

MICHAEL BUEHLER

Indonesia in 2020

Pestilence and Incompetence

ABSTRACT

The coronavirus dominated Indonesian politics in 2020. Rather than propelling Indonesia in new directions, however, the pandemic amplified existing political and societal dynamics.

KEYWORDS: coronavirus, COVID-19, omnibus bill, pandemic, Indonesia

DOMESTIC POLITICS

The global pandemic that had the world in its grip after a coronavirus outbreak in China in December 2019 dominated Indonesian politics, economics, and society throughout 2020. Its fallout will shape the country for years to come. However, the year began with another kind of environmental disaster that has by now become a routine occurrence: the flooding of Jakarta. This time nearly 10% of the capital was inundated, killing 66 people and displacing 60,000. Government officials reacted to the recurring calamity with their usual mix of cynicism and contempt for ordinary citizens. Jakarta's regional secretary Saefullah, the capital's top civil servant, informed the public that water was a feature of life—residents should therefore just “enjoy it” (Sari 2020). He died in September from coronavirus.

Despite the COVID-19 outbreak having occurred in China in December 2019 and the WHO declaring it a “public health emergency of international concern” in January 2020, the government of Indonesia (GoI) reacted only slowly to the threat. In early February, as the magnitude of the outbreak in China became increasingly clear, the GoI suspended all flights to and from

MICHAEL BUEHLER is an Associate Professor in Comparative Politics in the Department of Politics and International Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, UK. Email: <mb107@soas.ac.uk>.

Asian Survey, Vol. 61, Number 1, pp. 106–114. ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2021 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/AS.2021.61.1.106>.

China. At the same time, the GoI denied for weeks that COVID-19 existed anywhere in the archipelago.

Indonesia's health minister, Terawan Putranto, a physician whose license was almost revoked by the Indonesian Doctors Association's Ethics Board in 2018 due to various dubious treatments he had exposed patients to, seemed particularly inept at handling the pandemic. Appointed by President Joko Widodo in October 2019 due to his popularity in military circles, he claimed that prayer had prevented COVID-19 from spreading to Indonesia. Meanwhile, the secretary of the Health Ministry's Directorate-General for Disease Prevention and Control, Achmad Yurianto, told the media that COVID-19 and severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus type 2 (SARS-CoV-2), for which a tourist who had visited Bali had tested positive in February, were two different viruses—hence, there were no COVID-19 cases in Indonesia (Prabowo and Nugraheny 2020). In fact, SARS-CoV-2 is the virus that causes COVID-19. In July Indonesia's agriculture minister, Syahrul Yasin Limpo, announced that his ministry would produce and distribute “anti-coronavirus necklaces” consisting of a plastic pouch on a neck lanyard with a eucalyptus sprig inside. The proposal was ridiculed across the world, but Putranto defended it, saying that the necklace would boost Indonesians' immune system by increasing their confidence (*Guardian* 2020).

In reaction to these blunders, numerous civil society organizations and state agencies criticized the Ministry of Health's handling of the pandemic. The Indonesian Doctors Association (Ikatan Dokter Indonesia) and the Association of Public Health Professionals (Ikatan Ahli Kesehatan Masyarakat Indonesia) blamed the Ministry of Health for a lack of testing capabilities and inadequate supplies of medical equipment. The Ombudsman's Office called the government's information strategy regarding the pandemic “terrible” (*sangat buruk*) (*Tempo* 2020). Even the president's chief of staff, Moeldoko, stated publicly that the GoI could not rely on the Health Ministry in its efforts to overcome the pandemic.

The country reported its first official COVID-19 cases in early March. Subsequently, President Widodo established a National COVID-19 Task Force under the guidance of Doni Monardo, chair of the Indonesian National Board for Disaster Management (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana). In late March, the president declared a public health disaster emergency and imposed large-scale social restrictions (*pembatasan sosial berskala besar*). However, the GoI refrained from implementing the harsh

lockdown measures seen in many other countries, partly because declaring a quarantine would have obliged officials to provide sustenance to people affected by it. The large-scale restrictions were imposed again in September after a spike in COVID-19 infections.

The full impact of the pandemic on Indonesian society, politics, and economics was not clear by year's end. The death toll was steadily mounting throughout 2020, a fact the GoI tried repeatedly to downplay. By year's end, there were over 20,000 confirmed COVID-19 deaths, although a Reuters (2020) report suggested that the actual number was much higher. At least 115 doctors and 88 nurses had died from COVID-19 by September, placing Indonesia among the five countries with the highest casualty rates among medical personnel worldwide (*Jakarta Globe*, September 14).

Authoritarianism and Corruption

The rollback of Indonesia's democratic achievements of the past 20 years continued throughout 2020. Mechanisms to improve accountability and transparency were especially unpopular among Indonesia's political establishment. For example, Interior Minister Tito Karnavian launched yet another attack on direct elections for subnational offices. For several years, he has tried to abolish direct elections for district heads and mayors. This time, he suggested disenfranchising voters in regions with high poverty and low educational attainment (Alam 2020).

In April, Rahmat Mahulette and Ronny Bugis, two policemen, were charged with assault for an acid attack against Novel Baswedan in April 2017. The attack left Baswedan, a senior investigator with the Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, KPK) and a cousin of Anies Baswedan, the governor of Jakarta, partially blind. He has repeatedly denounced the arrest and trial of the two low-ranking police officers and called for their acquittal. He considers the trial a sham intended to protect higher-level personnel in the security apparatus. He pointed to Police Inspector-General Rudy Heriyanto as having undermined a thorough investigation of the case. In July, judges finally sentenced Mahulette and Bugis to 24 and 18 months in prison, respectively, arguing that they had acted purely out of personal anger at the KPK.

Amnesty International called the verdict "theater" (Arsyad 2020), and the Public Legal Aid Institute (Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Masyarakat Indonesia)

said that the two convicts were mere scapegoats for the real perpetrators (*Tribun*, July 18, 2020). The lack of respect for human rights under the second Widodo administration was also shown in October, when the president appointed Brigadier Generals Dadang Hendrayudha and Yulius Selvanus to important posts in the Ministry of Defense. Both generals had been members of the Special Forces Rose Team, which abducted pro-democracy activists between 1997 and 1998. Indonesia's current defense minister, Prabowo Subianto, headed the Special Forces at the time.

Government harassment of the media also continued. In January, the arrest of Philip Jacobsen, a foreign journalist who had attended a meeting of the provincial parliament in Central Kalimantan, sparked a debate over the decline of press freedom in Indonesia. Initially arrested and charged with a visa violation, Jacobsen was held under house arrest in the provincial capital of Palangkaraya and then deported. Observers saw Jacobsen's treatment as part of a growing trend of xenophobia in Indonesian government circles directed at Westerners (Cochrane 2020).

Indonesia's judiciary continued to be marred by corruption and nepotism. At the beginning of the year, the president appointed Daniel Yusmic as the ninth member of the Constitutional Court. An undistinguished academic, Yusmic's appointment suggested that personal loyalty rather than professional credentials continues to shape many of Widodo's personnel decisions. In April, Muhammad Syarifuddin became the 14th Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Indonesia. He will serve until October 2024. Only a few weeks later, the KPK arrested Nurhadi Abdurrachman, the former Supreme Court secretary, for allegedly accepting nine checks and IDR 46 billion (US\$ 3.2 million) in cash related to several court cases between 2011 and 2016. The arrest reminded Indonesians that corruption has undermined the Supreme Court for years.

In July, news broke that Djoko Tjandra, a high-profile corruptor related to the Bank Bali Scandal of 1999 whom law enforcement had tried to apprehend since his conviction in 2009, had entered Indonesia that month, obtained an electronic identity card, filed a judicial review of his case with the South Jakarta District Court, and disappeared again without ever drawing the attention of law enforcement. Indonesia's police chief later fired a one-star military general, Prasetijo Utom, for having signed a transit permit for Djoko Tjandra after flying with him to Indonesia on a private jet chartered from Transwisata Prima Aviation, which is owned by Tomy Winata, a businessman with alleged links to organized crime. In August the police revealed that

a prosecutor from the Attorney General's Office, Pinangki Sirna Malasari, had met with Tjandra in Malaysia. She had allegedly received US\$ 500,000 from Tjandra. Later in July, Tjandra was arrested in Malaysia and extradited to Indonesia. The controversy surrounding the arrest of Djoko Tjandra showed that corruption remains endemic in law enforcement and the judiciary in Indonesia.

In November, the KPK arrested Edhy Prabowo, minister of maritime affairs and fisheries. In May, he had lifted a ban on the exports of lobster larvae imposed by his predecessor. The ministry under Prabowo's control subsequently issued the highly lucrative export licenses mainly to members of the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra), in which Edhy Prabowo is a senior figure close to party chairman (and defense minister) Prabowo Subianto (Gokkon 2020).

In December, the KPK arrested Juliari Peter Batubara, the minister for social affairs, for allegedly having received kickbacks from companies that were providing food parcels to Indonesians as part of a COVID-19 aid program. The KPK subsequently found over IDR 14.5 billion (US\$ 1.2 million) in cash stuffed into seven suitcases and three backpacks at the defendant's private residence (BBC 2020).

ECONOMY

Fiscal conditions were already weak, and investment remained sluggish at the beginning of 2020. The economic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis aggravated Indonesia's poor economic outlook. Midyear, as the economic impact of the pandemic became increasingly clear, Widodo issued Decree-in-Lieu-of-Law No. 1/2020. The decree lifted a fiscal rule adopted in 2003 that capped annual deficits at 3% of GDP and raised it to 5%; it also authorized IDR 405 trillion (US\$ 28 billion) in spending.

The GoI subsequently established various support and stimulus programs. IDR 123 trillion (US\$ 9 billion) was earmarked for medium-sized, small, and micro-enterprises. In August, Widodo also announced IDR 22 trillion (US\$ 1.5 billion) in cash grants to nine million micro-enterprises. The same month, Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati inaugurated a program called Subsidized Wage Recipient Assistance, through which direct cash assistance would be transferred to every active worker earning less than IDR 5 million (US\$ 350) per month until year's end.

While Indonesian citizens very much welcomed such measures to mitigate the economic impact of COVID-19, the GoI disbursed many of these funds only slowly or not at all. The president also issued Presidential Regulation No. 64/2020, raising premiums for the State Health Insurance Agency (Badan Penyelenggara Jaminan Sosial Kesehatan)—a move that was criticized as insensitive to the plight of those Indonesians whose health was affected by the pandemic.

In February, Widodo submitted the Omnibus Bill on Job Creation to the national parliament. The bill aimed to revise sections of 79 existing laws. Parliament and trade union representatives reached an agreement in August, and in October the national parliament passed the bill. It amended 76 existing laws, with changes to provisions ranging from employment, research and innovation, and land procurement to the ease of doing business. Within days, protests erupted across the archipelago. Labour unions criticized the law for weakening workers' rights, while environmental groups said it would weaken environmental protection. Unfazed, on November 2 President Widodo signed the bill, and it became Law No. 11/2020.

In July, Presidential Chief of Staff Moeldoko announced that the Peatland Restoration Agency (Badan Restorasi Gambut) would be terminated in December 2020. The agency plays a crucial role in protecting Indonesia's peatland forests, whose exploitation has been responsible for various environmental disasters over the years, including a haze that annually pollutes the air over large parts of Southeast Asia. Environmental groups were quick to point out that the announcement of its abolishment was made in the same week as Widodo tasked Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto with creating a 148,000-hectare food-crop estate in Central Kalimantan Province, which will require the clearing of peatland.

The Ombudsman's Office reported in August that Indonesia's minister of state-owned enterprises, Erick Thohir, had violated the law by appointing high-ranking bureaucrats as commissioners of state-owned enterprises. This practice, which allows regulators to work in the companies they regulate, was outlawed by Law 25/2009 on Public Services (Buehler 2011). But the Yudhoyono and the Jokowi administrations have both ignored the prohibition. In other words, the Widodo administration continued to allow collusive practices at the highest level of the state apparatus, even though they are in direct violation of the law.

SOCIETAL ISSUES

The culture wars between secular-nationalist and Islamist groups, which have been underway for several years, continued throughout 2020. In June, the GoI postponed discussions of a Bill on the Ideological Guidelines of Pancasila (Haluan Ideologi Pancasila). The increasingly brazen behavior of Islamic hard-line groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (Forum Pembela Islam) triggered a debate in 2018 on how to strengthen Pancasila, the ecumenical state ideology. Widodo then tasked former President Megawati Sukarnoputri with the drafting of a bill that would bolster Pancasila. After Islamic groups voiced their opposition to the proposal—they warned that it would facilitate the resurgence of communism and Marxism—the discussion of the role and function of Pancasila in Indonesian politics and society was postponed.

In June, the United Development Party, the National Mandate Party, and the Prosperous Justice Party introduced an anti-alcohol bill into the legislative agenda. The Islamic parties claimed that prohibiting alcohol would reduce deaths from alcohol poisoning.

In December, Habib Rizieq, a radical Islamic preacher and leader of the Islamic Defenders Front (Forum Pembela Islam), one of the country's largest vigilante movements, returned to Indonesia after three years in self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia. Rizieq had left Indonesia after law enforcement accused him of exchanging pornographic messages and nude photos with a woman in 2017. After his return, Rizieq called for a “moral revolution” in front of thousands of supporters at Sukarno-Hatta International Airport.

REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

In September, Widodo delivered his first speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations. The speech emphasized Indonesia's history of nonalignment. It was prerecorded and delivered online to comply with COVID-19 health protocols. In October the new prime minister of Japan, Suga Yoshihide, visited Indonesia to discuss cooperation between the two countries in the South China Sea. A week later, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with President Widodo to emphasize the importance of protecting access to the South China Sea in light of China's growing authority in the area. China released a statement criticizing Pompeo's comments. Tensions with China in the Natuna Sea continued throughout 2020 as Chinese Coast Guard vessels patrolled territory the Indonesian government claims authority over.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 crisis dominated Indonesian politics and society in 2020. Rather than being a transformative force, however, the pandemic amplified the status quo. The long-term implications of the pandemic for Indonesia's political and economic trajectory were far from clear at the end of the year.

REFERENCES

- Alam, Bachtiarudin. 2020. "Mendagri Tito Kembali Lempar Usulan Sistem Pilkada Asimetris" [Home Affairs Minister Tito again tries to change the pilkada system.] *Merdeka* [Freedom], June 21 (<https://www.merdeka.com/politik/mendagri-tito-kembali-lempar-usulan-sistem-pilkada-asimetris.html>).
- Arsyad, Edy. 2020. "Vonis Rendah Penyerang Novel Baswedan, Amnesty: Seperti Sandiwara" [Amnesty International: mild sentence in Novel Baswedan case a farce]. *Fajar*, July 17 (<https://fajar.co.id/2020/07/17/vonis-rendah-penyerang-novel-baswedan-amnesty-seperti-sandiwara/>).
- BBC. 2020. "Indonesia minister accused of bribery following raid," December 6 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-55204061>).
- Buehler, Michael. 2011. "Indonesia's Law on Public Services: Changing State–Society Relations or Continuing Politics as Usual?" *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 47(1): 65–86.
- Cochrane, Joe. 2020. "Indonesia's Arrest of US Journalist Reflects Trend of Xenophobia against Westerners." *South China Morning Post*, January 30 (<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3048120/indonesias-arrest-us-journalist-reflects-trend-xenophobia-against>).
- Gokkon, Basten. 2020. "Indonesian Fisheries Minister Arrested over Graft in Lobster Policy." *Mongabay*, November 25 (<https://news.mongabay.com/2020/11/indonesia-edhy-prabowo-lobster-corruption-arrested-kpk-fisheries/>).
- Guardian, The*. 2020. "Indonesia Minister in Row over Eucalyptus Necklace Covid-19 Claim," July 7 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/07/indonesia-minister-in-row-over-eucalyptus-necklace-covid-19-claim>).
- Jakarta Globe*. 2020. "Indonesia Is Losing Health Workers at an Alarming Rate," September 14 (<https://jakartaglobe.id/news/indonesia-is-losing-health-workers-at-an-alarming-rate>).

- Jakarta Post*. 2020. “KPK Tracks Wealth, Possible Money Laundering in Nurhadi Graft Investigation,” June 24 (<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/06/24/kpk-tracks-wealth-possible-money-laundering-in-nurhadi-graft-investigation.html>).
- Prabowo, Dani, and Dian Erika Nugraheny. 2020. “Kasus WN Jepang, Beda Klaim Kemenkes dan Penjelasan WHO soal Corona” [Case of Japanese citizen: Ministry of Health claim differs from WHO explanation of Corona]. *Kompas*, February 25 (<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/02/25/07213601/kasus-wn-jepang-beda-klaim-kemenkes-dan-penjelasan-who-soal-corona>).
- Reuters. 2020. “Exclusive: Jump in Jakarta Funerals Raises Fears of Unreported Coronavirus Deaths,” April 3 (<https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-indonesia-funerals/exclusive-jump-in-jakarta-funerals-raises-fears-of-unreported-coronavirus-deaths-idUSKBN21L2XU>).
- Sari, Nursita. 2020. “Sekda DKI: Banten, Jateng, Jatim Juga Banjir, Dinikmati Saja” [Secretary of Jakarta: Banten, Central Java, East Java also flooded, just enjoy it]. *Kompas*, February 27 (<https://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2020/02/27/11154671/sekda-dki-banten-jateng-jatim-juga-banjir-dinikmati-saja>).
- Tempo*. 2020. “Terawan ditengarai Tutupi Informasi Soal Corona: Ombudsman RI menilai komunikasi public pemerintah sangat buruk” [Terawan is suspected of covering up information about Corona: Indonesian Ombudsman office calls government public information strategy very bad], March 9 (<https://koran.tempo.co/read/berita-utama/450824/terawan-ditengarai-tutupi-informasi-soal-corona>).
- Tribun*. 2020. “Polisi Diminta Usut Ulang Perkara Novel Baswedan, LBHM Pertanyakan Apa Dua Terpidana Memang Pelaku” [Police asked to re-investigate Novel Baswedan case, LBHM questions whether the two convicts are the real perpetrators], July 18 (<https://newsmaker.tribunnews.com/2020/07/18/polisi-diminta-usut-ulang-perkara-novel-baswedan-lbhm-pertanyakan-apa-dua-terpidana-memang-pelaku>).