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COVID-19 Secrecy in Indonesia

Between Economy and the Government's Empty Pride

Angela Merkel's remark on 11 March 2020 that up to 70 percent of Germany's population could contract COVID-19 was brutal. Being highlighted in various Indonesian news outlets, I can imagine how her words baffled their audience. Still, as someone who has to witness how secretive government gestures worsened the COVID-19-induced uncertainty in Indonesia, I strangely envy the Germans for having such an uncompromisingly blunt federal chancellor.

In Indonesia, the first and second confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection were announced on 2 March. *Tempo*, an investigative magazine reported (2020) that initially, the Health Ministry tried to cover them up. Before that, Indonesian officials persistently dismissed that the country was susceptible to the virus. The Health Minister was offended by a study carried out by a Harvard epidemiologist who estimated that there had already been a number of infections in the country by early February 2020. "This is an insult!" the minister remarked (Rahayu 2020). The Harvard epidemiologist, he said, should come by himself to see that Indonesia was properly screening everyone who came to the country. When a person from Japan found himself infected with SARS Cov-2 after coming back from Indonesia, a top official of the Indonesian Health Ministry insisted that the disease was different from COVID-19. "Its difference is more than 70 percent [from COVID-19]," the official said (Nugraheny 2020). During this time, there were also stories of people witnessing how patients were being admitted to a hospital through the backdoor by a medical team wearing full protective gear.

Even after the announcement of new COVID-19 confirmed cases and deaths had become the Health Ministry's daily ritual by the beginning of March, the government is still suspected to cover some of the uglier truth regarding the virus outbreak.

Along with consistently making remarks to downplay the gravity of the current situation, such as stating that the virus was not as effective in warm weather, the growth of new confirmed cases is oddly low compared to other Southeast Asian countries with much smaller populations. Once, Joko Widodo, the Indonesian president also compared the number of Indonesian cases and deaths with other countries and implied that the country fared better against the pandemic, which was absurd since Indonesia was among the countries with the lowest number of COVID-19 tests.



Indonesian President Joko Widodo (speaking) and Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto (on his right side) announcing the first and second confirmed cases of Coronavirus infection on 2 March 2020. Source: The Indonesian Ministry of State Secretariat Webpage, last accessed on 26 May 2020

Too much at stake?

The Indonesian government's opacity regarding the COVID-19 situation in the country is somehow not surprising. Ever since his reelection in 2019, Joko Widodo, the Indonesian President, was already sharply focused on curbing the repercussion of the upcoming economic recession. He was preoccupied with economic forecasts that predicted the world will face an economic slowdown in the near future. His government stubbornly proposed a controversial "omnibus bill" that would push the minimum wage down and remove many corporates' obligations to their workers and the environment in hope of attracting more investment to the country. The bill was met with widespread labor unions' protests but the government was unmoved.

The government only started to seriously address the COVID-19 situation when it affected the country's tourism notwithstanding that at that point many had already repeatedly expressed their concern with the public health threat posed by the virus. Joko Widodo's instructions to his administration during their first meeting on the COVID-19 situation were to accelerate the government's spending, reduce the current account deficit, maintain economic stability and competitiveness, and promote Indonesian tourism to people who looked for an alternative travel destination to China, South Korea, or Japan. The instruction to promote Indonesian tourism, particularly, stirred public outrage since it suggested that the government had no intention to prevent the influx of travelers who potentially carry COVID-19 to Indonesia and prioritized the economy over the people's health. Further fueling the discontent, the government was planning to spare 298 billion Rupiah (18.5 million Euro) to mitigate the effect of the pandemic to the tourism industry and to spend 72 billion Rupiah for hiring social media influencers to promote the country's touristic destinations

By trying to withhold information about COVID-19 infections in Indonesia as well as

occasionally joking about how immune Indonesians were toward COVID-19, apparently, the government expected to evoke an image of Indonesia as a COVID-free country, which would propel its tourism. Later, when they realized that the country's tourism industry was affected too badly by the pandemic, the secretive attitude was still maintained possibly to keep the people doing their work, hence, the economy going.

It took several public backlashes before the government decided to prohibit people from going back to their hometown to celebrate Eid al-Fitr, which traditionally was a moment when money would move from the capital to provincial towns. Mayors and governors had to take matter into their own hands and threaten to unilaterally enforce a lockdown before the related ministry elaborated a respective legal framework. Joko Widodo's explanation was illustrative of the central government's stance when he described his preference for being secretive in handling the COVID-19 crisis on 13 March. He remarked that unreasonable fear was more dangerous for the country's economy and stability than the virus itself and for this reason, he did not want everyone to know his measures to curb the pandemic in Indonesia else the public would be unnecessarily alarmed.

Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the secrecy may stem from the government's cluelessness in how to specifically manage the pandemic. Joko Widodo's government repeatedly changed its stances and policies along with the rapidly developing situation. While, at the beginning of the epidemic, it allowed intercity transportations to operate, it later reconsidered this decision as protests mounted and the number of infections and deaths continued to soar. One minister's decision could even be reversed within a matter of hours by another, politically more powerful minister. Such a cluelessness not only characterized the response of Joko Widodo's administration as the COVID-19 pandemic confronted governments all over the world with unprecedented circumstances. Still, in my view, it was conspicuous how Joko Widodo's government was trying too hard to maintain an

image that it was always in control of the situation. Rather than transparently conveying to the public that it had to constantly reevaluate and adjust their measures of responding to the COVID-19 outbreak, it suggested that it worked in a way that not all people could see.

Studies have shown that one of the predominant worldviews in Indonesia value *alus*, the refined, and *kasar*, the rough (Geertz 1976). This means, maintaining serenity is regarded to be important and the truth is expected to be concealed if it provokes conflict and disharmony. Also, bureaucratic and professional relationships are commonly played out in a manner that is indistinguishable from a father-child relationship, where the superior needs to always feel in power and the family's intactness is of great importance (van Langenberg 1986; Shiraishi 1997). This may partly explain why admitting that the government is lacking proper knowledge about COVID-19 and a comprehensive plan to curb the pandemic is considered to be risky by the people in power. Joko Widodo's government seemingly thought that transparency not only put the country's economy at stake but also the administration's dignity. When the Health Minister was insulted by an epidemiologist's estimation in early February that there were already COVID-19 infections in Indonesia, his response apparently stemmed from his feeling of having his authority undermined.

The price of subtlety

In this turbulent time, when conspiracy theories flourish wildly and uncertainty haunts everyone's mind, however, secretive gestures of Joko Widodo's government do not help as much as they expected. On the contrary, they enhance people's suspicion toward the government as well as their sense of the virus' ungraspability. Speculations on the true scale of the COVID-19 outbreak in Indonesia run wild as distrust becomes the norm to respond toward the government's handling of the

crisis. In Jakarta, the provincial government's broadcast on the COVID-19 situation currently also includes the number of bodies buried according to the COVID-19 protocol.[1] The number of these burials could be as high as four times the number of COVID-19 confirmed deaths announced by the Health Ministry. While this confounding gap possibly owes to the ministry's low capacity of testing, not everyone buried with the protocol was confirmed to have COVID-19. Nonetheless, many people took this as evidence that the central government, through the Health Ministry, continues to secretly manipulate the actual COVID-19 death numbers.

The policy of announcing the number of bodies buried according to the COVID-19 protocol in Jakarta unfolded amid the political rivalry between Joko Widodo and the Jakarta Governor, Anies Baswedan. Anies is considered as Joko Widodo's main political rival and reputed to be disliked by the central government. His policies and maneuvers suggested that time and again, he deliberately opposed the central government's policies and political stance. The first time Anies announced the number of bodies buried according to the COVID-19 protocol in Jakarta, the central government's influencers and supporters criticized him for unnecessarily frightening the people.[2] Interestingly though, his communication strategy proved to be more compelling for the public. Not only Anies keeps announcing the number of burials according to the protocol, COVID-19 situation updates in some other provinces are following suit. Being aware that people were wondering about the true extent of the pandemic in the country, news outlets also tried to get their hands on speculations on how many people are really infected by the virus. Reporters from *Reuters*, for instance, interviewed Jakarta coffin makers and found out their workloads had significantly increased during the outbreak. "Usually we sell between five to seven coffins a day, but now it is up to 20 to 30 coffins a day," said one of the coffin makers. At the same time, studies estimating the actual cases of COVID-19 infections increasingly made their way into the media.



Jakarta's Governor, Anies Baswedan, during his Coronavirus media briefing on 13 April 2020. Source: The Jakarta Provincial Government's facebook page, last accessed on 26 May 2020

Upon mounting pressure on the central government to open its COVID-19 data, Joko Widodo, who had explained that he wished to be discreet in handling the crisis, finally gave in. On 14 April, the government published the number of people and patients suspected of COVID-19. Still, this did not dispel people's suspicion that the government may still conceal some relevant information. The government, they thought,[3] may intervene with the test results since every COVID-19 test in the country needs to be certified by the Health Ministry before even being announced to the patient. The fact that a minister who is considered to be Joko Widodo's backer and closest advisor anticipated tourists to be back faster than expected and, recently, Indonesia's COVID-19 task force head requested people under 45 to get

back to work was perceived to further hint to the government's continued interest in sustaining the impression that Indonesia coped well with the COVID-19 crisis.

Today, the government is more blatant regarding the outlook of having to deal with COVID-19 for a long time. "We need to live in peace with COVID for some time," Joko Widodo remarked on 7 May. Indonesia's COVID-19 task force head also warned the public to be prepared for the pandemic's second wave. However, this transparency (or the attempt to look transparent) comes perhaps a bit too late. Joko Widodo's government clung to what could be perceived as empty pride for too long. The Indonesian public still recalls the government's earlier secretive gestures, holds it accountable for every loss harbored due to COVID-19, and suspects it of concealing the truth about the COVID-19 outbreak as well as of malicious intentions toward the people.

In light of these considerations, and to get back to the comparison with which I started this contribution, I understand why during the current health crisis, the Germans' approval of their governing coalition shot up to its highest point in 23 years. Merkel's bluntness and the government's efforts to rely on the national pandemic plan[4] and scientific establishment provided the public with a sense of security, even if at the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak in Germany, the government was also dismissing its danger and took weeks before it introduced wide scale containment measures. The kind of political leadership that is practiced in Indonesia during the pandemic prompted the fear that the government is hiding something that could endanger our lives or that of our most vulnerable dearest.

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Footnotes

[1] Briefly put, the protocol instructed those who carry out funerals to wear full protective gear. The deceased body has to be wrapped in a sealed bag, carried by a special hearse and be buried within no more than four hours after death.

[2] The webpage *Seword* is known for supporting Joko Widodo and constantly attacking his political rivals. The linked article criticized Anies for exploiting the pandemic to grab the public's attention.

[3] This is a link to a Twitter post of a report that the government did not manipulate the COVID-19 data. Twitter users were replying to this post by showing that they did not believe the government's statement.

[4] One of the instructions is to provide reliable and accurate information for decision-makers, medical professionals, media and the public.

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