



# Narrating Distrust and Resistance to the Inconsistency of COVID-19 Policies in Indonesia

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**Abstract.** This article discusses facts and typologies of resistance of Indonesian citizens regarding governmental policies on COVID-19. Government policies on handling COVID-19 which have been confusing, lacking proper socialization, and ineffectively-delivered communication have resulted in distrust leading to various kinds of resistance from the citizens. This research used a qualitative research approach through primary data from various news regarding citizens' resistance to government policies on COVID-19 published in many online media from March 2020 to March 2021. It has been supported by collecting secondary data incorporated in some official documents issued by the government such as national laws and regional and local government policies. This article has found the identification and typology of citizen's resistance that could be concluded into (1) cultural aspects of communal experience and practice in society which has been become the strong reason for resistance and (2) religious aspects regarding the understanding of the religious tenets openly practiced in daily life, for instance, in ritual and any other forms of performing the religious activities, has prominently shaped the citizen's resistance against government policies on COVID-19.

**Keywords:** covid-19 · polices · resistance · government

## 1 Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, civil resistance against government policies on COVID-19 has sparked controversy. The forms of resistance against them have become very massive, for instance, a violation of health protocols, vaccine hesitancy and vaccine refusal. On 27 April 2021, there was an expulsion of people who wore masks from a mosque located in Bekasi [1]. A similar case occurred in Jogokariyan's mosque, Yogyakarta, in which a massive crowd cantered in the market of Kampung Ramadhan [2]. Meanwhile, WHO clearly stated that health protocols like masks should be used as

a part of a comprehensive strategy to suppress transmission and save lives [3]. Zagury-Orly asserted that if wearing a mask is harmless to oneself, benefits others, and can reduce the spread of the disease, the decision should be simple [4].

This article aims at complementing data on the forms of resistance against government policies on COVID-19. Previous studies did not consider people's communal experience in cultural and religious aspects in regards to the process of creating awareness and beliefs on COVID-19 policies. In essence, this article not only (a) maps the typology of civil resistance against the health protocol of COVID-19, but also (b) explains the communal, cultural, and religious contexts that affect people's attitudes that create resistance against COVID-19 policies. The answer to those issues enabled the emergence of typology and fundamental changes regarding the resistance process shaped by people's social relations, cultures, and religious aspects.

The article is based on one argument that the civil resistance to government policies regarding COVID-19 happened, on one side, due to a distrust of the government and the influence of religion and culture on the other side. Resistance to government policies on COVID-19 is highly related to cultural-communal and religious aspects in which the relations of both create specific patterns in expressing people's resistance. Supported by communal spirit, as seen in religious organizations, the process of awareness and knowledge accumulation in regards to COVID-19 became increasingly wider because each community could very possibly change people's perception and beliefs on formal regulations like government policies on COVID-19.

## 2 Ease Literature Review

### 2.1 Policies Regarding Covid-19

In a pandemic situation or in a crisis, every nation rushed to formulate various policies to anticipate the worst-case scenario to happen to their citizens [5]. Public policies through their political process, at its core, is an issue of persuasion. Deciding, choosing, and making constitutions are in line with their interest in making public policies because public policy inevitably must, on the interplay between politics and markets [6]. In a narrow definition, policies can be understood as limited to the governmental scope, such as the ministry reshuffling policy, bureaucratization policy, and so on. Meanwhile, the definition of policy in a general sense covers global conditions and applies to or affects the entire public [7].

After the public policies are released, the government and state apparatus need to ensure the people could understand and obey them. Thus, stages of socialization are necessary. In this case, socialization is not only concerning resource mobilization but also moral subject production optimized by sensitivity to help the people. As this is also the case with COVID-19 policies, socialization is needed in order to make people know and understand the policies so there would not be any misunderstanding.

Although socialisation plays an important role, putting up posters, billboards, or other public service announcements is not sufficient to reach the mentioned goals. Public involvements and intensive communication are required to ensure deliverance of the messages. In times of crisis such as pandemic, socialization stage is an important and deciding in public policy so that there would not be any misunderstanding regarding the

policies. For example, the policies to maintain distance and the prohibition on home-coming tradition (*mudik*), if not socialized properly, could affect people's trust in the government.

## 2.2 Political Distrust

In Kantian's approach, trust concerns morality in which the emergence of trustworthy actions is validated. Conversely, distrust sees that he or she is motivated by non-moral incentives [8]. Distrust is not merely the opposite of trust, but also the functional equivalence because it can be a choice within a democratic society. Additionally, trust is considered to be able to reduce life's complexity in modern society [9]. In this article, we focus on political distrust of COVID-19 policies and handling. Political distrust is seen as dysfunctional to democracy. Bertsou [10] defines political distrust as a relational attitude that reflects perceptions of disbelief specifically towards political systems. The main driving force of political distrust is the poor quality of administration, technical incompetence, including report manipulations in state-owned media, and corruption. People's distrust of government policies regarding COVID-19 increasingly receives serious attention in many countries [11].

Although it is not systematically composed, the forms of political distrust in research literature can be separated into (1) personal distrust, a choice for each individual to show their distrust towards other individuals, individuals to agents or groups, and individuals to the collective [12]; (2) interpersonal trust, in which the more people distrust politicians and people in government, the less they trust other people in general [13], and (3) public distrust which characteristics are open to counter forms of incompetent government policies, corrupt political parties and politicians, abuse of power and corruption. Moreover, there is a method to express political distrust that becomes a focus in our article, which is the use of resistance like breaking the COVID-19 regulations both openly or secretly [14].

## 2.3 Everyday Resistance

In general, there are two major groups in the study of resistance, namely, those who study resistance from its visible forms like a demonstration and protest as well as scholars who focus on symbolic resistance or everyday resistance [15]. The term everyday resistance refers to the act of resistance from powerless people who do not have resources, access, and opportunity to resist openly against their superordinate. In Scott's study, this group of resistance is commonly comprised of farmers who do not have the capability to organize themselves. Their acts of resistance are done secretly - and often symbolically - so it will not threaten their lives. Therefore, it is not surprising that such resistance "makes no headline" because it occurs and is integrated into daily social life. This form of resistance is varied in practice, from "foot-dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on" [16].

There are two general categorizations of resistance that build on two main forms: the public and the disguised resistance" [16]. Resistance emerges due to material, status, and ideological domination. The forms of resistance declared publicly, such as open revolts, petitions, demonstrations, land invasions, and disguised, like (e.g., poaching,

squatting, desertion, evasion, foot-dragging), caused a number of resistance types. Public resistance caused resistance to (1) material domination; (2) *assertion* of worth or *desecration* of status symbols against status domination; (3) *counter- ideologies* against ideological domination. Disguised resistance that comes in the forms of everyday resistance, caused (4) *direct resistance* by disguised resisters against material domination; (5) *hidden transcripts of anger* or *disguised discourses of dignity* against status domination; or 6) *dissident subcultures* (e.g. millennial religion, myths of social banditry, class heroes) against ideological domination. Based on James Scott's typology, this study will map resistance to COVID-19 policies based on the two forms of resistance (public dan disguised).

### 3 Method

In such a critical situation during the pandemic, the government is forced to move quickly to solve the situation by releasing strategic policies. However, the implementation of the policies needs to be followed by the people in order to fulfil the goal. Meanwhile, in reality, resistance against the policies exists as a result of people's distrust towards the government's commitment in dealing with the pandemic. This is a pressing issue considering that one of the most severe consequences of such distrust is the emergence of resistance against government's policies. Thus, this study is urgent in order to stop the virus.

This study focuses on several cases that demonstrate the reality of citizen's resistance against COVID-19 policies using a qualitative research approach. Qualitative approach was chosen to map how the resistance came to occur during the pandemic in Indonesia and explain why they chose to resist. Data in this study were collected from online media about citizen action toward COVID-19 related government policies, in particular, news regarding public resistance in March 2020-March 2021. Furthermore, government policies such as Presidential Instructions, Bills, and local government policies as well as reports published by non-governmental organisations were also collected for better analysis.

We collected news published in online media using prepared keywords, namely: "government policy", "COVID- 19", "public and citizens' resistance", and "health protocols". From the search results, we managed to collect and select news from various media companies. Data analysis in this study was conducted using qualitative content analysis. There are three phases of the qualitative content analysis process namely preparation, data coding, and presentation of findings. In the preparation stage we determined research questions which were followed by collecting news from online mass media. The next phase, namely the data coding, is a series of processes for determining the coding framework, implementing, testing, evaluating and modifying the coding framework [17]. In this study, data were coded by grouping news in the mass media into four categories: actors, incidents/events, motives/reasons, and rejected policies. After grouping data, we analysed the data into three themes, based on James Scott's resistance theory. Finally, the presentation of the findings is carried out by describing and interpreting the findings based on the theoretical framework described in the previous section.

## 4 Narrating Citizens' Resistances

### 4.1 Against Health Protocols

One of the government's efforts in controlling the spread of COVID-19 is the implementation of the Health Protocols. This government policy is contained in Presidential Instruction Number 6, 2020 concerning Discipline Improvement and Law Enforcement of Health Protocols in the Prevention and Control of COVID-19 and a Decree of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Indonesia Number Hk.01.07/Menkes/382/2020 concerning Health Protocols for the Prevention and Control of Coronavirus Disease 2019. In general, the health protocols are rules of using masks, keeping clean, and social distancing. Moreover, there are government policy products related to health care ranging from Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB), Enforcement of Community Activity Restrictions (PPKM), funeral policy for COVID-19 death tolls, and many others.

The policy of the health protocols turned out to have caused resistance in the community. Citizens have a tendency to disobey and reject the implementation of health protocol policies, for example, tarawih prayers and homecoming tradition (*mudik*) during the feast of al-Fitr. The resistance of residents occurs everywhere, this is as explained by the Chair of the Behavior Change Division, the COVID-19 Handling Task Force, Sonny Harry Harmadi, revealing three areas with the highest level of public rejection of the COVID-19 health protocol in Indonesia. Papua, Jambi, and the Special Region of Yogyakarta [18].

### 4.2 Vaccination

The citizens' resistance of the COVID-19 vaccine has arisen at the same time as the government has begun to find a solution to overcome the pandemic by promoting vaccination. The results of a survey conducted by Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC) showed that residents in DKI Jakarta, East Java (East Java) and Banten mostly refused to be injected with the COVID-19 vaccine. Meanwhile, the least number of residents who refused to be vaccinated were found in Central Java (Central Java). According to the survey results, as many as 33 percent of respondents in DKI Jakarta, 32 percent in East Java, and 31 percent in Banten refused to be vaccinated. The lowest percentage of refusal to be vaccinated was found in Central Java at 20 percent.

Furthermore, the Populi Center Institute in mid- December 2020 revealed the results of the COVID-19 vaccine survey, in which 40% of residents said they were not willing to be given a vaccine by the government. The survey was conducted on 1,000 respondents in 100 regencies/cities spread proportionally in 34 provinces. The reasons for refusal are because they don't believe vaccines are curative and are related to halal [19]. The Ministry of Health and the Indonesian Technical Advisory Group on Immunization (ITAGI) stated that Aceh and West Sumatra were the provinces with the highest rates of vaccine rejection.

## 5 Discussion

The forms of civil resistance to COVID-19 health protocol in Indonesia have revealed various identities which are rooted in the material, social status, religion, and ideology.

These different statuses could widely challenge the possibility of producing another shape of civil resistance in accordance with a particular social group within the multi-cultural background of the country. In this context, civil resistance to COVID-19 health protocol has been harshly divided into public and disguised forms of resistance. The public resistance has been conducted by using public spheres, for instance, a petition against offline class and massive demonstrations, in criticizing some government's policies on COVID-19. In addition, a sporadic and direct resistance shown by not wearing a mask in public areas has been marked as disguised resistance which has been massively encountered in everyday life. Both ways are obviously identical to point out closely how civil resistance appears within society.

Another reason why civil resistance occurred is due to the government failures to socialize policies on COVID-19, thus, lead to political distrust. The government's failures are due to two reasons: (1) policies have not been well socialized in public so the policies are not well understood by them, and (2) in conducting socialization of policies on COVID-19, the state agencies are trapped in a conflict of interest by putting them on controversial ways of which many figures spoke differently. Such inconsistency of COVID-19 policies, then, caused public distrust as shown by many forms of civil resistance.

In addition, cultural experiences and religious awareness have stimulated the emergence of a distrustful attitude towards government policies regarding COVID-19. This distrustful attitude grows in the midst of a society with a communal-cultural background and a strong religious experience. There are two patterns of emergence of resistance in such a context. Firstly, in a cultural event like mudik (homecoming tradition), and secondly, in many religious experiences such as the practice of performing tarawih prayers in congregation (not obeying social distancing) and citizen controversy over vaccines (for halal- haram reasons). The distrustful attitudes towards the inconsistency of COVID-19 policies have made society dare to return to their hometown during feast of al-Fitr, perform prayers in congregation, and refuse vaccination.

The inconsistency of the COVID-19 policies has inevitably given rise to a massive distrust in the society [10], triggered by the government's incompetence in dealing with the COVID-covid 19 pandemic. Such incompetence is shown through various uncoordinated policies, and unskilled communication. In fact, some government officials themselves violated health protocols. As a result, resistance to these policies emerged, initially sporadically, then growing massively in almost all regions of the country.

## 6 Conclusion

This article not only public and disguised resistance which in line with Scott's study of peasant resistance, but also the disguised resistance has shifted massively into the public sphere as a means of mass mobilization. The latter fact has become a political tool for certain groups that have exacerbated the COVID-19 policy implementation. The disguised resistance was carried out by residents while still adhering to health protocols, but they 'modified' it according to the situation they faced. For example, residents still wear masks when they are outside their homes, but they don't put them on properly. Our research found a type of open resistance related to the offline face-to-face school policy,

namely by making a parental rejection of the plan. In addition, residents' disobedience to the ban on going home during 2020 and 2021's Eid holiday was clearly demonstrated by, for example, breaking through roadblocks installed by security forces.

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