

# Electoral Politics Amidst Pandemic: The Challenges and Risks

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**Abstract.** The Covid-19<sup>1</sup> crisis is unlikely to vanish in the near future, at least a couple of months to come. At the same time, Indonesia will hold Pemilu (general election) in 2024. This paper attempts to address to what extent does the pandemic affect the electoral politics? How the pandemic moment prior to general election could have some risks, especially the growing of money politics. To build the general argument of this paper, first, we elaborate literature works on the electoral politics during crisis. Second, we elaborate some cases associated with money politics in Indonesia. We conclude some challenges and risks, mainly money politics, that should be anticipated learned from the previous cases. This study would be a qualitative study conducted by a library research with secondary resources to gain the relevant data. The general idea that would be highlighted in this study is that the pandemic gives a chance for money politics in a disguise of social assistance or aids.

**Keywords:** Electoral Politics, Money Politics, Crisis, Covid-19

## 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 or coronavirus pandemic has generally been understood generating a series of socio-environmental and institutional health vulnerabilities [1]. It has caused infections and deaths of million lives across continents. Yet, with the current lingering pandemic, not only health systems, but also the economy, politics and social accounts have experience complex problems that had been dragging on for several decades. Some scholars review how and which political system works adequately in tackling the pandemic crises for their citizens [2][3]. In this case, democracy as the world-wide desirable political system since the end of Cold War is being questioned as the pandemic brings serious degree of uncertainties [4].

Many studies on the Covid-19 crisis have been attempting to be related to broader aspects beyond health-related issue. They are ranging – for example – from information system, tourism, gender, to education [5][6][7][8]. In the study of political science there are also some literatures discussing government responses [9], politicising people's beliefs about the virus [10], and international cooperation frameworks [11].

Nevertheless, studies on the Covid-19 relating to democracy particularly electoral politics are still limited.<sup>1</sup> This meets its importance since electoral politics in some democratic states are affected by the pandemic. For example, some elections had to be postponed or conducted virtually due to the safety reasons [12][13][14]. In developing countries where economy are in

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to stress distinctions between *election* and *electoral politics*. While election is the moment people votes, electoral politics more broadly is politics toward, prior to, and during the election.

growing [15] and democracy are still weak featured with poor social system [16], to what extent does the pandemic affect the electoral politics?

To make a focused discussion, this article will take evidence from Indonesia as one of the biggest democratic countries yet still in the category of developing one [17]. Similar to other democracy, Indonesia's 2020 regional election had also been rescheduled [18]. Nevertheless, the postponed election is not the main case in this study. In 2024, the country will have another general election. Currently, the coronavirus crisis in the country has led to some social activities associated with money politics. In particular this study is prompted by the report that Bawaslu (the Election Supervisory Body) found as many as 37 cases of alleged money politics violations in 26 regencies/cities in the 2020 regional head election [19]. Moreover, amidst the crisis, politicians have been involved in distributing Covid-19 aids to increase their popularity [20]. This is not just coincidental as the country will have general election in the coming years. Henceforth, this study will focus on money politics as the risk arose from the pandemic crisis in Indonesia.

This article is structured as follows. Following this introduction, the second section is a brief review on the methods to explain how this study is technically conducted. The third section is elaboration of literature works on the electoral politics during crisis. Topic on crisis meets its relevance since the pandemic has led into crisis. Forth, we elaborate some recent cases in Indonesia linked to money politics. At the end of this article, we review money politics as the main risk and challenge of the pandemic.

## **2 Method**

Prior to gaining the data, this study reviews some existing relevant literatures. Hence, the nature of this study is library-research. The library-research also help to obtain data. This study was conducted using secondary data sourced from online media, especially news reports released since 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic started to emerge. The main resource is Kompas as a leading media in the country. Kompas has its own online platform so that news is reasonably accessible through the web. At the same time, some other online media are also used as complementary resources. Keywords used so search the relevant news are '*politik uang covid/ covid money politics.*'

From the web surfing though the mentioned media, we found relevant news articles related to electoral politics and money politics in the Covid-19 crisis. In this case, the content-analysis method is used to analyse them. In this case, qualitative methods are used to analyse the 'quality' of data that is noteworthy to be presented [21].

## **3 Electoral Politics During Crisis**

Associating the pandemic with crisis is essential in the study of social and political sciences. We understand that the plague is initially of health study accounts. Yet, when the pandemic leads to uncertainty in society, questions like how the governments respond, how it affects political system, etc., are the domain of political science. Thus, new theoretical, epistemological and methodological frameworks must be developed to allow progress towards the resolution of context problems [22].

Since the Covid-19 pandemic has led to crisis globally, it is worth-noting to elaborate the context of crisis. There are many definitions about crisis.<sup>2</sup> But to set the same page of understanding, this study uses a definition by Lipsy. He defines crisis as a pressured and uncertain situation that desperately affects the population of a country and stipulates political responses. It at least has three characteristics, namely threat, urgency, and uncertainty. Hence, crises can be in a form of "...financial hardship, energy and climate change, pandemics, natural disasters, and violent conflict".<sup>3</sup> At this point, the Covid-19 pandemic is certainly a pandemic disease and a crisis in all over the world caused [26]. It threatens the people with dramatic cases of death and contagion globally, urges immediate and demanding solution with the expense of economic locked down, and hitherto causes uncertainty because no effective medication has so far been invented.

At the same time, elections are of important features of democracy. The lingering pandemic shall not affect the elections as periodical agenda in democratic states. Considering the pandemic as a crisis, let us overview what are the challenges and risks that could be when a democratic state is about to run elections in a crisis situation? Unfortunately, there have been limited study about electoral politics in the middle of crisis. Elections in a crisis moment did happen in some democracies. For instance, in the US 2008 presidential election, the downturn of global financial market leading to national economic decline had been used for the campaign rhetoric to gain popular votes [27]. In Germany 2009, the economic crisis has contributed to the victory of bourgeoisie parties [28]. From 1993 to 2015 in Italy, natural disasters had become advantages for incumbent to win elections by offering recovery programs that biased voters [29]. Another scholarly work that could be learnt is the study by James and Alihodzic [30] referring that election postponement during the pandemic like in the countries mentioned early could damage the important feature of democracy, and subsequently there should be some anticipation for democratic practice during emergency.

There are some relevant studies on election during crisis in developing countries particularly in Indonesia. For example, a study found that regional election during the pandemic in Central Kalimantan even increased more participants compare to elections before the pandemic [31]. Another similar study proposes that the government should prepare a rigid health protocol for running elections to prevent the spread of virus [32]. Following this case, it is studied that the government already set such regulation and arrangement [33].

As a main feature of democracy, elections are still held in democratic countries though crisis happens. The above-mentioned studies give us understanding how democracies run elections amidst crisis. Yet, there still a lack of explanation how the crisis challenges electoral politics, especially prior to elections.

#### **4 Covid-19 Budgets and Money Politics**

When the coronavirus outbreak occurred, Indonesia's response was a bit slow. As a result, there have been too many cases of death and infection. Besides, the pandemic also harms the economy; Indonesia's economic has slowdown of 0.4% [34]. Some people live in uncertainty,

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the definitions from perspectives of management by Bundy et.al. [23] and Seeger et.al. [24] or most popularly from a perspective of economy by Karl Marx [25].

<sup>3</sup> This article certainly follows Lipsy's logic that 'the politics of pandemic is the politics of crisis'. His work is on the importance of studying crisis and international relations. Yet, we would like to develop it in the level of domestic/local politics.

loss jobs, and get limited access to capital resources. To contain the virus spread and securing people needs, in terms of mitigating the spread and reducing social, economic, health and political impacts on the society [35]. The government sets some regulation to limit people mobilities, creates the Covid special task forces (*Satgas covid*), gives subsidies for basic needs, performs vaccination programs, and allocates aids. Most of these programs are spent from the state budget.

Prior to the 2020 regional elections, Bawaslu already warned that the pandemic could bring money politics. In the midst of the weakening economic conditions in Indonesia due to the Covid-19 pandemic, money politics has become a practice that is more prone to occur. In this condition the people need financial assistance so that there is a chance to give money or give goods but as an electoral political interest [36]. Subsequently right before the elections, Bawaslu found that there were politicizations of Covid-19 social aids by regional heads. The politicizations were done by attaching pictures of regional heads or symbols of political parties on the aid stuff. The provision of social assistance or aids spent from the state budget was given in the names of certain regional or political heads. This could be categorized as corruption of the Covid-19 social assistance budgets [37].

In June 2021, a case of misused of Covid-19 related-budget was found in Mamberamo Raya, Papua. The regional head corrupted 3 billion rupiah of the budget for his electoral interest [38]. That is just an example of several cases of money politics using the Covid-19 budgets. In this case, the central government in Jakarta suspects dozens of regional heads that do not allocate the budgets properly [39].

Many people in Indonesia live in hardships under the shadow of economic uncertainty. While millions of economically affected people depend on Covid-19 crisis social assistance, bureaucrats have taken opportunities in distributing the aid to increase their popularity [20].

In the 2020 regional elections, there were several (suspected) cases related to election fraud associated with Covid-19 aids. Some of them were in West Sumatra, South and Central Kalimantan, Yogyakarta [40, p. 6][41][42][43]. After all, there were 104 suspected cases in connection with money politics for election using the social assistance budget [44].

## **5 Conclusion: Challenges and Risks**

The General Election Commissions announced that general elections 2024. In the pre-election time, politicians would begin to gain popularity. While coronavirus pandemic is still in existence leading to crisis, money politics could find its hole. There were many alleged cases of misusing Covid-19 budget by politicians for their electoral goals. Indeed, after the 2020 regional elections, there has been no report on such case so far. Yet, the previous regional election in 2020 gives us a lesson to learn and to anticipate. The worse things could happen in coming years toward the 2024 general election.

Hence, electoral politics during crisis of pandemic could bring risks of political fraud by politician. They use the state budget for their own. Indeed, money politics is a classic issue in elections, and is getting more complicated in today's context. Society is more permissive of this practice because we are currently in an economic crisis where people need social and economic assistance.

Bawaslu and other relevant bodies must be more observant in supervising the practice of money politics. They must be more active in tracing the origins of the Covid-19 social assistance budget. This is important because the capital spent by the candidates will probably be replaced when they are elected. In other words, it is prone to corruption. Thus, this pandemic challenges

the existence of democracy, a political system aspired to as an ideal model, including being free from corrupt practices.

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