

Gamapi Insight #2

Business as Usual: An Overview of Indonesian COVID-19 Policies

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It is been a year and a half since Indonesia has COVID-19 cases. Since then, few policies effectively lessen COVID-19 in this country. The basic problems that arose in Indonesia are not yet been fixed. Many people agreed that bureaucracy, miscommunication, and anti-science government (also society) is the problem of our crisis. Yet, the problem goes beyond that. The intertwined problem from a weak political institution function, a tremendous amount of concentrated economic growth, and a disproportionate power within the civil society also contribute to this topic. This article is going to explore the relations between the Political-Economy condition of COVID-19 Policies and its effectiveness in curbing the pandemic.

Indonesia is one of the fastest growing economies in Southeast Asia. With a 5,05 YoY growth (2019), it is higher than any countries in the region such as Singapore and Malaysia. This economic powerhouse is supported by growth in the services sector. The notion of social restrictions policy (such as PSBB/PPKM) in Indonesia is questionable by the public because of the effectiveness of its policy. Many people criticized the government for being selective in implementing the policy. It argues that the government only imposed the policy on those who don't have government access (wong cilik). Other people, advocate the government impose a lockdown to contain the pandemic more effectively. The majority of the public wants the government to have strict regulations. Then, why the government is inconsistently do not imposed a stricter regulation to contain the pandemic —such as lockdown? Why, we, as a consumer of the government services, do not get what we want?

Besides the economic factor that the government needs to deal with to provide goods and services based on UU Keekarantinaan Wilayah, the author argues that the government had other motives. In 1845 French Candlemaker had its writing published called the “Candlestick Maker petition”. In this petition, the manufacturer of a candlestick is demanding the government to help them. This

is because, at that time, they need to compete with goods that have an absolute advantage. Yes, the sun. The candlestick manufacture argues that the sun is slashing the production of a candlestick. Therefore, they proposed the government should impose a law to prohibit people from using a window or using the sun. This will drive up the economy of the candlestick and reduce unemployment. Whilst the argument of candlestick maker is rejected by the French government, this axiom brings a heavy question. In a market-based economy, who does the government stands for, is it the consumer or the producer?

If the government stands with the consumer, then the argument of the candlestick maker is not rational at all. Because of this scenario, the consumer may lose many of its productive resources to buy the candlestick. Yet, if the government stands with the producer, the notion of candlestick maker is not so absurd. From this point, we can interpret that in COVID-19 policies, the government stands with the produce. One of the reasons why this decision can happen is because that the government sees that if they reduced the economic activity, the impact is concentrated. The government is scared if a major industry does not resume its operation soon enough, then it would lead to unemployment which would also lead to recession. Besides that, the interest of these companies is also aligned with the government. This is because the industry has been the backbone of the political funding cycle of a candidate at the executive or legislative levels. In its study conducted by Aspinall and many other researchers, the notion of money politics is very common in Indonesia.

In its book, Aspinall and Mada Seukmajati view major elections in various provinces in Indonesia. The conclusion money politics (that consists of many types such as pork barrel, club goods, et cetera) is still favorably effective in winning the election. This drives up the price to become an elite in Indonesia. The notion of how bad political funding in Indonesia is also explored by Marcus Mietzner in his book, *Money, Power, and Ideology* (2014) that eloquently elaborates this topic. This situation creates room for various private companies to participate in shaping the formulation of the implementation of such a policy.



Apart from that, if the consumer pays a higher price because of the pandemic situation, the impact is distributed —not concentrated. With 270 million people, the government thinks this amount of people can distribute the impact of COVID-19 more proportionally. The upper and middle-income socioeconomic status (SES) would afford the capacity to have self-isolation. Leaving the lower-income SES that could be taken care of by the government. Besides that, the consumer also did not have a major stakeholder that is aligned with their interest. The appointed legislative that functions as an echo mechanism for the people is not enough. The power structure within the party is favoring for an involuntary mechanism to support the party, even if the preferred policy is not aligned with the constituent or precampaign moment. The power structure determined by the party makes it harder to voice a parliamentary movement. The risk of being replaced by the Pergantian Antar Waktu (PaW) mechanism makes it inconvenient to create vibrant dynamics in Senayan. In addition, with only two (or maybe three) parties in parliament that opposed the government policy, the public was also left with fewer options. In sum, The power-sharing; rainbow coalition; and party cartelization condition is making it harder for the public to aggregate their interest at the parliamentary level. Left with CSO and NGO, the public does not have an adequate instrument for exercising their interest.

Conclusion

Since the beginning, the public sentiment is mostly angry and frustrated against the government's social restriction policy. The inconsistent, uncoordinated, and technically not sound policy is the basis of their emotion. Many of the public think that problem lies in the old bureaucracy and the government that is not relying on data. Yet the problem goes deeper. In this article, the decision of why the government prioritized the economy over health is explored by a political-economy lens. (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2015; Mietzner, 2013)

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<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1nthsj>



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