people and killed thousand others around the world (3). To prevent the spread, health protocols was suggested to be implemented in daily life, bringing the so-called new normal situation in the middle of the society. Wear mask, wash hands regularly and watch distance for 2 metres from each other became new campaign worldwide.

Lockdown in Wuhan and Hubei Province successfully implemented by such massive support. The Chinese government has allocated right amount of fund for Wuhan and Hubei Province during lockdown period. It was quite unexpected when the people themselves—businessman, professionals, and others—also volunteered to show support amidst difficult times their own way. Government and citizen were hand-in-hand fighting Covid-19 during lockdown period that proven as the most effective. Compared to policies implemented in many other cities around the world.

However, lockdown was no the only policy choice available, reflected to Japan's experience that never applied lockdown at the first outbreak. Further, in the beginning of the pandemic, Japanese government was not applying the social restriction policy, even as the time goes, they finally forced the policy to its citizen under the supervision of the police and military stating that Japan faced the same pandemic and same policies must be implemented. Japan might became one of the first countries infected by Covid-19 pandemic after China. However Japan did not experience the wave of Covid-19, different from other densely populated country at the same period of time. Japan did not even close her border and airport for foreigners at that time. Flights and tourism industries could be operated as usual. Malls, restaurants, and other economic activities can run as scheduled and people lived normal live. More citizen wore masks than before, as

this scene is actually quite a common thing for Japanese when in public transport and in crowd. (4)

Another lockdown, on the other hand, precisely caused chaos in India instead. India's social structure, with large number of the poor and jobless population in big cities, made the choice of implementing lockdown seemed counter-productive. Prime Minister Narendra Modi then cancelled the policy and even stated his apology in public for his careless policy. (5)

Social riots actually did not just happen in developing countries. Looting and community resistance to the officers also happened in Italy and some states in the United States of America. As the effect of the pandemic, the world experienced global economic recession that is similar to great economic depression in 1930.

3.2. The First Wave of Pandemic in Indonesia

The first outbreak in Indonesia was announced by the President Joko Widodo himself on March 2 2020, three months after the first outbreak happened in its origin, Wuhan. The government of Indonesia explained there were two patients infected, a mother and her daughter, who lived in Depok, West Java. Both patients then were being treated in Sulianti Saroso Hospital, North Jakarta before fully recovered on 16 March 2020 (6).

Anticipating the increasing number of populations infected, Indonesian government had to make choice of policies in response to the spread of the virus. Every public policy, especially in times of crisis was definitely no easy choice. The choice of policy Indonesian government took, was no exception, soon later also facing criticism.

Indonesian government choice of response to prevention and control of Covid-19 infections was to balance the economic and health sectors. This was not an easy choice decided by the President himself, taking into considerations the characteristic of the region, the spread of the people and settlement, as well as social class in Indonesia. Poverty still became the biggest problem. Millions of people still live near the poverty line. Therefore, government of Indonesia chose to implement the so-called Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar or PSBB that was announced directly by the President himself (7).

As a continuation to this policy, a Covid-19 Task Force was established. This new institution role was to coordinate all effort taken by ministries and institution to handle the effect of the pandemic. It also became the only trusted source of information for the people who wants to keep updated of the virus. The task force was led by the Head of National Board for Disaster Management, Doni Monardo.(8)

At first, this policy faced criticism from the former President of Indonesia Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and former Vice President Jusuf Kalla. These elites criticized the social restrictions policy made by the government, and suggest publicly the better option of lockdown. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono or SBY reminded the existing government to be more serious to handle Covid-19. (9). SBY thought that the policy of social restriction by the government as an undirected policy, equivocal and unrealistic. However, a week after SBY corrected his critic, he said that government's policy was right and there was no need for lockdown implementation in Indonesia. He also advise the public to help the government by adhering the policies. Shall there be recommendations, he suggested as well to be delivered in proper manner (10)

On 23 March 2020, President Joko Widodo gave explanations to the press after holding a meeting related to Covid-19. President announced the new emphasize to the previous policy in the form of PSBB. This announcement also neutralized the controversy of lockdown that coming to surface in the past week. He clearly stated that Indonesia cannot imitate other countries' policy as it is because of differences in the country area, number of population, level of discipline, geographical condition, and the fiscal situation. Therefore Indonesia was careful enough to formulate best strategy by taking into account public health as the top priority (11). The government of Indonesia, as stated by President Joko Widodo, emphasized that PSBB is the best option Indonesia can afford to face the pandemic.

3.3. The Second Wave of Pandemic in Indonesia

Second wave of Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia came in July 2021. This time, the wave was caused by new variant of Covid-19, delta variant that reportedly resulted in a very high number of confirmed cases in many countries abroad because of its faster spread. The government once again was under the pressure to implement a good policy to respond to this second wave of pandemic.

Being consistent with his policy from the first outbreak, President Joko Widodo still did not see lockdown as an option for Indonesia. He then announced the implementation of emergency activities restriction policy or Pemberlakuan Pembatasan Kegiatan Masyarakat (PPKM) Darurat from 3 to 20 July 2021. However, this policy at first was not implemented nationwide. It specifically designated to Java and Bali islands due to the large number and fast movement of people within these two densely populated islands. (12)

Under this policy some more tight restrictions applied. Non-essential sector workers must all work from home. Students do the online learning. Traditional and modern market that sells basic needs can operate only until 8p.m. with 50 percent maximum capacity. Malls, sport facilities, social and cultural to prayer facilities are closed. Restaurant can only take online order for delivery without dine in facility. (13)

Differ from the first wave control effort, this time the Coordinating Minister for Maritime and Investment, Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan was directly pointed by the President himself as the coordinator for the PPKM Darurat implementation and evaluation. (14) The task force, on the other hand, shifted roles mostly as the agent for habitual changes campaign to new normal amidst pandemic era. Later, when the delta variant spread fast across nation, President, again, chose to point Coordinating Minister of Economic Airlangga Hartarto to lead the Covid-19 prevention and control outside Java and Bali. The leadership and coordinating roles had been taken by the ministries, even though the government claimed that they are still in the same Committee that is formed to handle Covid-19 and recover the national economic.

When the second wave of Covid-19 pandemic happened, Indonesia's economic growth has been under 2 percent. Tourism and airlines became two sectors that hit hard by the pandemic. Followed by food industry, entertainment industry and Small Medium Enterprises. Non-formal economic sectors as the pillar of Indonesian economic might bankrupt if related government did not form a policy that make people confident to go outside their house.

3.4. What Covid-19 Pandemic Unveiled

During the first and second wave of Covid-19 in Indonesia, while executing the social restriction policies, there were some repetitive problems occurred coming from the problem of coordination intra ministries and institutions as well as the problems in public communication.

Latest, chaotic situation happened in Halim Perdanakusuma International Airport in Jakarta, Soekarno Hatta International Airport in Tangerang Banten, and Ngurah Rai International Airport in Bali due to the different policy between Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Transportation regarding the Covid-19 test as the requirement for flight.

Ministry of Home Affairs instructed the governors of provinces in Java and Bali on 18 October 2021 to oblige the traveller to have negative result only from Polymerase Chain Reaction test. It took effect immediately (15). On the other hand, the ones responsible to make the policies regarding the travelling requirement which are the Ministry of

Transportation and The Covid-19 Task Force did not confirm the same regulation. They stated that negative result from Antigen Test was still acceptable. (16) The victim of this inconsistency was surely the traveller themselves, who did not informed well or confused to whom they should follow. They spent more money to take the Polymerase Chain Reaction test, spent more time to wait for the result even some of them should missed their flights because of this sudden and difference in regulations.

Another interesting finding about Indonesian government miscommunication was coming from a non-governmental research organization named Lembaga Penelitian Pendidikan dan Penerangan Ekonomi dan Sosial or LP3ES. It stated that even from the beginning of the pandemic, Indonesian government had a lot of public statements coming from each ministers that made people confuse (17)

As example, the former Ministry of Health Terawan Agus Putranto once told Indonesian citizen to just enjoy their life, while at the same time massive outbreak happened in China that might affect the whole global citizen because the border was not closed yet. Or the policy coming from former Ministry of Tourism and Creative Industries endorsed many influencers to promote Indonesian tourism while other countries were starting to restrict the arrival of foreign tourist even further totally close the borders.

During the first wave, President Joko Widodo himself ever stated that in times of crisis like pandemic era, everyone was not supposed to give statement that made public communication unclear. This was also the reason, according to the President, why international media wrote something bad about Indonesia's Covid-19 prevention and control effort amidst pandemic (18). On the period of second wave, President himself again instructed his ministers to do a good public communications that could bring optimism to the people. All ministries were asked to be more sensitive to people's condition amidst the concern of rising number of the confirmed cases, so that they would not make mistake in giving statement that could give bad impact to the people (19).

4. Conclusion

Every public decision was political and contain certain interest, sometimes emotional. A good public decision is a choice that reflects partiality to public interest that suits the social and economic situation of the people. From this point of view shall we see the implementations of Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar or PSBB and Pemberlakuan Pembatasan Kegiatan Masyarakat or PPKM. The debates on best practice should be based to the condition and characteristic of the society amidst the difficult situation.

The experience of China, Japan and Indonesia (despite of the decision of lockdown versus social distancing) has shown that good health protocols are the ones taken by an effective government supported by its citizen. Besides, a good economical foundation is coming from the ability to produce the essentials domestically. Basically, economic resilience becomes a key for a country to face the security threats, that nowadays not coming from military but from a global pandemic.

Post-presidential election political situation still become a challenge to President Joko Widodo administration in handling Covid-19. The opposition still, to some point, criticized the policies that later proven effective to prevent and control Covid-19 spread.

Social restriction policies become a proof that Indonesian government put into consideration the social economic and cultural situation of its people. This policy was also followed by the social safety net policies that bring incentives to the impacted population. The Indonesian government is confident that balancing the economic and health sector amidst pandemic is inevitable.

Criticism towards PPKM was lower than PSBB. This is because the government has effectively implemented the restriction before and as the time goes are quite fast to correct the problems on coordination and communications.

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