

# The Metanarrative of Pandemic Politics: Indonesian Regional Head Elections Cases

Anyualatha Haridison  
{haridison@gmail.com}

Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia

**Abstract.** Indonesia has issued a decision to hold simultaneous regional head elections (pilkada) in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. In recent literature, holding pilkada during a crisis was considered a paradox of democracy. This article aims to explore the comprehensive views of Indonesian scholars concerning the implementation of the pilkada during a pandemic. The protean power theory approach is used to analyze the existing literature and it is possible to build a metanarrative of pandemic politics. This study concludes that Indonesia's experience of conducting pilkada in times of crisis is a form of innovation in power over uncertainty. Innovation is a form of government dexterity to adapt to the pandemic situation, generate capacity and act regardless of the impact that occurs. Like its situation, Indonesia is more accurately metanarrative as a country that strengthens the building of electoral political power to defeat the global pandemic. This is not a decline in democracy – merely a capacity to maintain political stability. Indonesia is easy to face a pandemic if political stability is maintained.

**Keywords:** Pandemic Politics, Covid-19, Pilkada, Protean Power

## 1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is present in the dynamics of global politics, indicated by the rapid advances in technology and information as well as the US and China trade protectionism policies [1]. When the Covid-19 Pandemic hit the world in 2019, the Indonesian government still considered it immune to this deadly virus infection, instead of responding, but came up with the sentence “Indonesian people will not be infected with the coronavirus” [2]. The statement is the opposite at this time, as reported by the world meter site as of August 21, 2021, Indonesia is placed as the sixth country with the most additions of new Covid-19 cases in the world, namely 16,774 cases. Covid-19 is a highly contagious and pathogenic viral infection caused by acute respiratory syndrome and can transfer the virus from human to human very quickly and widely, consequently controlling human mobility is an urgent matter [3].

The mobility aspect has been discussed a lot, in China the decline in the number of infections due to strict quarantine policies [4]. On the other hand, most of the major countries showed slow and delayed responses to social distancing policies, such as Italy, America, Spain and the UK [5], as was the case for the heterogeneous response of Republicans and Democrats in the US [5][6]. In Indonesia, it is relatively similar to the experience of other countries, with slow response, weak implementation and poor performance in handling Covid-19 based on social media opinion studies. [8][13] and the lack of transparency and disclosure of

information on the use of the Covid-19 budget and some violent incidents during the pandemic [13]. The pandemic threatens public health, economic life, social life, and welfare and in turn causes unemployment and an increase in the number of poor people [14].

Some literature also mentions Covid-19 and its electoral consequences, such as Landman and Splendore [15] proposes an election cycle risk matrix, namely a mixed voting system as a potential solution and partially implemented in countries to gain public trust, for example, the case of Spain successfully holding elections with tight regulations [16][17] and this pattern also occurs in the case of the North Korean election [18][19]. On the other hand, the phenomenon in America, the performance of handling Covid-19 resulted in the fact of Trump's defeat, and this is the voter's judgment on the actions of Trump and the Republican Party [20][21][22].

What about the study of handling Covid-19 and related to electoral cases in Indonesia? During the increasing trend of Covid-19 infection cases, Indonesia succeeded in holding simultaneous regional elections on December 9, 2020, in 270 regions, including 9 provinces, 224 regencies and 37 cities. This democratic speculation is moving towards criticism, the government is slow because the focus is shifted to efforts to maintain power [23] and short-term political articulation [1], as is the case in the Czech Republic and Slovakia [24]. Some scholars say that the government's actions contain dilemmas and paradoxes, such as the policy controversy between the regional elections and the handling of Covid-19, such as the antinomy of law and human rights [25], pandemic depoliticization [26], moderate actions and constitutional dilemmas as well as reducing the practice of leadership by interim officials in the regions [27][28][29][30][31] the number of abstentions is increasing – declining voter participation and Indonesia's global democracy index and prone to the politicization of the pandemic in various regions [32][33][34][35]; Violation of health protocols in elections [36][37]. Various other views also present offers against the possibility that the pandemic will continue, namely elections through representative democracy [38] and digitalization of politics through social media platforms [39] as well as electronic elections [40][41] as studies in other countries [42][43][44][45]. Empirically, the use of social media platforms has been applied to the implementation and supervision of regional elections [46][47] and also the implementation of campaigns such as those carried out by the Party of Perindo and the Gelora [48].

The literature review above tends to be oriented towards the implementation of pandemic handling policies, both in other countries and in Indonesia. Several studies also discussed the failure to handle the pandemic which resulted in defeat in the presidential election, while in other countries there was a linear relationship between the success of handling the pandemic and electoral victory. Studies related to the Covid-19 pandemic and the regional elections in Indonesia have mostly focused on conventional, predictable and normative power actions. The weak point of this study tends to put a negative opinion on the government's decision to carry out elections during a pandemic, thus closing the possibility of other perspectives from this action.

This article then wants to build the perspective of power actors, in this case, the government that makes political decisions on the implementation of the regional elections during the Covid-19 outbreak. To obtain this perspective, we offer an analysis using the protean power theory as introduced by Peter J. Katzenstein and Lucia A. Seybert. They mention that the protean power theory is the effect of the dexterity of actors when they adapt in situations of uncertainty. They criticize the conventional definition of power, which focuses on an actor's ability to exercise control in situations of calculated risk and the actor's predictable outcome consequences. However, in protean power theory, actors respond to shifts between risk and uncertainty, both in context and experience, with affirmation, denial,

improvisation, or innovation. Actor innovation is understood as rational improvisation, not irrational, because actors exploit their abilities and create opportunities for every positive possibility of political action to effectively deal with uncertainty without predicting the consequences [49][50][51]. We assume that the Covid-19 pandemic is a context that is understood as an uncertainty when the government as a power actor carries out or implements a power dilemma during a crisis.

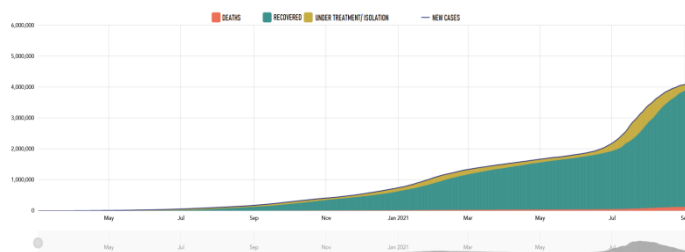
## 2 Methodology

This article was written by focusing on the case of regional elections during the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia. As an effort to prove, the data was taken from online platforms, such as journal publications, journalists' opinions (online media), and reports related to the implementation of regional elections during a pandemic. Excavations are focused on the assumptions of protean power of the government as a power actor who acts outside of conventional power acts, such as the words of power actors in the media. Overall, this type of research is qualitative with a case study approach.

## 3 Result and Discussion

### 3.1 Government dexterity to unpredictability

The Covid-19 pandemic that has hit the world and Indonesia can be termed a critical condition because it makes the world stop for a moment in its activities and has taken many lives. Indonesia is just as bold in adopting a policy of conducting elections as other countries and is not widely praised by scholars. In previous studies, the government as a power actor who decided to carry out the regional elections was considered to ignore the rights of public health and was considered a failure, even considered anti-science [52].



**Fig. 1.** Indonesia National Trend of Covid-19  
(Data processed from data.covid19.go.id)

Fig. 1 shows the national trend regarding Covid-19 cases, that since the confirmation of Covid-19 cases in Indonesia since April 2020 there has been a significant increase. On November 1, 2020, the number of new cases has reached 432,432 confirmed positive for Covid-19. The Indonesian government as an actor of state power is dealing with the situation of the rapid spread of Covid-19. It is reasonable if scholars and observers say that the implementation of the December 9, 2021 election is a government decision that does not make sense. Observers depart that state power must make rational decisions and the consequences

can be calculated. Conventionally, power must pay attention to human safety and the right to health.

Power relations are not only seen from the point of view of formality but there is another side that can be analyzed from the root of the actions of power actors in taking action. Protean power takes the positive side of the power dimension in decision making. Government improvisation is seen as a charade by some literature [26][25], but it's not the case, there are many situations to consider. The debate between circles and the context of the pandemic in the concept of protean power is considered a critical point that becomes the impetus for power actors to improvise in political decision-making [49][50]. Empirically this can be shown from the government's gambling in decision-making for the simultaneous local elections and statements of power that influence public opinion. President Jokowi once said that no one knows when the pandemic will end, so he firmly said that the 2020 regional elections would still be held to maintain constitutional rights, the right to be elected and the right to vote [53]. On another occasion, President Jokowi displayed the positive ornament of power by saying that the election could be used as a new momentum that was shown through the election system in a new way in the pandemic era and this was a form of innovation in democracy for all Indonesian people [54].

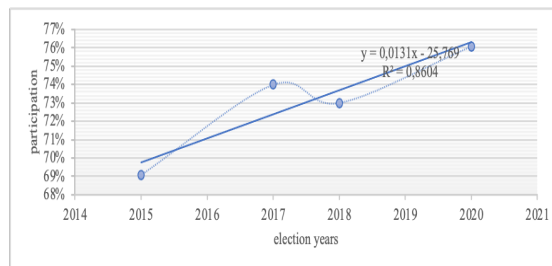
The power authorities neutralized public fears related to the pandemic outbreak that hit Indonesia, especially the pessimism and previously predicted risks. As stated by the Minister of Home Affairs, Tito Karnavian, that the government is confident that the regional elections will not lead to new clusters of Covid-19 transmission and that the 2020 regional elections are a scenario of government optimism, just like other countries holding elections during a pandemic. The Ministry of Home Affairs initiated the "Gerakan Pilkada Sehat" ("Healthy *Pilkada* Movement") positive energy to be conveyed to the community and the region. That the implementation of the *pilkada* is a place to choose quality regional leaders to work together to deal with the pandemic crisis in Indonesia. Another prerequisite that is prepared to hold a healthy election is the discipline of health protocols and prosecution for violations of health protocols [55].

Meanwhile, the protean power theory considers that the government does not take into account these risks because the views of society, in general, are the measure. Like Saleh's study with multiple regression analysis, it was found that 400 respondents (36.36%) did not believe in the information released by the media regarding the development of Covid-19 cases in the media and 553 respondents (50.30%) wanted the local elections to be held on condition that the protocol was implemented. health [56]. A relatively similar study in Central Kalimantan also shows that more than 50% of the people agree that the local elections will be carried out with strict health protocols [57]. Of course, the Covid-19 pandemic is still a mystification for some people, so they are sceptical of media coverage, on the other hand, people are used to elections. The government's decision to continue holding elections can be analogous to the government's decision not to implement a lockdown policy. As Saiful Mujani's analysis shows that economic conditions and political choices affect the public's evaluation of the government's performance in overcoming the pandemic [58]. People judge the government's performance as good because the government listens to the public's will [59], including not taking the lockdown policy and easing Large-Scale Social Restrictions/Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar (PSBB). This finding is relatively new and contradicts some previous opinions that the government is imaged as populist for the sake of power. By exploring public opinion, it turns out that the Indonesian government did not take a lockdown policy because it prioritized the will of the people.

Concerning power, the government as a power actor is dealing with uncertainty. However, the rational innovation lies in listening to the voices and opinions of the people where the government improvises to fight for the importance of people's political rights without ignoring the rights of public health. This political action is not a form of depoliticization or politicization of the pandemic as in previous literature [26][32][33][34][35] but it is an opportunity for positive possibilities to overcome uncertainty [51]. Not carrying out the local election will also face the government with uncertainty because the consequences cannot be predicted. Shadows related to the impact of not holding the elections can also lead to political instability and demonstrations in the regions. Several previous studies reveal more about calculative power so that the dimension of power is trapped on the mathematical side, while the protean form of power takes the positive side of power which contains innovation and maximizing hidden potentials. Just like other countries, innovation and the government's agility in improvising is a strategy to present a new way of democracy in Indonesia.

### 3.2 Politic electoral trump pandemic electoral

Is electoral democracy so urgent that the handling of the crisis is not on a scale of priority and subordination, even though all of them are forms of democracy? We borrowed Ari Perdana's anecdotal [60] that “everything can be arranged, but everything is difficult to manage”. This is used to describe the mobilization of the Indonesian people during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially during the implementation of PSBB. Although in conclusion, it is not the people who are difficult to regulate, the government who is difficult to regulate the handling of Covid-19. On the other hand, when we reflect on this anecdote in the context of *pilkada*, the reality is the opposite. It was easy for people to come to the polling station even without being mobilized. Rashidin and Aruni [61] illustrates the danger of Covid-19 being countered by holding simultaneous elections. At the local level, Minan's study focused on examining the level of voter participation in the Pandeglang Regency election during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results are astonishing that the voter turnout has increased compared to the 2015 election. Voter participation has increased in the midst of the Covid-19 outbreak and the flood disaster [62].



**Fig. 2.** Voters participation in pilkada  
(Data processed from kpu.go.id)

Fig. 2 presents the participation rate of the 4 *pilkada* periods and shows something unusual, in 2018 there was a decrease in voter participation from 2017 and this occurred in the midst of Indonesia experiencing various progress and a relatively conducive situation. But what should be questioned is why during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, voter turnout has increased significantly. Are voters not afraid of contracting Covid-19 so they can easily come to polling stations? Is it because the political behaviour of the Indonesian people is so enthusiastic about the election? Several predictions by experts regarding the new cluster of

Covid-19 spread due to the regional elections, the decline in voter participation and pessimism regarding the implementation of the regional elections have been broken [63][64][65][66][67].

There is no evidence to suggest that the election cycle causes an increase in new cases of Covid-19. As said by Riris Andono Ahmad, Epidemiologist at Gadjah Mada University, said that it was difficult to measure the increase in new cases of Covid-19 due to the simultaneous local elections. The reason is that the election process takes place over a long period and not only in the voting process. Meanwhile, other factors, because Indonesia is already in the red zone with a high transmission rate, so that even without the election, the transmission rate is always increasing [68]. Mahfud MD said that the 2020 local elections in Indonesia had been successful. An indicator of success is the increase in voter participation at 76%. Even the turnout is above the average voter turnout in elections in America [69].

The context of the *pilkada* and the Covid-19 pandemic illustrates the two opposite poles of electoral power. Political electoral triggers to form a crowd while the pandemic election is required to stay away from the crowd. It is reasonable if Ramadani and Rezah [25] said that at the level of policies issued by the government, it contains legal antinomy. However, at a practical level, people who adhere to two electoral dimensions at the same time choose to violate the pandemic electoral process by avoiding crowds. It can be understood that the Indonesian people during the pandemic were shackled in the psychological aspect because they were kept away from social relations. The election momentum is a change in the new way of electoral relations with the use of strict health protocols. The community as an electoral power redefines its social boundaries by coming to polling stations with strict health protocols. From the perspective of protean power, we term this as a space for interaction in the two dimensions of power won by political electoral and evidence of high voter turnout in the 2020 *pilkada*.

## 4 Conclusion

The election during the Covid-19 pandemic in the previous literature was narrated as the government's negligence in thinking about the right to health. This category is closely related to negative narratives against the authority of power. This article then proposes and explores government action from the protean theory of power. Based on the discussion of actions and innovations, the government makes decisions that are so difficult that it can be called innovation and improvisation to take actions beyond calculations. As has been explained in this article, the authorities are dealing with the rapid spread of Covid-19 and of course worrying all people. However, the government treated this crisis as an opportunity to create a new tradition of democracy that obeys health protocols. Indonesia has had electoral experience during a pandemic just like other countries. The various pessimisms and assessments of government failure in the previous literature are unfounded. By referring to the protean theory, it is appropriate that the authority of power is more likely to be metanarrative as an actor who is steeped in the ideology of society so that government innovation supports the aspirations of the people. With such a situation, Indonesia is more accurately metanarrative as a country that strengthens the building of electoral political power to defeat the global pandemic. This is not a democratic setback, but merely the capacity to maintain political stability and win over the Indonesian people in the two dimensions of power. This article supports the theoretical framework of protean power, although it has not been able to provide comprehensive

indicators and evidence, but has been able to present a new perspective in viewing the authority of power on a more optimistic side.

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