

Handling of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Indonesia: Time to Power Contestation

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ABSTRACT

During the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Indonesian government has shown a power contestation. The pandemic turned out to be a stage for actors and policymakers. Some policymakers use the economic approach as power, politics, and regional interests, to the medical power approach. Differences in handling between policymakers both vertically and horizontally have created confusion, counterproductive, and even conflict between parties, resulting in the slow handling of the pandemic. In line with that, this paper looks at the forms of contestation between various policymakers, both central and regional. It analyzes the factors causing the power contestation in handling the pandemic. This study uses the results of observations, searches, and readings on sources of information from various online media and previous research. It turns out that our findings show that economic power has dominated and has become a force that guarantees policies and the logic of power in handling the pandemic. This paper suggests the need to expand the cases studied and add data sources to enable a more comprehensive understanding of the importance of handling the pandemic.

Keywords: Power contestation; Handling Covid-19; Policy Stakeholders; Indonesian government

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia has spawned a power contest. Countries that dominate pandemic talks, apart from being unable to control various social forces, are also unable to coordinate between government agencies. Policy dissimilarities occur between ministry agencies and central and regional governments (Almuttaqi, 2020). The regional government has issued a social restriction policy to control the spread of Covid-19. The

Governor of Maluku has closed sea and air transportation routes since March 26, 2020, for 14 days (Wibowo, 2020). The DKI Jakarta Provincial Government did the same thing by proposing Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) to the central government. The submission does not follow PMK No. 9 of 2020 (Mandasari, 2020). This incident shows the chaotic policy of handling the COVID-19 pandemic prioritizes sectoral egos. As a result, the handling of the coronavirus is not only partial but also confusion due to differences in interests (Ardiyanti, 2020; Khoerunisa & Noorikhsan, 2021). Differences in interests in handling pandemics make disaster situations an arena for power contestation. Abers et al. (2021) emphasized that differences in viewpoints and interests have given rise to contestations that impact disrupted handling actions.

The study of contestation tends to look at two things—first, the contestation of the Covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of the political constellation. The Covid-19 pandemic gave birth to political constellations at local and global levels (Aji, 2020; Hartman et al., 2021; Kaarsholm, 2020; Moisio, 2020; Sushanti, 2020). The pandemic has become a space for international political battles through health issues (Sushanti, 2020). Kaarsholm (2020) emphasized that the Covid-19 pandemic is different from other pandemics such as SARS which WHO successfully overcame. Covid-19 tends to give birth to fierce political contestations. Second, a study looks at contestation related to public relations and trust in the state's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. By looking at the level of public trust in the government for handling various pandemics, both increasing and decreasing (Abers et al., 2021; Ayalon, 2021; Eichler & Sonkar, 2021; Mujani, 2020; Yang, 2021), from the two trends in above, a pandemic is seen as a medium that connects one entity to another. Meanwhile, the aspect of handling the pandemic, which is closely related to power, has not received much attention. Handling a pandemic with various interests allows the use of a pandemic as an 'area of

contestation.'

This paper aims to complement the shortcomings of previous studies that have not paid attention to the dimensions of power in handling the pandemic. In particular, this paper shows that the pandemic is not just a health issue but is an arena where relevant parties exercise their power. In line with that, this paper shows evidence of contestation of power in overcoming a pandemic outbreak. In line with that, this study will answer two questions: 1) What is the form of power contestation that occurs in handling the Covid-19 pandemic; 2) What are the factors that influence the occurrence of power contestation. The research findings may support the notion that the power contest in handling Covid-19 has resulted in poor pandemic control in Indonesia.

The argument is that the contestation of power in handling the Covid-19 pandemic shows the tenuous relationship between powers. A conflict of interest causes disharmony in the relationship. Conflicts of interest are a sign of intervention from various social groups who seek to control state institutions for personal and group gain. The handling of the pandemic, which the state should have recommended, was not strong enough to control the spread of Covid-19. The state is not the sole actor that is free from intervention. These dictating interests are manifested in various forms of overlapping regulations. Thus, each stakeholder can find sectoral ego as a perspective in handling it. In the end, it impacts inaction in handling the pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Covid-19 in Indonesia

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in the loss of many lives and infected millions of people, including Indonesia (Olivia et al., 2020). Data in Indonesia since March 2020 to April 2022, there have been around 6,039,266 million cases, and 155,844 people have died. The population who received the complete vaccine was around 162,204,973 (Data, 2022). Covid-19 has

destroyed the joints of human life. The bad consequences caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are related to death and declining health and problems in economic, educational and even mental psychological aspects (Abdullah, 2020; Azwar & Setiati, 2020; Meutia, 2020). Not a few people lost their livelihoods due to being dismissed unilaterally, and many companies went bankrupt; the wave of unemployment increased, which led to a spike in poverty (Fahri et al., 2020; Muhyiddin, 2020; Nasution et al., 2020). Another problem also hit the world of education, based on a report by the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) as released by the national media, that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted increasing school dropout rates. There are also constraints on the network and infrastructure to support online learning (Rulandari, 2020; Triwiyanto, 2020). Parents must understand various subjects because they struggle to become assistant teachers at home (Suhirman et al., 2020). The pandemic also harms mental burden and psychological trauma (Abdullah, 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020; Javakhishvili et al., 2020).

The bad consequences caused by the Covid-19 pandemic have made this pandemic like a scary monster (Ravi, 2020). Eradication, control and handling efforts are carried out in various ways, from starting to habituate life by using masks, keeping distance and washing hands to limiting social mobility (Fatmi, 2020; Lubis et al., 2020). Various forces are involved in handling efforts, whether carried out by the government "top-down" and religious leaders, local leaders, and various other components, including the media (Aula, 2020; Udytama & Susrama, 2020). Based on the experience of several countries in handling the dangers of Covid-19, where the involvement of civil society greatly determines the success of control compared to relying solely on the power of the government. Yuen et al. (2021) compared Hong Kong and Singapore in their research. The control of the pandemic in Hong Kong, although initially there was political tension between the government and the

pro-democracy movement, the strength of a civil society that cares for each other is the capital of effective control. Different things happen in Singapore, where the state power that determines the control has not been able to control other.

Handling the Covid-19 Pandemic

The pandemic handling strategy adopted by the Indonesian government is different from other countries (Muhyiddin, 2020; Mujani, 2020). The Indonesian government's handling of the pandemic received a lot of criticism (Kencana, 2020). Many parties consider the government to be less firm on this issue based on government statements and policies at the beginning of the pandemic (Mietzner, 2020; Sushanti, 2020). The policy to control the dangers of Covid-19 only emerged after the President formed the Covid-19 Handling Task Force on March 13, 2020 (Djalante et al., 2020). As a result of this policy that tends to be late, it will impact not only public health but also the worsening of the economy, the cost of handling it is greater (Olivia et al., 2020). Mietzner (2020) explains that the government's indecisive attitude is not about saving the economy of the lower class as it has been perceived, but because of other things, such as worsening democratization, religious polarization and corrupt attitudes. Inaction shows that the government lacks a Sense of Crisis. This is reinforced by evidence of the birth of counterproductive policies. Instead of locking down as many countries do, the Indonesian government opens the door wide for the presence of foreign tourists with incentive policies for tourism (Agustino, 2020). On the other hand, the local government first tightened the territory and restricted the mobility of its citizens; there were tug-of-war and policy clashes between the center and the regions in handling Covid-19 (Chadijah, 2020; Muhyiddin, 2020).

The contestation has been shown internally and also internationally. Lutfi and Hariyati (2020) point out that Georgia Governor Brian Kemp is

relaxing public activity, despite going against federal guidelines. Abers et al. (2021) show in Brazil that the government admits that it is difficult because it is opposed by social movements that continue to build various narratives of resistance or clash the pandemic agenda with politics. Internationally, China vs. America rivalry continues into Covid-19 territory, shown in Trump and Xi Jinping's speeches and the ban on journalists (Yang, 2021). Both at the state and international levels, the contestation indicates weak coordination between institutions which has led to the failure of the Covid-19 response.

RESEARCH METHOD

Case Choice

The contestation of power during the Covid-19 pandemic was chosen as a subject for three considerations. First, the issue of power contestation during a pandemic is a central topic that has not been much attention to in previous studies. Second, the contestation of power explains the existence of a causal relationship that requires a careful understanding. The contestation of power arises from various factors that need to be disclosed. Third, the presence of a power contest during this pandemic is the basis for a series of consequences. The three reasons for choosing the issue of power contestation as the subject of writing are expected to provide a comprehensive understanding and insight for problem-solving.

Research type and Data Set

This research is qualitative and relies on primary and secondary data. Preliminary data were obtained from field studies to observe directly and from mapping research aspects. Primary data is also obtained through online media based on readings that describe the existence of policy contestations, a tug-of-war between central and regional authorities, and sectoral ego rivalries. Various actions that show the presence of power contestation are mapped in this research. Data concerning implications are also mapped. Meanwhile,

secondary data is obtained based on the results of previous study and is sourced from other data that has been processed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out in two forms. First, data processing follows the steps of Huberman (2018). This stage begins with reducing observation and interview data, displaying data in a summary and synopsis based on the themes of field findings, and data verification for the conclusion process. Second, the analysis used follows an interpretation technique starting from "restatement" of the data found both from observations and interviews, followed by "description" to find patterns or trends from the data, ending with "interpretation" to reveal the meaning of the data that has been collected.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Power Contestation in Handling a Pandemic.

First, ineffective policies between the center and the regions. This difference in sectoral responses is seen in ineffective policies. The Central Government decided on PSBB through Government Regulation No. 21 of 2020, but some areas have implemented a lockdown. The Regent of Tegal has closed access to the city using a Movable Concrete Barrier on March 23, 2020 (Setiadi, 2020; Suripto, 2020). The Mayor of Solo implemented a semi-lockdown by closing schools for 14 days, delaying public events, canceling car-free days, and closing tourism destinations (Putri, 2020). The Governor of Papua closed entry and exit access, including the National Border Post (Kurniawan, 2020; Mandasari, 2020; Putri, 2020). The Governor of Maluku closed sea and air transportation routes for 14 days. Likewise, in several other areas, the main goal is to protect the public from the spread of Covid-19. Meanwhile, the DKI Jakarta Provincial Government is trying to follow the central government's wishes by applying for a PSBB permit from the Minister of Health. However, it was rejected because it was deemed not to have met the requirements of the

Regulation of the Minister of Health No. 9 of 2020 (Mandasari, 2020).

Second, the attraction of Central and Regional Interests. Government Regulation No. 21 of 2020 gives a significant role to local governments while still paying attention to the authority of the Central Government. One of them is the policy dispute between the DKI Jakarta Provincial Government, the Ministry of Transportation, and the Ministry of Industry regarding the polemic operation of the electric train and IOMKI (Industrial Activity Operational and Mobility License). The governor requested the termination three times, but all proposals were rejected (Anwar, 2020). The Ministry of Transportation argues that the Electric Railway service is still needed considering that the Minister of Health Regulation No. 9 of 2020, several sectors such as health workers, security personnel, and several strategic agencies still have to come to the office (Fadhilah, 2020). The IOMKI policy is based on the Circular of the Minister of Industry No. 4 of 2020 concerning the Implementation of Factory Operations during the Covid-19 period. Although many companies are not included in the excluded sectors in DKI Jakarta Governor Regulation No. 33 of 2020, they ignored the regulation under the pretext of pocketing IOMKI. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Industry argues that the Circular does not conflict with Minister of Health Regulation No. 9 of 2020. The Ministry of Industry only issued Circular No. 8 of 2020 concerning mandatory reporting for industrial and regional companies with IOMKI (Septyaningsih, 2020). Meanwhile, both the Ministry of Health and the Covid-19 Task Force tend to hand over the handling of these problems to the regions. The regional heads in the DKI Jakarta area finally tactics with their authority. The local government simultaneously applies a rule that requires every electric train passenger to bring a letter of assignment (Harahap, 2020).

Third, the authoritative claims of the Central Government. The contestation of power is characterized by the central government's authoritative claim to local government policies. This authoritative claim is

then manifested in policing to cancel some local government policies. Policy enforcement is the central government's response to the implementation of local lockdown by some regional heads who are considered to have violated Article 11 of Law No. 6 of 2018. In a press conference on March 31, 2020, the President emphasized that Regional Governments are not allowed to make their policies. In addition to control, the central government has also canceled several regional government policies—for example, the DKI Jakarta Provincial Government's policy regarding restrictions on public transportation. The day after the policy was issued, President Jokowi requested that local governments continue to provide public transit, even though Covid-19 continues to spread. In addition to limiting public transit, the DKI Provincial Government also prohibits the operation of cross-provincial buses. However, the Ministry of Transportation decided to postpone the ban on bus services on the same day. The postponement decision was based on the President's direction in a limited meeting.

Factors of Power Contestation

Two main factors trigger the contestation between government institutions: ego power and overlapping policies. In dealing with the Covid-19 outbreak, President Joko Widodo has repeatedly acknowledged that big walls between sectors hinder and are difficult to solve (Fauzia, 2020). The agency seems to prioritize the interests of its territory, then puts aside demands from other sectors. The case of the Mayor of Surabaya Tri Rismaharini protesting the policy of the Governor of East Java Khofifah Indar Parawansa, who transferred the PCR laboratory car to the Tulungagung Regency, is evidence. Although the request for additional units emerged from the Mayor's paper, the Governor had another view that Surabaya already had seven large-capacity laboratories. At the same time, other regions do not have test laboratories. Then, the contestation is also triggered by overlapping policies. To a certain extent, in conditions that are considered an emergency, the institution protects

its dependent area by making new regulations, even though they are known to contradict the previous laws. In the case of online motorcycle taxis, the Minister of Transportation Regulation No. 18 of 2020 allows online motorcycle taxis to carry passengers with conditions. This regulation contradicts the Minister of Health Regulation No. 9 of 2020 and DKI Jakarta Governor Regulation No. 33 of 2020 that online motorcycle taxis cannot ride people during the pandemic.

Both sectoral egos and policy overlap result from the precondition of weak coordination between government agencies. The leadership crisis caused the lack of coordination in controlling Covid-19 in Indonesia, the decision path, which is considered long and convoluted, the slow response of institutions, distrust between institutions, and the personal disharmony of leaders that occurred before the pandemic. Several leaders who have served at the national and regional levels have conflicting political histories. Anis Baswedan is a governor who has received a lot of criticism during the pandemic compared to other regions. The three ministers vulgarly conveyed Anis Baswedan's mistake to the public (Asmara, 2020). Bad communication seems inseparable from the national political agenda where Anis Baswedan is called the strongest candidate for president in 2024. Disharmonization is also seen between Risma and Khofifah (Nurita, 2020), which is considered a continuation of the political feud after the 2018 regional head election in which Risma supported her opponent. The coordination between institutions is a crucial factor in resolving various cases of contestation between rulers in Indonesia.

The factors causing the contestation in handling the Covid-19 pandemic are illustrated in table 1 below.

Table 1. Power Contestation in Handling a Pandemic

| No. | Cases | Contestation | Contestation Value |
|--|--|--|--|
| Regional-Central Contestation | | | |
| 1 | Social assistance for DKI Jakarta Province | Governor: "We have implemented PSBB. People will have food shortages, so they have to move fast." Minister of Finance: "So previously, 1.1 million was DKI Jakarta which covered it. The remaining 3.6 million is the central government. Now everyone is asked for a cover." Minister of Social Affairs: "The distribution of social assistance is not in accordance with the initial agreement." Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Culture: "Data on Social Assistance Recipients is problematic. We are pulling data, the atmosphere is a bit tense, I rebuke the governor." | Humanity Budget Coordination Data not updating |
| 2 | Local lockdown in Tegal City | Mayor of Tegal: "There is one infected person. We have to go into local lockdown immediately." President of the Republic of Indonesia: "Lockdown policies should not be taken by local governments, and we have never thought about locking policies." | Health National leadership |
| Ministry-President Contestation | | | |
| 3 | Eid homecoming ban | President: "Homecoming. We will ban everything." Ministry of Transportation: "Re-allowing transportation modes to transport passengers outside the region." | Health Economic |
| The contestation between the Ministries | | | |
| 4 | Operating license for online motorcycle | Ministry of Health: "It is forbidden to carry passengers during PSBB" Ministry of Transportation: "Allowing motorcycle taxis to carry passengers" | Health Economic |
| The contestation between regionals | | | |
| 5 | Diversion of laboratory cars for Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) | Mayor of Surabaya: "Guys, see for yourself. This is proof of my application to the Chair of the COVID-19 Task Force." Governor of East Java: "We transferred the car to Tulungagung. Surabaya has seven laboratories with large enough capacity to carry out PCR tests." | Distribution of facilities Distribution of facilities |
| 6 | Cash assistance for Covid-19 victims | Regent of Bolaang Mongondow Timur: "The ministries are out of sync in giving directions to the regions. The minister is stupid and annoying. too bureaucratic." Lumajang Regent: "All ministers are working hard. If it is the Regent who says the Minister is stupid, it's probably the regent who can't take care of it." | Policy distortion Institutional dignity |

Sources: main data, 2021.

The central and regional governments face serious challenges never encountered before. Lack of experience in dealing with the speed of the spread of the virus, the loss of life, economic downturn, and the loss of connectivity between people have resulted in many regulations that compel contestants to attend. Table 1 displays the actors, cases, forms, and values of the contests at

stake. PSBB is used as an alternative to local lockdowns while operating in eight sectors: health, food, energy, communications, finance, logistics, daily necessities, and the strategic industrial sector. The PSBB pattern forces the Ministry of Industry to relax factories to operate, and the Ministry of Transportation allows online motorcycle taxis and buses to return to transport passengers. This policy was forced to be accepted by the Ministry of Health, the Covid-19 Task Force, and the President. Balancing the economic sector and public health is the most contested value.

Discussion

This study shows that the contestation of power results from a conflict of interest. Economic power has dominated and defeated the power of science, which has significantly impacted the slow control of the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia (Sushanti, 2020). Conflicts of interest, sectoral egos, and policy tug-of-war in handling the pandemic allow the pandemic to be limited to the arena of contestation, where the egoism of sectoral power is displayed. State power which is expected to be a force that guarantees togetherness, actually loses its authority. The collapse of state power is evidenced by the many rejections of various government policies in handling the pandemic. Different public restriction policies, both large-scale (PSBB) and micro-scale (PPKM), are ineffective. They have not been able to break the chain of the spread of Covid-19. This condition is exacerbated by the attitude of the people who are ignorant and fight against various government policies in controlling Covid-19 (Harjudin, 2020). Resistance to different government policies shows the low public trust in the authorities (government) in handling the Covid-19 pandemic.

The low level of public trust is made possible by the weakening of authority and the example shown by the holders of state power (government) in handling the Covid-19 pandemic. Controlling a pandemic has shown how leaders work. In Wardman's view, good authority is based on risk-based

leadership, ready to face disaster emergencies (Wardman, 2020). The weakness of leadership allows the opening of competition space for the emergence of other forces amid uncertainty and powerlessness of the center of power. As stated by Avelino (2021) the real contestation is the struggle between empowerment and powerlessness. Powerlessness in handling the pandemic, inconsistent policies, intensifying controversies, and a shared sense of crisis is closely related to power authorities' weakness when they lose their head. Lack of control makes power lose its legitimacy in the arena of competition. Several aspects determine legality as a source of energy. Bourdieu (2015) mentions at least four capitals: social capital, economic capital, symbolic capital, and language capital. The holders of these capitals will be the real winners of the contest.

The contestation of power in dealing with a pandemic reflects how power is used, expressed, and legitimized. The exercise of power framed by economic and political interests that dominate the risk of handling the pandemic is increasingly uncertain. The difference in handling policies carried out by the circle of power is an essential statement of the different interests surrounding power, where economics and politics have become the commanders over other approaches that are more urgent. The various events experienced show that interests in economic and political resources are part of the accumulation of power capital, as described by Bourdieu (2015). The contestation of power in dealing with a pandemic is a struggle for help for the benefit of the collection of power that has a relationship in the past, present, and future. Mujani (2020) believes that political and economic aspects more influence public trust in handling the pandemic. Government supporters are the public who put their faith and hope in taking the pandemic. In contrast, those who refuse are the public, who have been in opposition. The rationality of the two interests is the leading choice that ignores other more urgent sides in handling the pandemic. The battle between two economic and political

interests that take advantage of the crisis arena makes the handling of the pandemic even more chaotic (Almuttaqi, 2020).

The conditions shown by the results of this study illustrate how the contestation of power, which is dominated by economic and political interests, actually indicates the lust for power rather than actual control efforts. The tendency to relate these two interests reflects the dynamics of power relations and the distribution of resources. The state is controlled by a power that benefits its group. As a power that distributes power and resources, the state cannot be neutral to the social forces that surround it. The handling of the pandemic prioritizes the stability of power and economic activity. This condition presents policies that lead to the interests of power and the distribution of resources among the elite. Handling a pandemic oriented to the interests of power as an essential element in handling makes the pandemic vulnerable to politicization. Politicization in addressing the pandemic has further widened the disharmony of relations.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown efforts to control Covid-19 in Indonesia are colored by conflicts of interest between those in power. Instead of promoting health, economic power appears to be dominant. The complexity of the Covid-19 problem is sufficient reason for policymakers to save the people through various shields of interest. The conflict of interest illustrates that the contestation seems to be maintained until the 2024 presidential election. At the same time, as the main person in charge of controlling Covid-19, the president is caught in a contest that is repeatedly shown by revising policies.

State leaders who should optimally mobilize resources to be in control seem to be controlled by other powers that impact tug-of-war policies that confuse the public. The head of state and the Covid-19 Task Force need to consider a bottom-up approach to equalize perceptions and visions in every critical decision. The more a top-down perspective is used, the more visible

policy blunders are. Then this article also recommends that every leader of the Covid-19 Task Force show enthusiasm for work and example. The central ideology must be a sense of crisis and siding with the people. The weakening of authority will allow contestation for other powers and distrust by the people.

Finally, studies of the power contest in the handling of Covid-19 are limited by the reliance on datasets from online media and descriptive analysis. Further studies need to record details through in-depth interviews. Focusing on one case can be the following option to support our findings. The pandemic policy is not just an effort to save people's health but is another arena for exercising power based on group, political, and economic interests.

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