



TAMING THE TWIN HAZARDS: INDONESIA'S 2020 DIRECT LOCAL ELECTION

Case Study, 10 November 2022

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INTRODUCTION

The first case of Covid-19 in Indonesia was identified on 2 March 2020. On 13 April, the Indonesian Government declared Covid-19 a national disaster and declared a national emergency. 2020 was therefore a very challenging year for electoral stakeholders and administrators; direct local elections were held simultaneously in all regions of the country amidst the pandemic. Compounding this challenge, the 2020 direct local elections were held on 9 December, which coincides with the peak period of the rainy season in Indonesia.

The direct local election is held to elect the heads of local government at the provincial and lower (district or municipal) levels. The 2020 direct local election was held in nine provinces, 224 districts, and 37 municipalities with registered voters numbering 100.359 million.

During the rainy season, flooding is prone to occur in all areas. The increasing sea-surface temperature due to global warming contributes to an increase in tropical cyclone intensity during the rainy season; Indonesia is projected to have increased extreme river flood risk and sea-level rise, too, in the coming decades (World Bank/ADB 2021: 18). The country will thus be more exposed to hazards such as floods, droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes, and landslides (Djalante et al. 2021). Flooding is the most significant among these hazards because it happens most frequently and affects a larger population (Djalante et al. 2017: 3).

Despite this risk-prone context—and specific Covid-19 legislation aside—Indonesia's election laws have yet to fully specify how to deal with natural

disasters. For example, in organizing general elections the KPU (*Komisi Pemilihan Umum* – General Elections Commission) instead refers to relevant articles of Law 7 (on Governing Elections) (Indonesia 2017). Article 431 regulates continuing elections when disasters disrupt some part of the election process; article 193 explains that election officials can discount particular electoral districts that have been destroyed by natural disasters; article 372 explains that voting can be repeated when disasters make voting impossible; and article 432 proposes repeating an election from its early stages when disasters make it difficult to implement all of the election processes. However, this law does not explain such responses in further detail or distinguish different types of natural disasters.

As such, no particular section in the 2017 law regulates how to run elections amidst disasters. On the technical side, the KPU has not provided more detailed rules and procedures for implementing elections in locations with specific disaster characteristics (Liando 2019), Nor does it have a detailed risk management framework or crisis management procedure, at either national or local level. This was seen in the 2020 direct local election, where no specific regulations responded to flood hazards. Therefore, the discretion of the regional electoral commission (KPUD – *Komisi Pemilihan Umum Daerah*) in the crisis was crucial.

This case study elaborates experiences of local election officials and what they have prepared for the future, with a focus on two contrasting districts: Semarang City (capital of Central Java Province—which was not flooded on election day itself) and to its east Demak, one of Indonesia's most severely flood-affected regions. What changes have they made to legal frameworks and operations, to mitigate the impact of flooding in elections? This study will also explore how flooding and Covid-19 interact and how election officials (alongside others such as meteorological agencies) dealt with these hazards simultaneously. Issues covered include the relocation of polling stations, existing mitigation plans, challenges for election officials in the field, the campaigning process, voter registration, and voter education.

Flood profile: Demak District

Located to the east of Semarang City (the capital of Central Java Province), Demak District is one of Indonesia's regions most severely flood-affected regions, experiencing land subsidence and sea-level rise. According to data from Global Surface Water, flood trace has spread in all the Demak district's coastal areas in the last 40 years (European Commission n.d.). The flood came from the river overflow and the sea (a tidal flood is referred to locally by the term *rob*).

Due to rising seas, some of the coastal areas in Demak have been sinking for some years, with areas predicted to flood also increasing yearly (Utami et al. 2017). The coastal area in Demak District experiences erosion and land subsidence of about 4 cm to 12 cm every year (Dinkominfo 2021). A researcher reported that coastal development and over-extraction of groundwater are among the causes of the flooding (Syambudi 2021).

BACKGROUND AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Electoral law and administration

There are two types of election in Indonesia. First is the general election which contains the presidential and national assembly elections. Second is the election to elect a governor and mayor/head of the district. The general election is governed by Law No. 7 of 2017 as already mentioned. Meanwhile, the governor and mayor/head of district election is governed by a series of laws: Law 1 of 2015, Law 8 of 2015, Law 10 of 2016, and the latest, Law 6 of 2020. The Indonesian Government enacted Law No. 6 of 2020 to implement local-level elections amid the Covid-19 pandemic (Indonesia 2020c).

The agency responsible for organizing all stages of the general elections nationwide is the General Elections Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum - KPU). Another parallel government institution involved in elections in Indonesia is the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), whose task it is to monitor and supervise all stages of the election process organized by the KPU. The KPU has units at provincial and district/municipal levels called the Regional Elections Commissions (Komisi Pemilihan Umum Daerah – KPUD). The provincial level of KPU is responsible for organizing the election of the governor and their deputy, while the municipal and district level of KPU is responsible for organizing the election of the mayor and head of the district. Similarly to the KPU, Bawaslu exists at every election administration level for oversight of local elections.

In line with Law No 1, 2015, the simultaneous direct local elections were originally to be held in September 2020. However, The National Assembly approved Law No. 2, 2020, proposed by the executive (President and his cabinet) to postpone the elections to December 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The postponement enjoyed the support of all political parties sitting in the National Assembly, including opposition parties. The government decided that the simultaneous direct local elections would be held on 9 December 2020. Previously, on 21 March 2020, the KPU had postponed pre-election processes such as the appointment of village-level election officers, administrative assessment for the candidates, and updating voters' data. Meanwhile, the National Bawaslu decided to dismiss field supervisors temporarily and instruct its provincial and district/city branches to supervise the postponement decision at the local level.

Indonesia adopts an in-person voting mechanism at the polling station on voting day. Special voting arrangements such as early voting, postal voting, proxy voting, or the mobile ballot box are not provided. However, there has been discussion about e-voting. In March 2022, the Minister of Communication and Information Technology proposed implementing an e-voting system in the 2024 election (Sari 2022), arguing that adopting digital technology would strengthen its legitimacy by making the electoral process more effective and efficient. This proposal has sparked a public debate because many areas in Indonesia are still without internet connection or a stable electricity supply (Sari 2022) and concerns about the security of voting data results remain.

Covid-19 coordination and protocols

To coordinate and supervise its pandemic response, the Indonesian Government formed a Covid-19 Response Acceleration Task Force (*Gugus Tugas Percepatan Penanganan Covid-19*). This task force was to accelerate synergy among government agencies at national, regional (provincial) and local government levels. Reporting to the National Disaster Management Agency, the task force involved the health authorities, national police, and armed forces. Regarding the 2020 direct local election, the task force fully supported the KPU and Bawaslu in all stages of the election process. The task force also helped to develop health protocols that election officials and participants must obey. The KPU formalized its collaboration with the Covid-19 task force through decree 531 of 2020. Through this decree, the National KPU also ordered all regional KPUs to similarly cooperate with the task force in their respective areas.

The 2020 direct local election during the pandemic triggered heated debates in the preceding months. Controversy about conducting the election in December emerged in the public debate. At the time, a vaccine had not yet been found and the infection and mortality rates were increasing. There was much concern that the election would trigger an uncontrollable escalation in the epidemic. There were 71 days of campaigning and more than 300,000 polling stations on voting day, posing an apparent risk of virus transmission clusters. The Centre for Political Studies at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI—a public body) argued for a further postponement, suggesting that an election in December contradicted the government's agenda to limit public gatherings (Santoso 2020). However, the government held with its decision to conduct the direct local election as scheduled.

The KPU issued Regulation 6 of 2020, which specifically regulates the organization of elections during the pandemic (Indonesia 2020c). This regulation serves as a guideline for all Regional Election Commission (KPUD) and contains health protocols that must be applied in all election processes: from voter registration and verification to candidate registration, to campaigning and polling. Among the Covid mitigation measures (such as mandatory personal protective equipment, PPE), the maximum number of voters in each polling station was reduced from 800 to 500 people.

Regulation 6 of 2020 also mentioned that voters who are (or suspecting of being) infected with coronavirus, hospitalized, or self-isolating due to Covid-19 still have the right to vote. Voters who are undergoing hospitalization, self-isolation or are positively infected with Covid-19 (based on data from the Covid-19 Response Acceleration Task Force in the local area) can vote at a polling station adjacent to hospital. For voters undergoing self-isolation and unable to come to the polling station, the polling station official will visit them while prioritizing their confidentiality.

The KPU's Regulation No. 13 of 2020 limits face-to-face campaign activities and prioritizes social media or online campaigns. This regulation prohibits

public meetings and similar activities that gather many people, imposing limits on the numbers of participants at public debates.

Flood preparedness

As a country with two seasons, high rainfall in Indonesia during the rainy season is normal. It makes some areas prone to flooding. The National Disaster Management Agency (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana – BNPB) noted that from 7 January 2020 to 7 December 2020, there were 2,745 disasters in Indonesia. Floods are the most frequent disaster, reaching 993 cases (Databoks 2020). The other disasters were landslides, tornados, drought, earthquakes, forest fires, and volcano eruptions.

The 2020 simultaneous direct local elections occurred in December, which poses a high risk of flooding. On 10 November 2020, the Meteorology Climatology and Geophysics Agency (Badan Meteorologi, Klimatologi, dan Geofisika – BMKG), in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Works and Housing, and the Geospatial Information Agency (Badan Informasi Geospasial – BIG) released a map of flood-prone areas in Indonesia. The author connected the BMKG data of flood-prone areas with the local election locations. The result was that 84 per cent of local election locations had (high, medium or low) flood vulnerabilities, with only 16 per cent being safe from flooding. Most regions have a medium level of vulnerability, while 4 per cent have a high vulnerability to flooding.

Most election logistics, such as ballots and other voting equipment, are easily damaged by water. The KPU, through Regulation No. 7 of 2020, has regulated the specifications of the 2020 election logistics materials. For example, Article 8, paragraph 1 stipulates that the ballot box is made of a waterproof double-wall cardboard material that uses coating or laminating on the outside. Furthermore, the ballot box must be in the shape of a box, with sturdy sides. There is a hole on the top side to install a connecting cable padlock, cable ties, or other security devices. Plastic bags are provided in large and medium sizes to make equipment safe from water damage. Large plastic bags are used to store containers that contain ballot papers, administrative reports, and certificates. Meanwhile, medium-sized plastic bags are used for polling station equipment such as ID cards for election officials, pens, glue, and stickers.

As the authorities responsible for organizing the elections, the national and regional KPU have thus taken several practical measures to mitigate the effects of flooding on elections. However, there was no formal cooperation between the KPU and BNPB to anticipate flooding in the 2020 direct local elections. Therefore, the discretion of the regional KPU was crucial. Four days before voting, the KPU of Medan City took anticipatory precautions by shifting some polling stations prone to flooding. They shifted the location of polling stations to a higher place but still within the same village (Muhardiansyah 2020). The Bandung District KPU also anticipated floods during the 2020 election and coordinated with the Local Agency for Disaster Response (Badan Penanggulangan Bencana Daerah – BPBD). They prepared to pick up voters using rubber boats in case of flooding. Given that there had been predictions

of extreme weather in the region, the Bandung District KPU also mapped 203 polling stations prone to flooding and landslides. The KPU assessed that BPBD Bandung District is well trained in dealing with disasters during elections (Ripaldi 2020).

FLOODING AND COVID-19 IN 2020: THE NATIONAL PICTURE

Before the election, BMKG noticed a tropical cyclone seedling in the Indian Ocean, precisely south of West Java. This tropical cyclone impacted high waves in the waters west of Lampung and south of Java. In addition, tropical cyclone seeds also have the potential for heavy rain and strong winds (Banten Province 2020). BMKG's prediction was proven by the high rainfall in several areas, causing floods such as those in Banten Province. Floods hit three regions that held simultaneous direct local elections. They are Serang District, Pandeglang District, and Cilegon City.

Based on data from BNPB and news tracing from the media, the author assessed that 91 (or 41 per cent) of the regions where the 2020 simultaneous direct local elections were located had suffered flooding disasters. This assessment was taken from 13 August 2020 to 31 December 2020. During this period, there were stages of the direct local elections that required fieldwork from the election officials. These include voter registration (14 July–6 December), the campaign period (5–8 December), voting day (9 December), and the tabulation of vote results (11–26 December). Some of the locations that flooded before voting day such as Berau, East Kalimantan, Serang, Pandeglang, Sidoarjo, and Medan. In addition, several areas flooded on the voting day, such as Serang, Pandeglang, Lima Puluh Kota, and Demak.

At the same time, Bawaslu faced significant challenges in supervising the 2020 direct local elections, being guided by various new health protocols: Regulations 6 and 14 already discussed, but also Regulations No. 16, No. 17 and No. 18¹ (on voting, vote counting and results) (Indonesia 2020a; Indonesia 2020b). Its task was to ensure that voter participation remained high while at the same time ensuring compliance with social distancing and other health protocols on the part of election staff, candidates, campaigners and voters (Asyilin 2021).

Some epidemiologists suspected the election contributed to new transmission clusters—which the government denied—complaining also that contact tracing was weak, so they could not determine the accuracy of the virus transmission rate (BBC 2020). After the election, The KPU reported that several election officials and participants were indeed exposed to Covid-19 (Hutabarat 2021). 70 candidates who ran for the election were infected with Covid-19, three of

¹ Regulation No. 18 provides that in force majeure situations election officials can stop some or all stages of voting and tabulation. The election officials at the sub-district and village levels will collect data on locations affected by the disaster. They then propose to the District/Municipal KPU for a communication to the National KPU, which issues a directive for the District/Municipal KPU to postpone voting if necessary, and to set the date for rescheduled polling.