



The Omnishambles of COVID-19 Response in Indonesia

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Introduction

On 2 March 2020, President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo addressed the nation to declare Indonesia's first (and second) confirmed case of the novel coronavirus disease, or COVID-19. It later transpired that the two individuals (a 31-year old woman and her 64-year old mother) only learned about their infected status from the news and that the President had announced it to the public before any health officials had personally informed the two individuals.¹ The incident is just one of many major missteps taken by the Government that seriously call into question its ability to respond to what has now become a global pandemic. Whilst the immediate focus should rightly be on treating those currently infected and preventing any further spread, a comprehensive investigation should be established in due time to examine the serious mistakes that were made that have endangered public lives. Indonesia must be more prepared in future.

'Enjoy Aja'

Ever since news started emerging in late December 2019 of a worrying new virus spreading through Wuhan province in China, health experts began to raise the alarm and on 30 January 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared 'a public health emergency of international concern' after 213 deaths and 9,692 cases from all of China's 31 provinces were reported.² In the following days other countries such as India, the Philippines, parts of Europe, Australia, Japan, Singapore, Vietnam and the United States reported confirmed cases. Meanwhile, Indonesia's Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto sought to downplay the international public health emergency telling the public, "Don't panic, don't be anxious. Just enjoy it. Eat well, live healthily. If you have a cough use a face mask."³ Whilst the Health



Minister's intention may have been to calm the public – certainly needed – the message to “*enjoy aja*” came across as dismissive and taking too lightly what was a very serious and deadly matter.

Weeks later, as Indonesia inexplicably appeared to be one of the few major countries in Asia without a confirmed case of COVID-19 – despite having direct flights to Wuhan that were not grounded until 23 January 2020 – the deeply-religious Minister Terawan raised further eyebrows when he claimed it was a “blessing from the Almighty”.⁴ He would also describe a study by researchers from Harvard University that had argued Indonesia may have undetected cases using mathematical modelling as “insulting”.⁵

Wrong Priorities

Despite mounting questions about Indonesia's so-called ‘coronavirus-free’ status, the Government initially attempted to take advantage of it. Following a Cabinet meeting on 25 February 2020, President Jokowi issued four instructions to anticipate the economic impact of coronavirus, of which the second sought to maximize conference activities and MICE (meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibition) in Indonesia as well as to raise promotional efforts that position Indonesia as an alternative tourism destination for those who have cancelled trips to China, Korea, and Japan (at the time three of the most impacted by COVID-19).⁶ At the same time, the Government was preparing IDR 72 billion (USD 5.2 million) to pay foreign social media influencers to promote Indonesia as a tourist destination.⁷

At a time when other countries were trying to slow the spread of the coronavirus by imposing certain travel restrictions, Indonesia was instead encouraging as many people to visit the country. Instead of using state funds to inform the public on basic health precautions, the Government was making plans to splurge money on an online tourism campaign.

Later, when Saudi Arabia imposed its own travel restrictions – including a suspension on all foreign Umrah pilgrims – in the interest of public health and safety, Indonesia initially sought some kind of flexibility from Riyadh given its ‘coronavirus-free’ status.⁸ This was despite the risk of the pilgrims getting infected and bringing it back to Indonesia. The above incidents were indicative of a Government still adopting an economic developmentalist mindset, at the expense of what was a global public health emergency.

An Omnishambles





If the Indonesian Government was shockingly ill-prepared and irresponsibly relaxed prior to its first confirmed case of COVID-19, it had been hoped that President Jokowi's March 2 announcement would have focused the minds of government officials to the cold harsh reality facing the country. It was further hoped that the Government would get its act together and present a more coordinated, responsive, and comprehensive approach. Unfortunately, it has been anything but.

Whilst experts highlighted the importance of openness and transparency as one of 'the key ingredients of effective response in several countries', the President instead admitted, "We did not deliver certain information to the public because we did not want to stir panic."⁹ This included the locations of positive COVID-19 cases in Indonesia, leading to frustrated local administrations to announce it themselves. As one commentator noted, "one of the reasons that local governments started to implement their own measures was because they were losing faith in Jokowi's ability to manage the outbreak."¹⁰ The splits between the central government and local administrations was made clear when the President publicly warned that 'the decision to commit to a lockdown must not be taken by regional administrations. The central government has reserved the right to do so.'¹¹

Aside from a war of words with local administrations, the Indonesian Government was also involved in a spat with neighboring Singapore after Achmad Yurianto, the specially appointed Indonesian spokesperson for all COVID-19-related matters, accused Singapore of withholding information.¹² Embarrassingly for Jakarta, Singapore's Ministry of Health pointed out that it had 'promptly shared information with Indonesia through the official IHR [World Health Organization's International Health Regulations] channel on all the confirmed COVID-19 cases involving Indonesians, to facilitate contact tracing in Indonesia' – something confirmed by Indonesia's own IHR national focal point within the Indonesian Health Ministry.¹³ The lack of communication between Indonesian officials must surely have left Singapore perplexed.

There have been other embarrassments for Indonesia, including at least two patients fleeing hospitals (one confirmed case from RSUP Persahabatan in Jakarta and one suspected case from RS Mardi Rahayu in Kudus) when they should have been under isolation.¹⁴ In a case study of Indonesia's woeful performance, the public was only made aware of the first escape a week after it took place with officials clueless where the patient had fled to. Achmad Yurianto later denied the patient had fled, claiming the individual had only returned home for a day and then checked into another hospital.¹⁵ It was also revealed that the patient doubted the tested results and was reluctant to be in isolation with others, fearing she would get infected if she stayed in the hospital. The sorry state of affair was arguably demonstrative of the lack





of faith the public have in officials.

Analysis/The Verdict

The above is only indicative of the many missteps taken by the Indonesian Government in its handling of the global coronavirus pandemic. We have not even discussed the severe lack of testing capabilities (as of 19 March 2020, only 1,592 tests had been carried out in a country of 270 million people whereas South Korea has carried out more than 220,000 tests despite a far smaller population of 51 million people)¹⁶ or lack of protective gear for medical officials (with some resorting to using rain jackets).¹⁷ As a developing country with a limited health care system, some problems are to be expected. However, unnecessary missteps of the Government's own doing are not acceptable.

Whilst the immediate focus should rightly be on treating those currently infected and preventing any further spread, a comprehensive investigation should be established in due time to examine the serious missteps made that have endangered public lives. Such investigation should involve parliamentarians, medical experts, academics, and civil groups with the aim of identifying what went wrong, who committed such missteps, and how to make sure it doesn't happen again. Indonesia must be better prepared for future public health emergencies.



Endnotes

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