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Abstract

This study analyses the declining public trust in Indonesia's central government amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The study aims to explore the driving factors that decrease the public trust in the central government during the pandemic. It also seeks how the central government restores the low public trust during the crisis. In doing the research, the author uses the reports from Lembaga Survey Indonesia and Indikator Politik Indonesia, which showed data on the decrease of public trust in Indonesia's central government from September 2020 to July 2021. The author validated the survey result with the news in online media, which discusses public trust in Indonesia's central government. The author uses a descriptive qualitative method and secondary data analysis with mainly desk review in conducting the research. The findings show the factors that decrease the public trust in the government include: lack of transparency and accountability, fast-changing regulations, disbandment of the COVID-19 task force, regional head elections, overly concern with the economy, and poor communications. To avoid further deterioration of public trust, the Indonesian government must find strategies to address the issue, such as: Improve COVID-19 related data transparency, Increase budget allocation to improve the test, tracing, and treatment (3T) implementation, Improve the acceleration of free COVID-19 vaccinations and promote vaccine boosters, Ensure good governance in social assistance distribution, Strengthen the resilience of the health system, Enforce the pandemic-related regulations humanely, Facilitate access to adaptive education during the pandemic. This study seeks to examine the patterns of measures implemented by Indonesia's central government in dealing with the COVID-19 situation, which may have a consequence on citizens' trust in the government. The investigation of public trust in government is necessary because the findings can predict future public cooperation and compliance with government policies.

Keywords:

trust, public trust, Indonesian government, COVID-19, pandemic, handling pandemic

A. Introduction

In the mid-2020, Indonesia experienced a major health crisis due to the global spread of the COVID-19 virus. The virus transmission is influenced by many factors, including the government's lack of preparedness since the onset of the pandemic when they underestimated the virus threat (Agustino & Wicaksana, 2020). During that time, various policies issued by the government to address the spread of COVID-19 have been inconsistent and less transparent. The coordination between central and local institutions is also still weak (Ika, 2020). At that moment, the central government was more concerned with anticipating economic problems than addressing health problems because monetary solutions might create a more immediate impact on the country. For example, the government has instructed that all employees under the age of 45 return to work in May 2020. The decision is part of the government's aim to ease lockdown and improve economic activity, particularly for the business sector (Rakhmat, 2020b). The focus on the economic issue then leads to inadequate regulations aimed at limiting the infection of COVID-19. This situation makes citizens independently band together to help one another, promoting aid, locking down their neighbourhoods, and launching various efforts based on information shared on social media (CNN Indonesia, 2021).



The central government's underestimation of the coronavirus threat is reflected by the government's denial of warnings that the virus might exist in the country. The government then responded late by securitizing the issues when the first cases were confirmed in March 2020. However, the efficiency of restricting virus transmission is hampered by this late step. And due to a lack of public trust in the government's programs, citizens did not fully appreciate the government's efforts (Chairil, 2021). In March 2020, the central government bought 500,000 rapid test kits from China. However, this transaction is considered ineffective because the precision of the ordered kits is just 30%. This problem made the number of samples taken using the kits cannot fulfill the necessary number and resulted in a potential loss due to the expenditure (Ramadhan, 2020). Consequently, the official public information becomes inaccurate because of the uncomprehensive testing on specimen samples, and the country has a more challenging time lowering its COVID-19 mortality rate (ICW, 2020). Furthermore, the medical supply scarcity has not been addressed quickly enough. This scarcity is caused by insufficient budget policies at both the national and regional levels, poor procurement procedures, and distribution problems (Kertiyasa, 2020).

During the pandemic, social distancing limitations and staying at home suggestions are imposed in the hopes of preventing the spread of the coronavirus. Unfortunately, not everyone can work or study from home due to the daily expense. Employee layoffs and income loss became more common. In this case, the government started to assist vulnerable groups through various social safety net initiatives and economic stimulus (Barany et al., 2020). The government funds diverted into a stimulus are supposed to impact the broader community and national economy positively. The government initiated the first economic stimulus in February 2020. This Rp8.5 trillion budget aims to boost the domestic economy by increasing spending and labour-intensive programs. The second was a stimulus of Rp22.5 trillion in March 2020; this fund seeks to raise people's purchasing power and encourage export-import convenience through fiscal and non-fiscal stimulus and financial sector measures. And the third was a stimulus of Rp405.1 trillion in March 2020 that focused on public health, social protection, and economic system stability (CNN Indonesia, 2020b). Achieving good results from economic stimulus programs and setting them effectively will require an immense level of public trust and social cohesion. Moreover, governments must promote mandatory COVID-19 procedures like testing, tracing systems, and public vaccination to stop the pandemic (Eichenberger et al., 2020).

The efficiency of government responses in addressing the pandemic is heavily reliant on citizens' willingness to follow them, especially when pharmaceutical cures and vaccines are



not widely available. Obeying health regulations is vital for halting the virus spread and avoiding a strict lockdown. Higher adherence also helps healthcare systems handle rising demand in countries with limited healthcare capacity (Pak et al., 2021). Governments had a critical role in preserving lives and livelihoods as countries coped with the pandemic. However, in OECD countries, only approximately half of citizens trust their government. For securing citizen support, public trust in government institutions is important during all stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, such as containment, countermeasures, and recoveries. The ability of the government to harness public trust as a force out of the crisis will be vital for designing and executing an inclusive recovery. Lack of trust erodes citizens' capacity to react to public policies and to contribute to a greater economic recovery (OECD, 2020). According to a study conducted by (Lalot et al), a lack of trust reduces people's willingness to comply with restrictive government policies implemented in French and Italian municipalities. This fact is also confirmed in a study among young Swiss adults (Nivette et al., 2021). In Nigeria, big political distrust caused by corruption was thought to erode public obedience to the government COVID-19 regulations (Ezeibe et al., 2020).

Significance of the study

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted global health and economic conditions worldwide. It posed as a new challenge to all countries regardless of their political system. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Indonesian citizens have raised concerns about its government's troubling characteristics in handling the pandemic. Those measures include the government's denial of the COVID-19 threat, inconsistency in decision-making, ineffective cooperation between central and local governments, and increasing trade-off between economic and public health perspectives. The country's reputation has suffered as a result of its delayed pandemic handling and its inability to lower the number of COVID-19 infections months after announcing the first cases. Indonesia President Jokowi has implemented a range of policies in regard to the pandemic since then, including partial lockdown, social distancing, and providing a special government budget for COVID-19 response. However, the government's policy approach has generated worries about the failure to restrict the spread of the virus because it prioritizes more on economic growth than people's health.

The Institute for Development of Economics and Finance poll found that 67.7% of conversations on Indonesian social media negatively reflect the government's mitigation policies (Suoneto, 2020). Human Rights Watch stated that Indonesia's government is failing to



offer transparent access to data in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic since they could not provide specific information on the number of cases it has. The stories about Indonesia's incapacity to deal with the pandemic have harmed the country's reputation worldwide. A report by the Lowy Institute's 2020 Asia Power Index, which assesses a country's reputation based on various factors, such as military capability and diplomatic influence, stated that Indonesia's diplomatic influence declined by 5.2% as a result of its poor management of COVID-19 (Pristiandaru, 2020). It also revealed that 95% of Australians doubt Indonesia's capability to address the pandemic, despite Indonesia being extremely crucial to their country. Such doubts may have an impact on Indonesia's investment and tourist industry. Foreign investors might flee Indonesia's capital market due to the poor management of the outbreak and the constant increase in the number of cases (Rakhmat, 2020a)

Indonesian citizens' low level of trust gives a challenge to the central government in handling the COVID-19 crisis. The government has been deemed to be sluggish in addressing the problem since the beginning. This research aims to examine the patterns of measures taken by the central government of Indonesia in handling the COVID-19 crisis, which may affect the citizens' trust level in the government. Trust in the government is essential to investigate since the research findings can picture public cooperation and obedience to government policies in the future.

Research gap

In the study by (Riefky et al., 2021), the findings reveal that the Indonesian government attempted to reduce public distrust by improving essential aspects such as benevolence, reliability, competency, honesty, and transparency of the ruling government. By establishing the COVID-19 Task Force in Indonesia, the government can optimize these aspects in numerous government policies. The Indonesian government's COVID-19 policies are deemed to be ineffectual in addressing the needs of society. As a result, huge economic losses have occurred and the fatality rate increased. Thus, the government must improve its public relations and share transparent information to rebuild public trust. Another study by (Chairil, 2021) found that the Indonesian government has excessively relied on influential military generals and national security agencies to address the pandemic. They also tend to downplay threats, lack transparency, and even use the pandemic to combat anti-government propaganda. Thus, the government must adjust its approach in COVID-19 measures to emphasize the human security factor while not underestimating health risks and maintaining transparency.