



DOI: 10.22363/2313-2272-2021-21-3-536-542

Social consequences of the 2020 regional elections in Indonesia under the covid-19 pandemic*

V.L. Muzykant, M.A. Muqsith

RUDN University
Miklukho-Maklaya St., 6, Moscow, Russia, 117198
(e-mail: muzykant_vl@pfur.ru; munadhil.muqsith@gmail.com)

Abstract. The article considers the relationship between the 2020 regional elections in Indonesia under the covid-19 pandemic, public space, and political activism in the social media. The covid-19 pandemic has changed the social, political and cultural fabric of the contemporary world. First, the covid-19 threatened the country's healthcare system, then it affected other aspects of social life, including the political sphere. The pandemic has been exacerbated by the spread of misinformation about the covid-19, which is also known as the 'infodemic'. Thus, the covid-19 pandemic influenced the choice of holding elections or delaying it until the situation is under control. The development of the social media encourages political activism in the 'political public sphere' and makes it more diverse in the sphere of egalitarianism. The political public sphere becomes increasingly dynamic and critical to various policies. Indonesia did not postpone the 2020 regional elections under the covid-19 crisis. According to the health protocol, this decision had its pros and cons in the digital space. The authors show that political activists in the social media called for prioritizing health rather than the process of democratization through elections, while the government supporters insisted on having elections even in the covid-19 pandemic situation. Finally, the 2020 regional elections were held but were followed by various incidents. The question is whether the government's argument to hold elections under the covid-19 pandemic was reasonable or, on the contrary, contributed to the wider spread of the covid-19 in Indonesia. Deliberative democracy should consider civil participation as the main pillar of the political system, which is relevant for the new social reality as based on the new social media technologies.

Keyword: regional elections; pandemic; social consequences; covid-19; public sphere; social media; media technology

The covid-19 pandemic implies new challenges for societies and democratic systems all over the world by limiting social interactions — social activities and participation in public events and meetings are under control. The covid-19 pandemic forces various fundamental transformations, especially in healthcare, economic and social systems, including the sphere of civil and collective responsibilities and political rights. The covid-19 pandemic has affected election processes globally, i.e., millions of people as voters became the indirect victims of

* © V.L. Muzykant, M.A. Muqsith, 2021

The article was submitted on 12.03.2021. The article was accepted on 04.06.2021.

the pandemic. Later, the state will assess the pandemic impact of the 2020 elections. The International Data for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) mentions that at least 113 countries decided to hold national or regional elections despite fears of increasing the spread of the covid-19, while 78 countries decided to postpone elections [7].

The Indonesian government decided to hold regional elections in 2020, although the covid-19 pandemic postponed them. The government, the House of Representative Council (DPR) and the General Election Commission (KPU) of Indonesia agreed to hold the elections in December 2020 despite the fact that this political decision threatened the safety of agreed regulations. The government argued that no one knew when the pandemic would end [10]. The decision to hold regional elections under the pandemic caused public debates: those, who opposed this decision, declared it unrealistic and risky, because the number of positive covid-19 cases in Indonesia was increasing, and the epidemiological experts did not know when the pandemic would end.

On the other hand, the development of the new media technologies is accompanied by the increasingly sophisticated network activism, which produces normative patterns for discussion and critical-rational debate. The new social media destroy boundaries and promote egalitarianism and equality. In Habermas's terms, technologies create a 'political public sphere' that transcends the nation-state and allows the fight for political ideas [8]. Therefore, the authors want to explain how the 2020 regional elections were held in Indonesia under the covid-19 pandemic, and focus on critical debates in the social media to consider the social consequences of the elections. In the social media, the public can present their opinions and arguments, while the government uses various media platforms to promote its policies and regulations.

According to Habermas, public space is a place for information and communication, and a place for public discussion, so the access to this public space is free, because it is a place for freedom of assembly, association and expression — *an ideal communication venue*. The public space has three features: 1) it is an arena for it provides a basis for communities' communication; 2) it is the public itself for it ensures democracy from the grassroots level; 3) it is an agent of conveying aspirations from the top to the bottom [16]. Such social media platforms as Facebook and WhatsApp have revived public spaces by providing an unlimited time and space access which exceeds the technical potential of such conventional public spaces as television and radio [17]. Although the public space is considered an inclusive, egalitarian space and a foundation of democracy, there are both segregation (separation) and negative trends (hate, fraud, fake news, and so on) [15].

The Indonesian government issued the Regulation (Perppu) No. 2 of 2020 to hold the regional elections on December 9, 2020, under the covid-19 pandemic. Previously, the elections were scheduled on September 23, 2020, in 270 regions

(9 governors, 224 regents and 37 mayors). A total of 105,396,460 registered residents had the right to vote [13]. Before the pandemic, the KPU set the stages of the 2020 regional elections. But the necessary political campaigns and voting potentially threatened individual and public health. On September 15, 2020, there were an additional 3,507 new cases, and a total of 225,030 cases with 8,965 fatalities [9]. Many worried that the regional elections in December 2020 would produce a new cluster for the spread of the covid-19.

The number of Internet users in Indonesia increases every year. According to the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), in 2020, the number of Internet users was 196.7 million people, or 73.7% of population, which is by 8.9%, or 25.5 million users, larger than a year before [11]. Users of Java Island still contribute the most to the increase in the number of Internet users (56.4%), followed by Sumatra Island (22.1%), Sulawesi Island (7%), Kalimantan (6.3%), Bali-Nusa Tenggara (5.2%), and Maluku-Papua (3%) [11].

The decision to hold the 2020 regional elections caused public debates in the digital space on its pros and cons. Opponents argued that the decision is unrealistic and risky under the pandemic, while supporters insisted that there was no guarantee that the pandemic would finish quickly. According to the Dorne Emprit Academic (DEA — an online data analysis company based on big data, artificial intelligence and natural learning process [9]) which focused on the key word ‘Pilkada’ on the social media platforms on September 15-22, 2020, there were 208,000 conversations and discussions on 175,000 twitter platforms, 31,000 online news, and 1700 Instagram platforms with the peak on September 21 (112,000 conversations, mainly on Twitter — 101,000, online news — 10,000, and Instagram — 354).

We will consider only the pros and cons of the Indonesian regional elections on Twitter (Table 1). There are five influencers/public figures who wanted the regional elections to be postponed. They have different professional backgrounds, i.e., do not present the position of some particular group. Azyumardi Azra is the biggest employer and academic who criticizes the government policy. He decided not to vote to express solidarity with those who died from or were infected with the covid-19, and argued that the elections endangered the health of voters. Dr. Gunawan and Gia Pratama are doctors who criticize the government and insisted that nobody cared about the elections due to being busy with the pandemic. Farid Gaban is a journalist and political observer, and Jack Sparo Gendeng is a humanist. They tweeted satirically the quotes of the two largest Islamic organizations — Nahdatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, which had asked the government to postpone the regional elections to 2021.

Table 2 presents the second cluster of pros based on the calls to the public to follow health protocols during the 2020 regional elections 2020 to stop the spread of the covid-19, and to report any violations in the election process.

Table 1

Cons on Twitter

Influencer	Status	Followers	Retweets	Likes
Azymardi Azra @Prof_Azymardi 21/Sep/2020 18:37	I will not vote in the December 9 regional elections to express my solidarity with those who died from or was infected with the covid-19. Elections under the pandemic are very dangerous for voters' health.	28,247	2,215	6,79
Dr. Gunawan @GundiDr 21/Sep/2020 14:48	How about a win solution, sir @jokowi, all elections are postponed except Solo and Medan? Do you agree? The important thing is that Gibran and Bobby become mayors, other areas don't seem important for you?	39,734	1,899	4,342
Farid Gaban @faridgaban 21/Sep/2020 13:37	NU and Muhammadiyah are nonsense. asking for the election to be postponed. Then what about my son and daughter-in-law who are desperate to become mayor? You have no feelings. The suggestion is yes, the solution	13,599	942	5,139
Jack Separo Gendeng @sudjwotedjo 21/Sep/2020 14:35	NU & Muhammadiyah as large mass organizations asked to postpone the general elections due to the pandemic. This is true for the crowd. The authorities still want the elections to be held. This is truth itself. Let us wait for the third: true truth	1,780,754	868	2,496
Gia Pratama @GiaPratamaMD 21/Sep/2020 19:57	Who cares about elections? Seriously. Those, who are enthusiastic about participating in campaigns, debates, voting, don't care whether there are elections this year	285,880	726	419

Table 2

Pros on Twitter

Influencer	Status	Followers	Retweets	Likes
Polres Trenggalek @1trenggalek 21/Sep/2020 10:01	At the time of the election, follow the health protocol to stop the spread of coronavirus (#TaataProkesSaatPilkada, #TheArieAir, #tjhinfar21)	10,381	103	114
Humas Polres Bukittinggi @Humas_Res_Bkt 21/Sep/2020 10:33	September 23 is the day for announcing the 2020 regional elections' candidates, and September 24 — the day for announcing the candidate pairs' numbers, avoid crowds and keep distance, use a mask and bring a hand sanitizer or wash your hands (#TaataProkesSaatPilkada)	39,734	81	119
Republik Merdeka! Rmol.ID @rmol_id 21/Sep/2020 07:44	Reject postponing of the regional election, Hasto: Leaders must be trained in the midst of the pandemic	13,599	80	186
Prince Spartan @princes_spartan 21/Sep/2020 10:26	We are optimistic about the regional elections in the midst of the covid-19 pandemic, like elections in 40 other countries. Registration of candidates for regional heads in 270 locations is under control. The 2020 regional elections sanctions Perppu is needed, and @kemendagri will soon have a meeting with the DPR	1,780,754	79	87

In addition to the hashtag #TaatProkesSaatPilkada, the pro Twitter accounts used infographics and memes — about the election regulations during the pandemic, applicable articles, and 3M (wearing masks, washing hands, distancing and avoiding crowds) — according to the government's recommendation. The most popular hashtags from the government clusters were #TaatProkesSaatPilkada and #MaklumatKapolriTaatProkes from the public relations network of the police, #PilkadaLanjutProtokolKetat — from the supporters of the regional elections. The most popular public contra hashtags were #PilkadaorMurder and #TundaPilkadaSerentak2020.

The presidential spokesman Fadjoel Rachman explained why the government decided to hold the regional elections in 2020 [1]. First, elections could not be postponed until the end of the pandemic, because the government could not predict this end in Indonesia and the world. Second, elections under the pandemic are possible — Singapore, Germany, France and South Korea held the elections under the strict health protocol. Third, elections were expected to become an innovation [6]. After the 2020 regional elections, the Indonesian government, represented by the Minister of Internal Affairs (Mendagri) Tito Karnavian, informed that the democratic parties in 270 regions were supported by 105 million citizens, and the elections were declared successful — did not produce new covid-19 clusters and involved a high share of voters (76.13%) [18].

However, the situation was different according to the evidence and empirical facts. First, certainly, the elections under the pandemic were not normal: 4 voters died from the covid-19, 70 candidates were tested positive for it, 100 election organizers were infected [6]. There were at least 70,000 campaign activities from September 26 to December, and the number of the covid-19 cases increased significantly from the late November to mid-December 2020 — from 534,266 infected and 16,815 deaths to 650,197 infected and 19,514 deaths [14].

Second, the government insisted on holding the elections by referring to the elections held under the pandemic in other countries such as South Korea and Singapore. Thus, in Katadata (South Korea), the elections were held on April 15, 2020 — when the number of infected decreased by 58% on average; in Singapore, the elections were held on July 10, 2020 — when the average number of cases decreased by 67% [13], i.e., both countries had passed the first wave of the coronavirus outbreak. However, Indonesia held the elections on December 9, 2020 — when the average number of cases increased from September, 28 by 58% [5].

Third, there was no promised success in the innovative election organization. The government does regulate the campaign face-to-face meetings and dialogues on the social media, but on a very limited scale due to the obligation to follow the campaign health protocol if not online. There were many violations, including the face-to-face meetings attended by more than 50 people, not wearing masks and not keeping a social distance [4]. The Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) noted that 43% of the campaign activities of the regional elections' participants were face-to-face meetings, 22% — distribution of campaign materials, 17% — installing props, and only 11% were online activities [2].

In addition, the regional elections led to an increase in the scale of ‘infodemic’ in the political field (post-truth). The Indonesian Anti-Defamation Society (MAFINDO) revealed 47 hoaxes in as if fact-checking articles from April 27 to December 2, 2020. These hoaxes were fake content (34%), manipulated (23.4%), misleading (21.3%), false (17%), artificial or satiric (2.1% each) [3].

Despite the fact that the center of participatory democracy is the citizen, and civil participation is the main pillar of the political system, especially in the era of the new media technology [12], the Indonesian government ignored both the covid-19 outbreak and the public request to postpone the 2020 regional elections. Deliberative democracy has four features: emphasis on the virtue of deliberation to make political decisions, a strong normative character, rejection to reduce politics to the strategic and instrumental, procedural and universalist rationality. The pandemic produced two dilemmas — health vs. economy and health vs. democracy, which are basically political choices. The decision to hold the 2020 regional elections in a crisis situation had to rely on the scientific evidence-based policy and to take into account the public interest. The authorities had to question the very possibility of holding the elections or to transformed the procedure with technology, because election activities inevitably produce crowds which increase the risks of the covid-19 further and wider spread.

According to Jeremy Bentham, the 18th century British philosopher, the highest good is the greatest happiness of people, and the sole purpose of the country, market and scientific community is to increase global happiness. Thus, it is not the people who serve the country, but the country that serves the people.

References

- [1] *Anggraini T.* Hak Pilih Pasien Covid-19 OLEH TITI Anggrain. URL: <https://rumahpemilu.org/hak-pilih-pasien-COVID-19-oleh-titi-anggraini>. (In Indonesian.).
- [2] *Azzahra T.A.* Bawaslu: 43% Kampanye Pilkada 2020 Masih Tatap Muka, Pakai Medsos 11%. URL: <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5197898/bawaslu-43-kampanye-pilkada-2020-masih-tatap-muka-pakai-medsos-11>. (In Indonesian.).
- [3] Catatan Awal Tahun Perludem: Refleksi 2020, Teropong 2021 Pelaksanaan Demokrasi di Tengah Pandemi dan Arah Demokrasi ke Depan. *Perdulem*. Jakarta; 2021. (In Indonesian.).
- [4] *Danang M.* Pilkada 2020 di Tengah Pandemi Covid-19. URL: <https://kompaspedia.kompas.id/baca/infografik/kronologi/pilkada-2020-di-tengah-pandemi-COVID-19>. (In Indonesian.).
- [5] *Dewi F.R.* 70 Calon Kepala Daerah Positif Corona, Eks Ketua MK: Besar Pengorbanan untuk Demokrasi. URL: <https://kabar24.bisnis.com/read/20201128/15/1323655/70-calon-kepala-daerah-positif-corona-eks-ketua-mk-besar-pengorbanan-untuk-demokrasi>. (In Indonesian.).
- [6] *Erwanti M.O.* Jubir Jokowi: Pilkada 2020 Tetap Sesuai Jadwal dengan Protokol Ketat. URL: <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5181604/jubir-jokowi-pilkada-2020-tetap-sesuai-jadwal-dengan-protokol-ketat>. (In Indonesian.).
- [7] *Global Overview of Covid-19 Impact on Elections*. IDEA; 2020.
- [8] Habermas J. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge; 2015.
- [9] Kholis N. Politik Sains Kebijakan. URL: <http://www.politik.lipi.go.id/kolom/kolom-2/politik-sains-kebijakan/1417-pilkada-serentak-2020-antara-demokrasi-dan-kesehatan-publik>. (In Indonesian.).
- [10] Krisiandi. Komisioner Ungkap 4 Alasan KPU Tetap Gelar Pilkada Saat Pandemi. URL: <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/06/21/22125671/komisioner-ungkap-4-alasan-kpu-tetap-gelar-pilkada-saat-pandemi?page=all>. (In Indonesian.).

- [11] Kumparan O. Jumlah Pengguna Internet Indonesia Tahun 2020 Capai 196,7 Juta, Naik karena WFH. URL: <https://kumparan.com/kumparantech/jumlah-pengguna-internet-indonesia-tahun-2020-capai-196-7-juta-naik-karena-wfh-1uYnJ729dTL/full>. (In Indonesian.).
- [12] Muzykant V., Mfarrej F. Effective readability of news: Comparative analyses of Russian and foreign online newspapers. *Vesntnik Slavyanskikh Kultur*. 2018; 4. (In Russ.).
- [13] Pusparsa Y. Maaf, kami tidak menemukan halaman yang anda cari. URL: <https://katadata.co.id/ariayudhistira/infografik/5f73ddee163a/beda-pemilu-berbagai-negara-saat-pandemi>. (In Indonesian.).
- [14] Rahayu S.R. Ini 6 Kunci Kesuksesan Pilkada Serentak 2020 Versi Mendagri Tito Karnavian. URL: <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4870812/ini-6-kunci-kesuksesan-pilkada-serentak-2020-versi-mendagri-tito-karnavian>. (In Indonesian.).
- [15] Sabar F. Hoax dan Diskursus Ruang Publik. URL: <https://kupang.tribunnews.com/2017/03/31/hoax-dan-diskursus-ruang-publik>. (In Indonesian.).
- [16] Schluer D.P. *Shaping the Network Society: The New Role of Civil Society in Cyberspace*. London; 2004.
- [17] Subijanto R. Indoprogess. URL: <http://indoprogess.com/2014/04/ruang-publik-dulu-dan-sekarang>.
- [18] Suharso P. *Pemanfaatan Drone Emprit dalam Melihat Trend Perkembangan Bacaan Digital melalui Akun Twitter*. Anuva; 2019.
- [19] Trotsuk I.V. All power to the experts? Contradictions of the information society as both depending on and devaluating expertise. *Russian Sociological Review*. 2021; 20 (1).

DOI: 10.22363/2313-2272-2021-21-3-536-542

Региональные выборы 2020 года во время пандемии covid-19 в Индонезии и их социальные последствия*

В.Л. Музыкант, М.А. Мукситх

Российский университет дружбы народов
ул. Миклухо-Маклая, 6, Москва, 117198, Россия
(e-mail: muzykant_vl@pfur.ru; munadhil.muqsith@gmail.com)

Аннотация. Статья посвящена анализу региональных выборов 2020 года в Индонезии в условиях пандемии covid-19 и их социальным последствиям, проявившимся в публичном пространстве. Пандемия изменила социальную, политическую и культурную ткань современного мира. Начав с системы здравоохранения, пандемия распространилась на социальные области, спровоцировав политический кризис, и усугубляется распространением дезинформации о коронавирусе, превращаясь в «инфодемию». Пандемия сказалась на проведении выборов, породив многочисленные дебаты об их отсрочке до того времени, пока ситуация не будет взята под контроль. Развитие социальных сетей в Индонезии пробуждает политический активизм — публичная сфера становится все более динамичной, критически относящейся к политике в целом и к проведению региональных выборов в период пандемии. В социальных сетях опубликовано множество мнений «за» и «против» проведения региональных выборов в 2020 году, подчеркивающих приоритет здоровья и безопасности избирателей. Принудительное проведение выборов противоречит процессам демократизации и не соответствует требованиям безопасности избирателей в условиях пандемии covid-19, поэтому региональные выборы в Индонезии сопровождались различными инцидентами. Тем не менее, совещательная демократия считает гражданское участие главным столпом политической системы, что соответствует современным социальным реалиям как основанным на широком распространении новых медиатехнологий.

Ключевые слова: региональные выборы; пандемия; социальные последствия; covid-19; общественная сфера; социальные сети; медиа технологии

* © Музыкант В.Л., Мукситх М.А., 2021

Статья поступила 12.03.2021 г. Статья принята к публикации 04.06.2021 г.