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Populist Anti-Scientism, Religious Polarisation, and Institutionalised Corruption: How Indonesia's Democratic Decline Shaped Its COVID-19 Response

Marcus Mietzner[1]

Abstract

There is widespread agreement that compared to most other states in Southeast Asia, Indonesia's central government has offered a poor response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak. The government of President Joko Widodo initially ignored the threat, and when it did react, the crisis policies were piecemeal and confusing. But what explains this outcome? It would be easy to attribute Indonesia's response to its lower middle-income status or its democratic governance structures that lack strong repressive capacity. With countries poorer and more democratic than Indonesia performing better, however, this explanation is unsatisfactory. Going beyond simple development and regime categories, this article proposes that Indonesia's COVID-19 response was the result of its specific process of democratic decline in the last decade. This backsliding produced intensifying populist anti-scientism, religious conservatism, religio-political polarisation, corruption and clientelism, as well as assertiveness among anti-democratic actors. Ultimately, these segmental factors combined into a toxic mix that severely constrained Indonesia's ability to effectively respond to a massive external shock such as COVID-19.

Keywords

Indonesia, democracy, authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, governance

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Governments around the world have struggled to find the most appropriate response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak and its economic repercussions. Leaders have weighed dilemmatic options, experimented with unprecedented measures, and frequently changed their mind during extremely fluid circumstances (Wheeler, 2020). In such a context of historic chaos, no government has been flawless. Yet, it is clear, even as the crisis continues, that some countries have dealt with the outbreak better than others, and that a number of states' responses have been particularly poor. Southeast Asia is no exception in this regard. Malaysia and Vietnam, for example, have been widely praised for their reactions, with the latter especially singled out because it is one of the region's poorest nations (Fleming, 2020). Others, by contrast, have been criticised for first systematically ignoring the problem, and then offering piecemeal and ineffective policies to contain the spread. Myanmar has been in this category (Kipgen, 2020), but more importantly, Indonesia as well. As the country with the world's fourth-largest population, Indonesia's response to the crisis was exceptionally relevant, as a massive outbreak there had the potential of killing many thousands of people and threatening the health security of its neighbours as well (Hodge, 2020). Thus, Indonesia's approach was crucial not only to the survival of its own citizens but to the global campaign against COVID-19 too.

By most accounts, Indonesia's central government struggled considerably to produce a fast, coherent and effective policy to mitigate the crisis (Lindsey and Mann, 2020). In March, the World Health Organization (WHO) asked Indonesia for a more serious response, while Jakarta's foreign diplomats openly criticised the executive's lacklustre campaign (Smith, 2020). In January and February 2020, as the virus crippled China, South Korea, and Iran, Indonesia claimed that it had no cases. Offering reasons that ranged from its tropical climate, ethnic Malays' alleged immunity to the virus, and self-praise for its own (very limited) response, officials assured the public that Indonesia was safe from the virus. It was only in early March that President Joko Widodo (or "Jokowi") reported the first case of COVID-19 in Indonesia. From then on, the government adopted a response that used elements of what other countries had successfully tried (including a sensible socio-economic relief package), but rejected a coherent, strictly enforced stay-at-home regime advocated by medical professionals. Much to the frustration of many local leaders calling for stricter measures, Jokowi refused to heed their advice because he prioritised the preservation of the economy. At the same time, the government under-reported the number of infections and deaths. At the end of March, for instance, it reported 84 deaths in Jakarta, when burial statistics for the month of March suggested that at least 1,300 people must have died of the virus in the capital during that period (Allard et al., 2020).

It would be too easy to explain the Indonesian central government's sub-standard response with the country's status as a lower middle-income country, or its lack of state capacity. As indicated above, countries poorer than Indonesia have responded to COVID-19 more effectively, and the Indonesian state demonstrated its capacity to implement

complex nationwide policies in the past (as in the case of the much-praised birth control campaign, for instance). Similarly, it is tempting to attribute the Indonesian government's inability to execute a cogent COVID-19 strategy to the country's status as a democracy that lacks the repressive implementation apparatus of states such as China, Vietnam, or Malaysia. Other democracies in the East Asian region, such as South Korea and Taiwan, have received accolades for their respective COVID-19 approaches (Hille and Hill, 2020), and Indonesia's post-1998 democracy has no shortage of examples in which the government achieved its goals through a mixture of coercion and politico-economic means – for example, it ended massive student demonstrations in September 2019 by using both sheer force and economic incentives. Hence, the answer to the question of why Indonesia's COVID-19 response was so ineffective must go deeper than the simple categories of development status and regime type.

This article argues that it was the very specific form of Indonesia's democratic decline in recent years that predetermined the government's poor response to the COVID-19 crisis. As will be demonstrated, each segment of this democratic deterioration (Power and Warburton, 2020) contributed in its own way to the executive's failure to develop a better disaster mitigation response. The toxic combination of these influences produced a government reaction that was highly inadequate but reflected the interests of the various actors driving it. In developing these arguments, the article focuses on the five main areas of Indonesia's democratic decline in the last few years, and explores how they have impacted the country's COVID-19 action (or lack thereof). These five areas are rising populism, increasing religious conservatism, escalating politico-ideological polarisation, worsening political corruption and clientelism, and the growing confidence of anti-democratic elite actors. After investigating these areas and their consequences in detail, the conclusion reflects on what these findings mean for both the study of Indonesian democracy and the comparative research on which kind of political systems were best (or worst) prepared to tackle the COVID-19 outbreak. It ends on a rather encouraging note: while Indonesia's central government clearly botched the COVID-19 response, some local leaders and civil society groups filled the void, arguably preventing an even worse outcome.

Rising Populism

One of the trends that have undermined the quality of democracy in Indonesia is the rise of populism since the 2014 elections. Following Cas Mudde (2004: 543), this article posits populism "as a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people." However, as Mudde's ideology-focused concept has been less specific on who exactly the populists are, I also borrow from Levitsky and Loxton (2013: 110) who have described populists as those who "mobilise mass support via anti-establishment appeals, […] rise through prominence outside the national party system" and profess to establish a direct "linkage" to "the people". Thus, populists are those who

style themselves as outsiders to the rotten establishment, claim to fight for the ordinary people against corrupt elites, and proclaim to require no intermediary institutions to identify the people's needs. Ideologically, they can be located on the left or right ends of the political spectrum, but in countries lacking such a spectrum, they often use religious, class or regional identifiers too to build their specific brands.

In Indonesia, the 2014 presidential elections marked a significant defeat for establishment actors. Both presidential candidates in that year were outsiders to the conventional party system, and both portrayed themselves as untainted by corrupt elite politics. Of the two candidates, Prabowo Subianto was the more radically populist, running a Hugo Chavez-style campaign that was nationalist, xenophobic, and rich in attacks on the political status quo (Aspinall, 2015). Jokowi, by contrast, adopted a more moderate style of populism (Kenny, 2019: 54), but he too highlighted that he had a unique way of speaking with and for the people; that he was not entangled in existing party networks; and that self-interested actors had caused the country's problems. As established party leaders watched from the margins how two populists contested the presidency, Jokowi prevailed. Five years later, it came to a rematch between the two men: once again, no leader of a traditional party had proved sufficiently competitive to even nominate for the top executive position. As in 2014, Jokowi emerged victorious, but this time integrated Prabowo into his government. During the campaign, Jokowi had also adopted elements of Islamist populism into his platform (Mietzner, 2020), leading to a post-election landscape in which a conservative Islamic cleric was vice-president and Prabowo, as a right-wing populist, defence minister.

Given their common characteristics, it is not surprising that populists around the world responded to the COVID-19 outbreak in similar ways (Lassa and Booth, 2020). In most cases, ruling populists reacted by downplaying the threat, and by accusing their critics of using the issue to disrupt their governments. In the United States, President Donald Trump initially described the threat of the virus as low, saying in January that it is "going to be fine" and, a month later, that "within a couple of days" the number of infections would be "close to zero" (Watson, 2020). At the same time, he called the oppositional Democrat's criticism of his lax attitude a "hoax." In the United Kingdom, Trump's populist counterpart Boris Johnson said as late as early March that "perhaps you could take it on the chin, take it all in one go and allow the disease, as it were, to move through the population without taking as many draconian measures" (Grayling, 2020). In India, Narendra Modi insisted throughout January and February that there were only a handful of cases and no community transmission was occurring, before declaring a bizarre 14-hour curfew for 22nd March (and, later, a full lockdown). His populist colleague Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil refused to implement any systematic lockdown measures as the virus was a "fantasy" and "media trick," and he suggested that somehow Brazilians were immune to the virus (Phllips, 2020).

While populists' reaction to the COVID-19 outbreak was initially almost identical in its anti-scientific, downplaying, and opposition-targeting character, the second wave of responses saw significant differentiation. In countries where populists ruled but where substantive democratic controls still existed, populist leaders were forced by public

pressure to change course. This was the case in the United States and the United Kingdom. While clearly acting against their instincts, these countries' populist leaders instituted strict social distancing and lockdown regimes while providing economic assistance to the suffering population (Walker, 2020). Although Trump's endorsement of lockdowns was short-lived, it came at a crucial period of the pandemic and helped to mitigate the crisis. By contrast, in cases where populists governed without effective democratic controls, the leaders often imposed planless lockdowns that did not primarily serve medical purposes but allowed them to claim extra-constitutional emergency powers. Hungary's Victor Orban, for instance, gave himself the power to rule by decree, and the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte tried to copy that approach. While Duterte had ignored the virus at the beginning, he abruptly changed course in mid-March 2020 and declared a lockdown of Manila and Luzon. In doing so, he obtained emergency powers from parliament, and began to repress critics of his government's handling of the crisis (Holmes and Hutchcroft, 2020).

Indonesia's central government adopted the standard populist response to COVID-19 in the first phase of the crisis. Initially, Jokowi left much of the government's communication on the issue to his health minister, Terawan Putranto. Jokowi had appointed Terawan in October 2019 because he was the doctor in charge of his mother's cancer treatment. Tellingly, the Indonesian Medical Association had warned the president not to select him, given his notoriety for unapproved treatments. Living up to this reputation, Terawan speculated in February that Indonesia had no official COVID-19 cases because its citizens prayed so much (Nurita, 2020). Otherwise, he recommended Indonesians just to eat healthily and relax. Echoing Bolsonaro, another health official even suggested Indonesians were immune because of their Malay race (Mawardi, 2020). Government circles also pushed the line – often used by Trump as well – that warmer weather was hostile to the virus, and that Indonesia therefore had good chances of avoiding it (Wuragil, 2020). Far from mobilising emergency capacities to prepare for a COVID-19 outbreak at home, Jokowi stated that he wanted to attract more tourists during the crisis, going against international practices of limiting rather than encouraging further mobility (Prasetia, 2020). As would become clear later, during this phase of government ignorance of COVID-19 as a potential threat to Indonesia, the virus was already rapidly spreading in the country.

Following the announcement of the first Indonesian COVID-19 case in early March, Jokowi eclectically adopted parts of the divergent second-phase strategies of populists outlined above. This led to a fragmented and ineffective policy platform. On 15th March, the president issued a vague call to "work, study and pray" at home, but stopped short of issuing a clear, nationally binding stay-at-home order. At the same time, he asked local leaders to not institute lockdowns on their own. After some local government chiefs ignored this order and declared such lockdowns (among others, in Papua), Jokowi signed regulations on 31st March that set out the parameters for mobility limitations sanctioned by the central government. However, each of the 34 provinces and 540 cities and districts had to individually apply to the health minister for approval of such limitation rules. Once approved in principle, local governments could define for their areas what

exactly those limitations should look like. Consequently, a hotchpotch of regulations emerged, with some regions not applying for any limitations at all, and others designing quasi-lockdowns and strict stay-at-home frameworks.

Jokowi explained his refusal to declare a more coherent and strictly enforced stay-at-home regime with his concern for the economy, which he wanted to see continue operating (Deslina, 2020). While such economic fears were obviously well-founded, Jokowi's prioritisation of the economy over the medical COVID-19 response once again echoed Trump, who publicly mused whether it was justified to sacrifice the economy in order to save the life of patients infected with the corona virus. Channelling the mantra that the cure should not be worse than "the problem," Trump declared on 24th March that he envisaged the economy to re-open within three weeks, going against his medical advisers. But unlike Jokowi, Trump temporarily suspended this idea when his medical officials showed him graphics that predicted more than 2 million people would die in the United States if social distancing restrictions were lifted too early. Jokowi was reportedly shown similar statistics on 28th March (Eliott, 2020), with a worst-case scenario calculating a death toll of 7.5 million people (based on a 70 per cent infection rate and 1 to 4 per cent mortality). Obviously, these numbers did not convince Jokowi to opt for a tighter regime.

While Jokowi did not take the turn that Trump and Johnson took by endorsing strict containment measures, he also did not follow down the path of Orban and of Duterte in seeking emergency powers. If anything, Jokowi seemed unwilling to exercise the power he had to implement nationwide lockdown policies. Instead, he focused on the economic side of the crisis – something he felt much more comfortable doing than conveying the hard facts of the virus' spread and containment to a confused society. In his brief and unstructured press conferences, Jokowi typically said very little about the virus itself, but went into some detail when explaining the government hand-outs that were offered to citizens hit by the crisis (Ihsanuddin, 2020). The government's economic relief package, announced in late March, had an initial value of around US$25 billion, and was increased to US$43 billion in May. Jokowi received praise from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for this package, and deservedly so. But in a strange reversal of the situation in the Philippines and India, where populist leaders had declared lockdowns without preparing their societies for the economic repercussions, Jokowi offered sensible economic emergency relief without developing a coherent regime of containing the virus. In other words, citizens were offered some protection from the economic repercussions of the virus, but not from the virus itself.

Indonesia's populist streak, then, had serious consequences for how the COVID-19 outbreak was handled in Indonesia. Three of these consequences particularly stood out. First, in line with other populists, Jokowi allowed a strong anti-scientific sentiment to inform his decision-making. Even after the illusion that prayers and racial genes protected Indonesians from the virus had burst, senior cabinet ministers continued to promote remedies that lacked scientific credibility – such as eucalyptus inhalers or coconut oil (Adjie and Prawira, 2020). Second, Jokowi's openly declared fear that a medically prescribed lockdown could destroy his economic legacy was a position that populists

were much more likely to articulate than non-populist governments. Indeed, the majority view among most non-populist governments (and even among many authoritarian ones) was that the short-term attempt to save millions of lives from the virus took precedence over economic protection. Indonesia, rather tragically, seemed to believe it could offer the latter through a watered down version of the former. Finally, like other populists, Jokowi also felt that his opponents misused the crisis to undermine him, with his senior aide Luhut Pandjaitan expressing this sentiment publicly (Detik, 2020). We shall return to this theme in the section on how religio-polarisation influenced Jokowi's crisis response.

Increasing Religious Conservatism

Intertwined with the rise of populism, Indonesia has also seen increasing religious conservatism in recent years. The watershed in this regard has been the year 2016, when an Islamist mass movement against the Christian-Chinese governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (or "Ahok") attracted much support. Opinion polls showed that the number of Muslims holding religiously conservative and intolerant views rose sharply after this event (Mietzner and Muhtadi, 2019). This rise in Islamic conservatism has also had a significant impact on the political landscape. On the one hand, Jokowi accommodated some Islamist demands into his platform – for instance, he presided over the most extensive anti-LGBTI campaign in modern Indonesian history (Knight, 2018), and he did not improve protections for religious minorities (as many of his pluralist voters expected). As mentioned earlier, he also ran with a conservative Islamic leader as his vice-presidential candidate in 2019. On the other hand, Jokowi criminalised the most hard-line leaders and groups involved in the anti-Ahok movement, banning the Indonesian branch of Hizbut Tahrir and charging other Islamists with a range of offences. Thus, rising Islamic conservatism damaged democracy from two fronts: it further hollowed out minority protections, and it escalated the government's use of repressive instruments against opponents (Power, 2018).

The coalition that Jokowi had built for his 2019 campaign reflected this complex need to keep conservative but mainstream Islamic groups in his tent while confronting the most militant Islamist fringes. A key part of this strategy was Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation. NU has a long history of opposing hard-line Islamist groups, but contains a lot of socio-religiously conservative leaders and followers in its own ranks. Opinion polls indicated that conservatism had risen within NU after 2016 just as in other segments of the Islamic community (Mietzner and Muhtadi, 2020). Ma'ruf Amin, Jokowi's vice-president after 2019, was one such conservative NU leader (at the time of the election, he was the chairman of NU's supreme religious council). In addition to NU itself, the NU-affiliated National Awakening Party (PKB) was a crucial member of the president's alliance arrangements in cabinet and parliament. In the 2019 election, Jokowi had won mainly because of sharp vote increases in NU and PKB strongholds, and its leaders never forgot to remind him of that.

Hence, when considering the government's response to the COVID-19 outbreak, Jokowi had to take the position of NU and other Islamic groups into account. Similar to many church organisations in the United States, however, NU's stance on how to handle the spread of COVID-19 was ambivalent. NU's central leadership issued a fatwa on 19th March that made the obligation to participate in Friday prayers at mosques conditional on the individual's health status and the infection rate of the respective area. This created much confusion, given that the lack of testing made it difficult to separate areas by infection rates. This confusion trickled down to the regions and led to mixed messaging on the ground. In early April, the head of NU's East Java branch (the organisation's largest and most influential) expressed his "confidence" that the pandemic would soon be over in East Java because it had so many saints and clerics (Azmi, 2020). He said that "if you are sick and contagious, don't congregate, just pray at home," implying that everyone else should go to Friday prayers as usual. Similarly, the NU Central Java branch declared in late March that it was an obligation for Muslims in areas "that are still safe from the spread of the virus" to go to Friday prayers, if they were themselves "healthy and without symptoms" (Purbaya, 2020). Thus, many NU branches still wanted their "healthy" members to attend to religious obligations, even when it had become clear that the virus was spreading among asymptomatic carriers and the government was unable to detect them.

But the biggest issue facing Indonesia's Muslim groups (and the government) was how to deal with the celebrations surrounding Eid al-Fitr, Islam's most sacred holiday. Each year, around 20 million Indonesians make their way from the urban centres to their home villages in the regions to mark the occasion, a process referred to as *mudik*. In 2020, Eid al-Fitr fell on 24th May, creating the prospect of a mass migration from the cities (where the virus was spreading more intensely) to the countryside at the peak of the crisis. In the eyes of most medical experts, this high risk of Eid al-Fitr increasing infection rates in rural areas made it essential to ban *mudik* travel. But Indonesia's Muslim organisations were, again, ambivalent. While sending out messages that, in various manifestations, recommended not practicing *mudik* in 2020, most stopped short of a ban. The secretary-general of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second-largest Muslim organisation, stated in early April that it "was not a problem" if Muslims did not practice *mudik* as it was not a requirement of the scripture (Pertana, 2020a). Using similarly soft language, an NU spokesman in Yogyakarta said that *mudik* was neither mandatory nor banned, but asked Muslims to "consider" whether it was necessary (Pertana, 2020b). Unhelpfully, he added that it depended on the areas from which the potential travellers originated, and where they wanted to go.

It appeared, then, that Indonesia's largest Muslim organisations did not want to attract the wrath of their followers for banning their most anticipated holiday of the year. While calling on the government to ban the *mudik*, they refused to use their immense religious and moral authority to issue a ban of their own. The government, on the other hand, wanted these Muslim groups to take the lead in stopping the *mudik* because it too was afraid of a backlash from the Muslim community if it imposed a ban. In a climate of rising personal piety and conservatism, Jokowi apparently feared that he would be seen

as anti-Islamic if he went ahead with such an executive ban, and some of his opponents fuelled that anxiety. His former military chief, Gatot Nurmyanto, who wanted to challenge him in the 2019 elections but failed to get nominated, accused the government in March 2020 of harbouring a "phobia" towards mosques, because it had suggested to pray at home (Rosmayanti, 2020). It was pressures such as this, in combination with Jokowi's other predispositions against a more wide-ranging lockdown described in the previous section, which led to lax government COVID-19 policies. Instead of being based on medical necessities, the government's response was eroded by a host of religious and other qualifications that rendered it ineffective.

In the case of *mudik*, the president's unwillingness to risk alienating parts of the Muslim community was particularly consequential. As the discussion in government circles about how to stop the outflow of Eid al-Fitr travellers to the regions dragged on, thousands of them pre-empted the executive by leaving to their hometowns early. Many had lost their jobs, and hoped for a better (and cheaper) existence in the countryside. By late March, rural areas in Java recorded a dramatic spike in arrivals from the cities: the migration that the government said it wanted to prevent but was unwilling to ban had already begun, spreading the virus beyond the metropolitan areas. In despair, the sultan of Yogyakarta compared the looming *mudik* to a "bomb," estimating that 50 to 60 per cent of travellers from the Greater Jakarta area were infected and about to trigger an infection spike in his area (Pertana, 2020c). Ultimately, the president issued a nominal ban on the *mudik* on 21st April and froze most regional transportation links. But on 5th May, the government re-opened these links and issued a long list of reasons to get exempted from the travel ban. Under the cover of these exemptions, thousands more left the capital to the regions (there was visible overcrowding at airports in the days after flights were re-opened), while the president declared that what he had banned was the *mudik*, not the use of transportation.

Escalating Polarisation

Indonesia's increasing religious conservatism went hand-in-hand with gradually intensifying polarisation. The country has traditionally seen a divide between those who believe Islam should be the guiding principle for state organisation and policy, and those who argue that the state needs to be religiously pluralist. This polarisation was strong in the 1950s, but temporarily moderated during periods of autocratic rule and post-authoritarian reform. However, in the 2014 and 2019 elections, in which only two candidates competed, the religio-political polarisation reached new heights (Warburton, 2020). In broad terms, Jokowi was seen as the representative of the pluralist camp in Indonesian politics, while Prabowo aligned with the Islamist side. The level of this polarisation was expressed in the fact that Jokowi drew the vast majority of non-Muslim voters – in 2019, he attracted 97 per cent of them. This was despite his concurrent attempt to appeal to conservative but non-radical Muslims, highlighting that most voters continued to perceive the Jokowi–Prabowo rivalry within the framework of the pluralist–Islamist divide (Pepinsky, 2019). In both camps, the view prevailed that anti-democratic measures

against the opposite side were justified as it posed an existential threat to Indonesia's ideological foundations (Aspinall and Mietzner, 2019b). Polarisation, then, became a major driver of Indonesia's democratic decline.

However, the personnel involved in this cleavage began to change after the 2019 elections. Prabowo, apparently now aware that he can not win without the non-Muslim vote, joined the Jokowi government, broke with his Islamist allies, and approached the pluralist (and ruling) Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) to discuss a potential alliance in the next presidential elections in 2024. As a result, many Islamist groups shifted their allegiance to Anies Baswedan, the governor of Jakarta. Anies had played a key role in the 2016 mobilisation against Ahok, and he had defeated him in the subsequent gubernatorial elections with the help of a host of Islamist and ultra-conservative groups. Afterwards, polls showed him as a leading contender for the 2024 presidential elections, and following Prabowo's "defection" to the government's side, he emerged as the most likely Islamist standard bearer in that upcoming contest. Palace insiders reported that Jokowi and his pluralist allies too began to view Anies as their biggest threat.[1]

Accordingly, when the COVID-19 outbreak began, with Jokowi as president and Anies in charge of the capital, it was to be expected that the politico-ideological polarisation would impact the campaign against the virus. But even experienced observers were shocked at the intensity with which the cleavage damaged the containment efforts. Jokowi and Anies developed diametrically opposed approaches to fighting the outbreak, and the president did everything in his power to obstruct his rival's actions (Sulaiman, 2020). As mentioned previously, Jokowi argued for a soft and locally diversified regime of social distancing measures that would allow the economy to continue running wherever possible. His government stuck to unrealistically low infection and death rates, presumably to calm the population, and it was reluctant to stop the high-risk *mudik* migration. Anies, unsurprisingly, chose the opposite approach. He advocated for a strict lockdown of the capital, published and endorsed death counts that were much higher than the official numbers, and intended to shut down bus links to the countryside in order to keep Jakartans from spreading the virus elsewhere.

Many ultraconservative Islamist leaders who viewed Anies as their most likely ally for 2024 quickly endorsed Anies' stance. Usually not known for their defence of strictly scientific positions, they produced a wide range of theological and strategic reasons for why Muslims should not go to the mosque during the pandemic. Among them was Rizieq Shihab, the firebrand leader of the 2016 anti-Ahok movement. From his exile in Saudi Arabia (where he resided since 2017 after the police had charged him with various offences), Rizieq emphasised that Muslims should stay away from mosques for the duration of the outbreak because otherwise they could be blamed for spreading the virus – presumably by the Jokowi government. In a statement on 20th March, he said that "We have to avoid having someone at the mosque get ill and then have the mosque be accused of spreading the virus because it continued to hold Friday prayers" (IPAC, 2020: 3). Echoing Rizieq, another prominent Islamist preacher, Abdul Somad, delivered sermons in which he explained the theological justifications for stay-at-home orders.

The clash between Jokowi and Anies broke into the open after the president issued a vague call on 15th March for Indonesians to "work, study and pray" at home. Anies, believing that this was a binding call, ordered Jakarta's mass transportation services to dramatically reduce their operation frequency. But as it turned out, the president's call was a recommendation, not an order, and many employers thus continued to ask their workers to come to work. As a result, Jakartans tried to squeeze into the few available buses and trains, further increasing the infection risk. Jokowi subsequently ordered Anies to return public services to normal capacity. In response, Anies declared his own state of emergency for Jakarta on 20th March, giving him greater authority to enforce stay-at-home and social distancing regulations. With his new authority, Anies reduced the services of public transport again on 22nd March, but Jokowi's transport ministry refused to endorse the complete shut-down of railway commuter services that Anies and the heads of Jakarta's surrounding cities and districts wanted.

Further incidents aggravated the tensions between the president and the Jakarta governor. On 30th March, Anies decided to stop the long-distance bus traffic between Jakarta and the regions (Supriatin, 2020). Given his strong roots in the Islamic community, Anies had less to fear than the president as far as a possible backlash from Muslims for obstructing the *mudik* was concerned. On the same day, Jokowi complained publicly that thousands of Jakartans had already began their holiday migration, implicitly blaming Anies for driving them out of the capital through his strict shut-downs. But at the same time, he ordered his senior minister Luhut Pandjaitan to overturn Anies' ban on inter-regional buses, ensuring that the vehicles that facilitated the exodus kept operating. Still on the same day, Anies asked Jokowi to approve a partial quarantine of the capital, but the presidential spokesman announced shortly afterwards that this request had been declined. Instead, the president reminded everyone that declaring quarantines was the responsibility of the central government, and that he had no intention of ordering such drastic steps.

Anies' increasing frustrations culminated in a public outburst in early April. By that time, the president had issued emergency regulations that asked all regions that wanted to introduce social distancing measures to submit an application – backed up by various statistics and documents – to the health minister. In response to this bureaucratic hurdle, Anies told a newspaper on 5th April (Syakriah, 2020) that "it is as if we are proposing a project that needs a feasibility study. Can't the ministry see that we are facing a rising death toll? Is that not enough?" On the day before, the international news agency *Reuters* had suggested that at least 1,300 excess deaths in Jakarta for the month of March had to be attributed to the COVID-19 outbreak (as mentioned earlier, the official number of fatalities for Jakarta at that time was 84). Asked by *Reuters* about these numbers, Anies confessed that "I'm struggling to find another reason [for these statistics] than unreported COVID-19 deaths" (Allard et al., 2020). But Anies' outburst did nothing to soften the central government's opposition to Anies' push for a more effective stay-at-home regime in Jakarta. On 6th April, the Health Ministry refused to endorse Anies' application for stricter regulations in Jakarta, saying that the documents submitted were "incomplete." It was only after a media backlash that the minister ultimately approved the request.

In short, while increasing populism and religious conservatism had put Indonesia in a poor position to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak effectively, the sharpening polarisation prevented a co-ordinated effort by political actors in key positions. This occurred at a time when polarisation at the grassroots had subsided somewhat in the aftermath of the 2019 elections – but it had evidently persisted where it mattered most: among the decision-makers handling the COVID-19 crisis. In the United States, which has a similarly polarised society and elite, a comparable situation prevailed: Trump was accused of withholding essential supplies from areas governed by Democrats he particularly disliked (Mackey, 2020), and the president's supporters alleged that the opposition used the crisis to its benefit. In other, less polarised polities (such as Germany, Australia, or South Korea), co-operation between the government and opposition was significantly better, leading to superior health and economic outcomes. Even in some polities run by populists, such as the United Kingdom, the executive and opposition worked much closer together than in the polarised polities of Indonesia and the United States. Hence, populism alone was not sufficient to obstruct such co-operation – the latter usually failed in the face of deep religio-political elite divisions.

Persisting and Deepening Corruption

Another important feature of Indonesia's democratic decline has been the persistence, and in many cases deepening, of socio-political corruption and clientelism. As Aspinall and Berenschot (2019a) showed in their seminal work on this subject, the introduction of democracy did not reduce the corruption so prevalent under Suharto's authoritarian regime, but simply altered its dynamics and patterns. Indeed, democracy created opportunities for new corrupt and clientelistic practices, especially in relation to the transaction between elected officials and voters. As reforms to the electoral regime gradually increased vote-buying and thus campaign costs (the introduction of an open party list system in 2009 was a particularly important milestone in this regard), politicians winning public office now spend much of their time in these positions to recoup their investment. With public campaign funding and orderly private donation systems near-absent (Minan, 2017), politicians typically engage in budget-scalping and other forms of corruption to fill their pockets, using the proceeds to seek re-election. In this vicious cycle, mismanagement of public funds has become systemic.

In order to mitigate the problem, the Indonesian public and international actors pressured policymakers to establish the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) in the early 2000s (Schütte, 2012). This body proved effective insofar as it arrested numerous party leaders, parliamentarians, ministers, judges, and other officials. But while high-profile convictions attracted much praise (and led to an improvement in Indonesia's score in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index), the overall impact of the KPK's operations remained limited. It could only handle an average of about 100 cases each year, keeping the risk of getting caught small for the vast majority of corrupt politicians. In 2019, however, the political elite managed to decrease this risk even further. In line with other steps that accelerated Indonesia's democratic decline at that time

(Power, 2018), Jokowi and parliament agreed to weaken the KPK by taking away many of its investigation powers. Concurrently, a police officer with a history of hostility towards the KPK was elected its chairman. After he took office, and after the new legislation that undermined KPK's powers came into force, the number of arrests dropped dramatically (Sidarta, 2020). Thus, as corruption persisted, the fight against it was wound back.

One of the sectors most seriously hit by this corruption has been public health. Health budgets have traditionally been attractive to corruptors because state funding is relatively large, and few financial controllers have the courage to scrutinise health-related transactions in fear of being seen as delaying vitally important procurement processes. As a result, millions of dollars are siphoned off the health system each year, leading to sub-standard equipment being bought (or no equipment being bought at all). In one case pursued by the KPK briefly before its powers were cut, Tubagus Chaeri Wardhana, the brother of the former governor of Banten, was accused of systematically targeting health projects across the province in the early 2010s (Prasetyo, 2019). He had arranged for medical equipment contracts to be handed to his friends' companies, which marked up the price for low-quality products. Consequently, hospitals in many areas of Banten received products that were not in line with what they had requested, preventing them from offering satisfactory health services. According to the Indonesian Corruption Watch (2018), this practice has occurred so frequently in other areas as well that it undermined the effectiveness of the Indonesian health system as a whole, making it poorly positioned to handle massive health crises.

But while corruption and clientelism left Indonesia's health system unprepared for the COVID-19 outbreak, they also undermined the effectiveness of the actual crisis response. When the virus first hit, Indonesia's underdeveloped health infrastructure lacked the resources to quickly procure test kits, making Indonesia the country with the lowest level of per capita COVID-19 testing in Southeast Asia. In early April, Indonesia had tested only 36 out of 1 million persons – Vietnam had tested 775, and even Laos had tested twice as many as Indonesia (Bata, 2020). As a result, Jokowi announced 75 trillion Rupiah (US$5 billion) in extra funding for the health sector, much of it to be used for the procurement of test kits, protective gear, and respirators. This announcement sparked a procurement run by private and state-owned enterprises, all keen to obtain such items and then sell them to the government and individual hospitals. As the magazine TEMPO reported (Anam, 2020), much of the equipment procured came from dubious sources, and the quality of the test kits in particular was often low. The government was also unable to give clear specifications as to what kind of equipment it wanted, leading to a wide range of types being procured. One of these transactions involved a firm owned by an ally of former Vice-president Jusuf Kalla, who remained close to Jokowi. Asked about the profits the company made from the sales, its director replied that the items were sold at an "economic" price.

Indonesia's persistent corruption also reduced the potential effectiveness of its socio-economic relief measures. As mentioned above, Jokowi had put together an overall relief package of $43 billion by May, which included the health sector allocation mentioned

above (Hakim, 2020). But more than two-thirds of this sum was set aside for tax incentives, economic stimuli, credit restructuring, and guarantees for businesses (including cash injections for struggling state-owned enterprises). Indonesia's record of managing economic aid packages for the business sector during times of socio-economic upheaval is poor, making it likely that significant portions of the funds will go astray. In 1998, when the government faced a similar economic crisis and tried to mitigate it by extending credit lines to the banks owned by politically well-connected tycoons, up to US$8.6 billion dollars were diverted to saving and reviving their other businesses (Ari, 2000). While it was Suharto who initially launched this programme, the perpetrators of the corruption were protected and mostly freed from further legal and financial responsibility by the government of Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001–2004). Currently, Megawati still chairs PDI-P, of which President Jokowi is a member. The party was a driving force in weakening the powers of the KPK, and it is therefore not expected to insist on strict scrutiny of the emergency funds.

The fact that the government gave itself legal immunity from any prosecution related to its management of the crisis funds did not bode well for a corruption-free disbursement either. Emergency legislation issued in late March included articles that would make it impossible to hold key decision-makers managing the funds to account if they "acted in good will." These stipulations were designed to prevent a repetition of the kind of prosecution experienced by the former head of the Indonesian Bank Restructuring Agency, Syafruddin Temenggung, who was accused of releasing tycoons from their post-1998 loan repayments with very soft conditions. Temenggung had been sentenced to fifteen years in prison in 2018, but was acquitted of all charges a year later. Another case apparently on Jokowi's mind when guaranteeing immunity for the COVID-19 crisis managers was that of Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati, who had been in the same job during the financial crisis of 2008. At that time, she approved the bailout of a bank whose owner had engaged in widespread fraud and corruption. Sri Mulyani resigned as finance minister in 2010 after constant attacks from the opposition over the issue, before resuming her post in 2016. While there was no evidence that she had in any way benefitted from the bailout, the case highlighted how quickly state funds could disappear during crises.

Thus, while corruption and clientelism damage the effectiveness of a polity even in normal times, major socio-political crises amplify their impact. At face value, Jokowi's economic relief package has been impressive, and its size appeared sufficient to alleviate some of the socio-economic pressures created by COVID-19. Similarly, the allocation for medical supplies would normally go some way to cover the most fundamental necessities. But in a context of persistent corruption and weakening controls, such total budget numbers need to be seen in the context of the institutionalised leakage of public expenditure, and the even greater pressure on predators to gain funds in times of crisis. As a result, the government's ability to handle the crisis was much reduced, and the risk of societal conflict increased. Ironically, these were risks raised by anti-corruption watchdogs when the elite decided to weaken the KPK's powers in September 2019 (Hamdani, 2019), but the president and parliament chose to ignore them. It is this systematic

toleration of corruption leakages that forms the strongest argument against interpreting Indonesia's COVID-19 response through the lens of the normal capacity deficit inherent in middle-income countries: Indonesia, a member of the G20 and a one-trillion-dollar economy, has significant resources. But through elite manipulations, not enough of these resources is translated into increased capacity, leaving Indonesia vulnerable to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Anti-Democratic Actors

The actors behind many of the trends that produced Indonesia's democratic decline in recent years have been religio-political elites set on overturning key post-1998 reforms. As early as the late 2000s, these elites – which consist of socio-politically conservative leaders in parties, parliaments, the bureaucracy, religious organisations, and the security agencies – asserted that democratic changes introduced since Suharto's fall have been excessive, and that some of them must be rolled back. While elites have targeted a number of areas for rollback, they have particularly focused on anti-corruption policies as well as civil, electoral, labour, and environmental rights. In this campaign, elite politicians have traditionally confronted liberal civil society groups that try to defend the main achievements of Indonesia's post-1998 democratisation (Lay, 2017). In recent years, however, civil society opposition to anti-democratic elite campaigns has weakened, partly because of the increasing religio-political polarisation that infected NGOs as well. Siding with one of the camps in this societal divide, many otherwise liberal NGO figures gave up their resistance to anti-democratic measures if the latter helped to defend their cleavage position (Aspinall and Mietzner, 2019b). Consequently, anti-democratic actors recorded significant victories in their rollback campaign, among others by weakening the KPK in 2019.

As the COVID-19 outbreak began in Indonesia, many conservative elites saw a fresh opportunity to continue their anti-democratic push. The new social distancing regulations put severe limitations on civil society groups' ability to mobilise protest, creating ideal conditions for conservative politicians in executive and legislative positions to pursue their agenda without much societal attention or opposition. This constellation not only made democracy increasingly vulnerable, but also undermined the fight against COVID-19. At a time when the country's entire government resources were needed to implement stay-at-home regimes, boost the capacity of the health sector, and mitigate the economic impact of the crisis, key officials preferred to concentrate on the chance to more or less secretly work on anti-democratic policy initiatives. While not all of these initiatives succeeded, and others are still in the making, they distracted from the need for an all-out campaign to repair the public health and economic damage created by the virus.

One of the COVID-19 policy responses that conservative elites tried to exploit was the well-meaning initiative to release some convicts early to reduce pressure on the overcrowded prison system. Medically, this made sense, as prisons were breeding grounds for the virus. But such a release required careful management, given the risk that infected

inmates could spread the virus in the community. Thus, the relevant officials should have had their hands full with making the necessary arrangements. However, the justice minister in charge, PDI-P cadre Laoly Yasonna, seemed more interested in using the crisis to secure the release of corruption convicts, who – based on a 2012 regulation – were generally not eligible for early release. Yasonna had tried to revise the 2012 decree since 2015 (Atriana, 2015), but public pressure had temporarily stopped his initiative. As the COVID-19 crisis escalated, Yasonna told parliament on 1st April that he would again seek to change the 2012 regulation to release around 300 corruption convicts over the age of 60 who had served two-thirds of their sentence. Yasonna's proposal distracted from the fact that these corruption convicts were not a major factor in prison overcrowding – much in contrast to the around 47,000 people serving time for personal drug use. After a public backlash, Jokowi clarified that corruption convicts would not be released, but the debate itself had forced senior officials to deal with the issue when their attention was needed elsewhere.

Another policy that conservative politicians advanced in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis was the so-called omnibus bill. Introduced by Jokowi prior to the crisis, the bill proposed to change hundreds of articles in eighty-one existing laws on investment, labour, tax, and environmental issues. It was designed to increase investment by cutting red tape, but it effectively reduced many labour rights legislated after 1998 and almost completely abolished environmental protection requirements for large-scale business and infrastructure projects. Shortly before the COVID-19 outbreak, labour unions and environmental NGOs had begun mobilising demonstrations against the bill, but these came to a halt as the social distancing regulations were put in place. On 3rd April, as much of Indonesia was occupied by the rapidly spreading virus, parliament decided to continue the deliberations on the omnibus bill. What is more, senior economics minister Airlangga Hartarto suggested that most legislators had already agreed to pass it (Puspita, 2020). Indeed, Airlangga offered the omnibus bill as a solution to the economic problems created by COVID-19, calling it "the light at the end of the tunnel" (Fajar, 2020). To appease the unions, Jokowi suspended discussions on the most controversial labour stipulations in the bill in late April, but there was no guarantee that they would be dropped, and deliberations on the rest of the bill continued.

Concurrently, parliament decided to re-activate the deliberations on two other contentious bills: the criminal code bill and the mining bill (Kustiasih, 2020). The deliberations on the criminal code bill had been suspended in September 2019 because of massive student demonstrations that protested against it and the already passed KPK law. Among others, the bill included an article that would have criminalised sexual relationships between persons who are not married, while another stipulation resurrected penalties for insulting the president that the Constitutional Court had scrapped in 2006. Thus, the bill posed a major threat to the civil liberties of Indonesians, both in terms of morally over-regulating their lives as well as limiting their personal freedoms. But many members of parliament were undeterred by the 2019 protests and the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, and insisted that the bill be passed. Similarly, the mining bill, which granted new benefits to coal miners and further reduced environmental protections, was deliberated during the

crisis, and eventually passed in May 2020. As in the case of the omnibus bill, the observance of social distancing rules – especially among educated activists – reduced the likelihood of significant demonstrations against the mining bill, allowing elites to accelerate the legislative process and push through unpopular measures.

Hence, the vested interests of anti-democratic actors – and their increasingly aggressive articulation since the 2010s – diverted the attention of policymakers away from a more effective COVID-19 response. Working on democracy-eroding projects in the middle of the pandemic, legislative and executive leaders not only ignored their main tasks during the disaster, but also introduced new policies that undermined Indonesia's democratic resilience even further. Given the pattern and growing success of this anti-democratic push in the last decade, this should not be surprising. Nevertheless, the blatancy with which elites launched their initiatives at a time of widespread suffering in the population caught many of the civil society groups that normally oppose such measures off-guard. The weakening of Indonesia's democracy, then, hurt the country's crisis management capabilities, but conversely, the pandemic delivered fresh blows to democracy too.

Conclusion

In the debate on Indonesia's democratic decline in recent years, observers have listed numerous adverse effects inherently linked to this trend. Among other consequences, Indonesian citizens have seen their freedoms reduced, the credibility of electoral mechanism has declined, minorities have been pushed to the political and social margins, and control mechanisms of elite behaviour have weakened (Power and Warburton, 2020). But the COVID-19 crisis demonstrated that Indonesia's democratic backsliding has had even more existential repercussions. As the discussion above showed, the various aspects of Indonesian democracy's erosion crippled the country's COVID-19 response in serious ways. While the death toll keeps rising and the exact number will probably never be known, it is clear that Indonesia's intensifying democratic deficiencies cost thousands of people their lives. The Indonesian government was painfully slow to respond, and when it did react, the response was hesitant and fragmented. Initially, it was populist anti-scientism that blinded the government. Subsequently, the executive's response was hampered by its self-perceived inability to go against religious traditions; petty considerations of hurting political rivals; and deep-seated corrupt practices that had damaged the country's health sector prior to the crisis (and continued to damage it during the outbreak).

This outcome stood in sharp contradiction to the claims of populist and other anti-democratic actors who had spearheaded Indonesia's democratic decline in the last decade. In various formats, they had asserted that Indonesia's complex democratic decision-making made governance cumbersome and ineffectual, and that stronger, less constrained leadership was necessary to cut through red tape, reduce corruption, and improve public services. If more evidence was needed that these arguments were self-serving and factually wrong, the COVID-19 crisis delivered it. Not only in Indonesia, populists who had promoted themselves as strong decision-makers turned out to be policy amateurs who did not understand or ignored the medical advice given to them.

Apparently, the removal of democratic controls had not streamlined governance, but had undermined the mechanisms through which non-scientific policies could be prevented from being advanced at the highest policymaking levels. In consequence, the damaged democratic system Jokowi presided over at the time of the COVID-19 outbreak was less prepared for the crisis than earlier manifestations of the polity, especially in the mid-2000s. For instance, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono resolved the separatist Aceh conflict in 2005 based on input from international experts, and even his nationalist critics co-operated in drafting the relevant legislation.

While the COVID-19 crisis has thrown a damning spotlight on the declining state of Indonesia's democracy, it is already obvious that it will cause further deterioration. As we have seen above, anti-democratic actors used the crisis to pursue additional democratic rollbacks, and while Jokowi has not sought the kind of emergency powers Orban and Duterte demanded, he has criminalised critics of his poor handling of the pandemic. On 4th April, Jokowi's police chief sent a letter to all regional police commanders in Indonesia to pay particular attention to citizens who insult "the power holder/president and government officials" in relation to their management of the crisis (Santoso, 2020a). On the night before the letter was sent out, police arrested an activist who had posted a video in which he criticised Jokowi's plan (which was later withdrawn) to declare a state of emergency. While robust in its language, the video's content would not have attracted legal action in other, less defective democratic polities. In line with a previous modus operandi used by police against Jokowi critics, the activist was also accused of possession of pornographic material (Santoso, 2020b). Similar arrests followed, discouraging citizens from speaking out against what was widely seen as incompetent crisis management by the Jokowi government.

Returning to the broader debate on which regime type has been most suitable to respond to the crisis (Kleinfeld, 2020), the Indonesian case sheds some useful light on this issue. With some autocratic regimes (China and Vietnam, for example) and stable democratic states in the region (South Korea and Taiwan) offering effective COVID-19 responses, the case of Indonesia suggests that it is defective and declining democracies that have faced some of the highest hurdles to a professional crisis response. The populist tendency towards simplistic and anti-scientific solutions, which was so prominently on display in Indonesia, also paralysed proper government action in the United States, Brazil, and – initially – the United Kingdom. In all these cases, stronger democratic mechanisms could have led to a quicker and more comprehensive reaction – and not to less decisive measures, as leaders such as Trump and Bolsonaro insinuate. Indeed, the much-maligned established, non-populist democracies (from Germany to New Zealand and South Korea) were much more likely to take science-based, tough decisions to save their populations than the anti-democratic and populist leaders who had come to power railing against such establishment polities. Even when some leaders of defective democracies eventually decided to take action, as Jokowi half-heartedly did, they were constrained by the institutional polity defects that they had helped creating.

The COVID-19 outbreak is certain to have severe political, social, and economic consequences for Indonesia and the world. But while the short- and medium-term

outlook is grim, the long-term consequences are far from predetermined. As with the Great Depression of 1929, deep social upheaval can lead to democratic erosion and collapse, but can also – as in the United States at that time – produce political modernisation. Similarly, the crisis in Indonesia offered some glimpses into alternative leadership models beyond those offered by Jokowi and his allies. For instance, the governor of West Java, Ridwan Kamil, received much praise for his open, transparent, and hands-on approach to the crisis. Indeed, opinion polls showed that citizens viewed the COVID-19 response of local leaders as generally more effective than that offered by the central government (Damarjati, 2020). At the same time, spontaneous civil society activism often substituted for government inaction, with ordinary citizens locking down neighbourhoods, producing masks, or setting up emergency kitchens (Varagur, 2020). Thus, should Indonesia's residual democratic substance survive the pandemic, it is not implausible that its voters could rebuke those seen as responsible for its mismanagement, and replace them with leaders advocating a reformed democratic system strong enough to withstand severe external shocks.

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