

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND MODERN DISJUNCTURE AMIDST THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 IN INDONESIA

TEORI KONSPIRASI DAN KETERPUTUSAN MODERN DI TENGAH PERSEBARAN COVID-19 DI INDONESIA

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ABSTRAK

Di tengah penyebaran wabah COVID-19 di Indonesia, pemerintah banyak mendapatkan kritik karena ketidakmampuan dalam merumuskan strategi penanganan yang tepat. Selain dari tidak berfungsinya birokrasi, tingkat kepatuhan yang rendah dari warga negara Indonesia terhadap protokol kesehatan, menambah kerumitan dampak COVID-19. Salah satu faktor yang berpengaruh dalam perilaku tersebut adalah tersebarnya informasi palsu dan teori-teori konspirasi yang berkaitan dengan virus tersebut. Bagaimana kita bisa menjelaskan luasnya persebaran teori konspirasi di tengah ancaman virus COVID-19 di Indonesia? Artikel ini mengajukan argumen bahwa persebaran teori konspirasi di tengah pandemi merefleksikan kontestasi yang tengah berlangsung terhadap legitimasi politik di antara negara dan masyarakat. Untuk menjelaskan argumen tersebut, artikel ini akan memaparkan tiga momen kritis yang menjadi landasan dari persebaran teori konspirasi di Indonesia. Pertama, teori konspirasi digunakan sebagai pondasi dari rezim otoritarian Soeharto, dan kemudian melekat dalam institusi sebagai instrumen penting untuk mempertahankan kekuasaan. Kedua, pertautan antara ekosistem demokratis dan penggunaan media sosial memungkinkan masyarakat untuk merebut teori konspirasi sebagai alat perlawanan dan skeptisisme terhadap pemerintah. Ketiga, ketegangan negara dan masyarakat terkait otoritas kebenaran tersebut menguat dalam konflik terkait penanganan COVID-19 di Indonesia. Pemerintah mencoba mempertahankan legitimasinya melalui ketidakterbukaan terhadap informasi tentang COVID-19. Sebaliknya, sebagian kelompok masyarakat merespon ketidakterbukaan tersebut dengan melakukan penyebaran teori konspirasi yang menjustifikasi ketidakpatuhan pada protokol kesehatan. Kontestasi ini memperburuk dampak dari penyebaran COVID-19 di Indonesia

Kata Kunci: teori konspirasi, COVID-19, Indonesia, media sosial

ABSTRACT

Amidst the global outbreak of COVID-19 in Indonesia, the government has been under the spotlight for not being able to formulate a proper response. Aside from the malfunctioning bureaucracy, the low compliance among citizens toward public health advice complicates the impact of COVID-19 in Indonesia. One factor that contributes to the attitude of society is the spread of false information and conspiracy theories associated to the virus itself. How do we explain the propagation of conspiracy theories under the threat of COVID-19 in Indonesia? The article argues that the spread of conspiracy theories amidst the pandemic reflects the on-going contestation of political legitimacy between the state and society in Indonesia. To elaborate this point, the article elucidates the three critical junctures that buttressed the propagation of conspiracy theories. First, conspiracy theory was utilized as a foundation of authoritarian regime of Soeharto, and later became an institutionalized tool to maintain its power. Second, the entanglement between democratic ecosystem and proliferation of social media after Reformasi, has enabled society to appropriate conspiracy theories as a form of resistance and skepticism toward government. Third, the tension between state and society in regards to the authority manifested on the contention on COVID-19 management in Indonesia. The government has been trying to maintain the legitimacy by being secretive on COVID-19 information. At the same time, some elements of society responded to the secretive government with propagation conspiracy theories that also justify public disobedience toward health protocols. These combinations have further exacerbated the impact of COVID-19 in Indonesia.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, COVID-19, Indonesia, social media

“Good morning, should there be anyone who would like to challenge me to go to hospital to interact with COVID patients, or challenge me to inject myself with covid virus, I will accept that challenge. With conditions: should I survive, all doctor in Indonesia, all Indonesian media/celebrities/SJW/musician/influencer/celebgram that have been pushing the idea of lockdown SHOULD VOLUNTARILY ASKED TO BE IMPRISONED since they have been propagating wrong solution and have caused harm for the whole Indonesian society.”

((@jrxsid, 28 April 2020)

INTRODUCTION

The excerpt above is taken from the Instagram posting of Ari Astina, better known as Jerinx, a well-known drummer of Superman Is Death, a punk band based in Bali. The content was just one of many social media rants Jerinx actively propagated since Indonesian government applied partial lockdown to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. Jerinx believes that the order to lockdown, as well as the mainstream narrative about the danger of COVID-19 is part of global conspiracy. The threat of COVID-19 according to Jerinx is a public lie manufactured by global elites such as Bill Gates that are looking to make profit out of the fear of many states and society.

As silly as it sounds, the influence of figures such as Jerinx should not be underestimated. On *Instagram* alone, Jerinx has almost one million followers. Granted, the number of followers does not necessarily mean that they agree with all the points presented by the drummer. Jerinx’s number of followers also does not automatically translated to actual influence outside of social media platform. Nevertheless, on social media platform such as *Instagram*, Jerinx could talk about almost anything without any gatekeepers as implemented in mainstream media.

Jerinx is not the only social media persona that entertain conspiracy theories in Indonesia. There are many other figures that, like Jerinx, utilized social media platforms to propagate conspiracy theory as well. At the same time, based on their interactions with followers on social media, many also seem to approve the skepticism and distrust toward government regarding

the actual threat of COVID-19. The dissonance on COVID-19 is publicly demonstrated on social media as well as public space, in contrasts to the day-to-day COVID-19 death toll presentation by government’s spokesperson in television.

Reports from many areas also shown that the obedience toward COVID-19 health protocols is patchy at best. In Jakarta, city with the highest number of patients, around 60% of its citizen decided to stay at home during the early implementation of partial lockdown. But, after couple of months many chose to conduct normal activities and directly correlated to the increase of patients (Umasugi, 2020). The situation is even worse in Surabaya which recently becomes the new hotbed for COVID-19. In public areas, more than 80% of Surabaya residents do not use face mask and also neglect the social distancing protocols (Frd, 2020). At the same time, the official cases of COVID-19 in Indonesia went beyond 100,000 cases at the time of the writing of this article.

Indonesian government tend to attributes the failure to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to the disobedience from citizen to follow the health protocols. Similar notion could also be found on various digital platforms, where Indonesian internet users would blame and mock other citizen, either for their ignorance, lack of education or even religious fanaticism. The existence of social media figures who propagated conspiracy theories in this regard, further strengthens the frame of thinking that posits citizen’s ignorance as the main reason behind the spread of COVID-19.

The propagation of conspiracy theories in the past few years, has been very salient within Indonesian public sphere. Alongside the misinformation or hoax, conspiracy theories which also have its distinct characteristics, are easily found to be shared on social media or social messenger. Prior to the pandemic, MAFINDO (social collective who focuses in debunking misinformation) had found the health issues to be one of the most popular false information in Indonesia (Wiyanti, 2020). Anti-vaccine group for instance, they have been propagating conspiracy that frames vaccines as an evil plot from secret elite group either for commercial or political interest. Nonetheless,

these theories are usually located on the fringe spectrum of society and could not gain significant traction into mainstream discourse. The case is rather different with COVID-19 conspiracies, the theories become very significant; it affects various kind of policies.

Some scholars have conducted the study on how the pandemic increased emotional burden in society (Abdullah, 2020; Megatsari et al., 2020). Other scholars discussed the limitations of online learning as implemented by Ministry of Education (Rasmitadila et al., 2020). An-other crucial issue is the discrepancy between government policies and its reception in society. Lazuardi (2020) demonstrated the problem with governmental program through the specific case of Yogyakarta. In term of gap between facts and false information, Nasir et al. (2020) also found there are many misinformation about CO-VID-19 in society. Notwithstanding the valuable contributions of these articles, the discussion on conspiracy theories is still nascent.

As comparison, the topic of conspiracy theories and its link to the spread of COVID-19 has been discussed in many regions. The survey in UK has demonstrated how belief on conspiracy theories links to people's disobedience for health protocols (Allington et al., 2020). In USA, it is found that social media influencers plays a big role in the propagation of conspiracy theories to wide audiences (Gruzd & Mai, 2020). On the other hand, based on the case in Pakistan, Inayat Ali (2020) argues the importance of anthropological work to comprehend the spread of conspiracy theories with social and political contexts. It is under the similar point of view, that this article would seek to understand contemporary prominence of conspiracy theories and its link to Indonesian social and political contexts.

The salience of conspiracy theories amidst the pandemic, thus raised questions to be explored in this article. Does the salience of conspiracy theories emerged as a distinct phenomenon triggered by the unprecedented crisis? Or, is it an existing socio-political feature in Indonesia that

later to be amplified by the pandemic? Rather than putting the blame on conspiracy theories, as the reason behind public disobedience against COVID-19, the article examines the political and social disjuncture that enables the proliferation of conspiracy theories in contemporary Indonesia.

The article argues that conspiracy theories are deeply entrenched within Indonesian socio-political fabric. Throughout history, the production and propagation of conspiracy theories, reflects the never ending tension between state and society on the claim of authority in regards of public information. To elucidate this argument, I will be looking into three specific political junctures that shapes the development of conspiracy theories in Indonesia. The first juncture is the establishment of New Order as the authoritarian regime. I would argue that from the start, conspiracy theories has become one of the most important tools of the regime to initiate -and later maintain- its power. The regime was started by Manichean narrative, which portrays Soeharto and the armed forces as a hero, that rescued Indonesia from the evil forces of Indonesian communist. The same narrative was brought up from times to times that it becomes the conspiracy theory that entangles to Indonesian politics and remain to be one of the most influential tropes until these days.

The second juncture is *Reformasi* that brought democratic system in Indonesia as well as many different social and political turmoil. As has been discussed by many scholars (e.g. Hefner, 2000; Sidel, 2006), the absence of repressive regime has opened up competition between many social and political forces. Democratization has made Indonesian citizens to be disillusioned with the authority of government, including their role to be the source of reliable truth and information. The skepticism for instance, was reflected from the high demand of transparency during the early stages of *Reformasi*. At the same time, the freedom to produce and propagate information also bred various conspiracy theories within society. These theories were not just only targeted towards government but also to element of societies perceived to be rivals based on primordial identities. In this context, the growth of social-media usage has amplified various horizontal cleavages, since

conspiracy theories are now having a much larger outreach than ever.

The third juncture is the pandemic of COVID-19 in Indonesia. The spread of virus in Indonesia has exposed various problems long attached to Indonesian politics. Within such disruption, various conspiracy theories are propagated through the now matured social media ecosystems. The inability of government to provide transparent data and reliable response has triggered the conspiracy theories to come at the fore of public sphere online and offline. Moreover, the inconsistent implementation of what often proposed as ‘scientific facts’ of the virus has erode the trust to government and also public health officials. The long contentious relationship between state and society regarding the claim of authority is now expressed to public debates regarding the true nature of COVID-19. These contested authorities have been detrimental to any efforts to mitigate the impact of the virus in Indonesia.

REASONING AND FEATURES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The spread and belief of information that contradicts the existing facts, have been intriguing many scholars for quite some time. On these issues, there are several conceptual frameworks that despite some overlapping features, have specific traits that separate one category from the others. One term that is commonly used by scholars is misinformation. Kuklinski et al. (2000) define the condition of misinformed as “people hold inaccurate factual belief’s, and do so confidently.” Based on their understanding, a group of people that does not have any knowledge regarding particular issue, then could not be categorized as misinformed, rather they are uninformed. The conceptualization is important, because people who holds strong belief on inaccurate information, are most likely will shape their behavior according to their belief. As demonstrated by the case of COVID-19, misinformation could potentially lead people to conduct dangerous behavior. For instance, supposed to be a group of citizens believe that COVID-19 is not a real threat, these people might endanger themselves

and other people as well, since they would not want to comply to health protocols.

The second concept that also intersects with these issue is rumors. The concept is rather different from misinformation, since rumors still hold possibilities to be later proven as truth (Jerit & Zhao, 2020, p. 79). Rumors then is often to be associated with information that might have some partial truths, but the whole picture is remain ambiguous for most society. One illustration that is relevant in Indonesia, is rumors regarding corruption. It is common to in society to find the talks and hearsay regarding the wealth of public officials, particularly those that openly flaunt their wealth in public. People would secretly questioned the sources of their wealth, particularly since they know that the officials salary could not be the source of it. Yet, aside from high profile corruption cases, most of the times it is hard to confirm those public suspicions. The suspicion thus manifested on rumors that spread around within society. It is a phenomenon which was at the time of ‘New Order’ would be categorized as ‘open secret’ among society (Pemberton, 1999, as cited in Butt, 2005, p. 418). Nonetheless, it still has much relevance after democratization, particularly since many of those suspicions are later justified by public arrest of the alleged corruptors. Nonetheless, it still has much relevance after democratization, particularly since many of those suspicions are later justified by public arrest of the alleged corruptors.

In comparison to misinformation, there are shared distinct specificities between rumors and conspiracy theories. Both concepts refer to social phenomenon where the concept of truth is elusive and ambiguous in nature. Conspiracy theories most of the times have a sensational narrative, yet just like rumor, it has some element of truths that enable conspiracy theories to resonate its audience. One instance is the Pizzagate conspiracy that was emerged in US during presidential election in 2014. The theory suggests that political elites from Democrat party, covered up a pedophiles circle ring, and hides their activity on the secret underground chamber located behind one pizza restaurant. The conspiracy theory was propagated by many right wing online platforms. Strongly believing the theory, one man armed

himself with heavy guns and raided the pizza restaurant, only to find that there is not any hidden chambers nor pedophile activities in that establishment (Hsu, 2017).

While many dismissed the theory as ridiculous, later criminal cases might give the conspiracy some credibility. One case is the arrest of Harvey Weinstein, film mogul, that used his power to sexually assaulted several women. The other is Jeffrey Epstein, an oligarch that was caught for pedophile activities that was also linked to other powerful figures such as Prince Andrew from UK. While these cases do not directly link to Pizzagate conspiracy, the narratives that powerful rich figures utilized power to sustain their practices of sexual abuse is the same. Anxiety toward objective reality thus becomes the important reference for conspiracy theory.

Despite the similarities with rumors, conspiracy theories is still quite distinct than ordinary rumor. Oliver & Wood (2014) suggests three distinct features that separates conspiracy theories from common opinion: *First*, the believer of conspiracy theories explained the extraordinary social and political event as the work of 'unseen, intentional, and malevolent forces.' *Second*, conspiracy theories are commonly framed within the Manichean frameworks that perceive the world to be a struggle between good and evil. *Third*, mainstream explanation are often dismissed by conspiracy theories as cover-up to hide the truth regarding the evil elites from general public.

What kind of social and political situations that facilitates the proliferation of conspiracy theories? The existence of conspiracy theory itself has been developing for quite some time in many regions in the world, therefore there were plenty offered explanations to understand the phenomena. One important explanation posits that belief toward conspiracy theories is highly associated with two predisposed psychological predispositions (Oliver & Wood, 2014, p. 954): *First*, is tendency to comprehend the explanation of extraordinary events as the work of the unseen forces (Shermer, 2002). *Second*, is the interest to Manichean narratives that perceive extraordinary event as a struggle between good and evil. These traits are quite consistent among

those who believes conspiracy theories irrespective their political inclinations.

Other research focuses on how conspiracy theories are associated with motivated reasoning. The proposition of this finding is that conspiracy theory are the outcome of reasoning processes that functioned to strengthened beliefs or attitudes when someone is confronted with information that contradicts personal belief (Miller et al., 2016). In consequence, someone with strong predisposition toward religious or political point of view thus are more prone to bias toward conspiracy theories that solidify their personal belief. The tendency to believe the conspiracy theories is further exacerbated, should the politician aligned with the political belief publicly endorsed the theories. The consequence of this action will further reinforce the belief toward the conspiracy theory.

While the discussion on individual reasoning is important to understand the appeal of conspiracy theories, this article take a different path. It will focus on larger social, cultural and political structures that enable the development of conspiracy theories. One important research that touch the subjects, also happened to be conducted in Indonesian region thus has much relevance to the topic raised in this article. Butt (2005) conducted research on conspiracy theories related to AIDS prevention campaign in Papua. During her fieldwork, she found many conspiracy theories among her informants that perceive the spread of AIDS in Papua region as part of an organized Indonesian plan to depopulate the natives Papuan. While it is easy to dismiss such a theory as irrational thoughts from uneducated people, Butt decided to went into another direction and examine how such theory reflects the complex contentious relationship between the natives Papua to Indonesia as a nation state.

The way Indonesian public officials and state apparatuses perform injustice and inconsistent policies for Papuans, has foster conspiracy theories among the natives. In this context, there are substantial gaps from the way AIDS prevention framework are designed in global standards, to

how Indonesian health officials impose moral superiority within it, and how it is perceived among the Papuan natives. The study thus found how conspiracy theories serve to fill the gap within modern framework imposed toward the Papuans.

The question on modernity is also relevant to the research conducted in Himalayan region by Mathur (2015). On this region, he observes the unusual occurrences involving behaviors of several species animal. The first case is the aggression of leopard in Himalaya that has been claiming many human victims for years. While considered to be more rare incidents, similar hostility between beast and human is also relevant to the species of black bear. Around the same period, the musk deer, whose organs are valued highly in Chinese traditional medicine black market, is getting much more rare in several last decades. The Indian public officials explained these cases as a result of climate change impact on this region. However, the local natives suggest other form of explanations where the state are widely believed to be the culprit or at least involved on these cases changing animal behaviors.

The attacks from leopard is said to be the consequence of deliberate actions from the plain residents with blessing from the state, to endanger the lives of locals in highlands. Alongside the theory, there are many eyewitnesses' accounts that claimed they had seen a number of vans that released the leopard on high terrain. Likewise, while government representatives believed that the decreasing population of musk deer as a direct results of climate change, the residents points their finger toward black market trade that involves public officials. Regardless, the portion of truth behind every theories, one thing that is apparent is the gap between official explanations and the counter information perceived by local residents.

Parallel to the study of AIDS in Papua, public officials are ready to resort to modern idioms either on health information or climate change to mask the inconsistencies of public policies that is apparent for locals on daily basis. At the same time, local residents are witnessing how these information within modern frameworks never actually deliver the promises to improve

their lives. In this regard, the conspiracy theories enabled the locals to make sense the disjuncture they experienced on daily basis.

Another aspect that is also important from these two research is the way they demonstrate the unequal relationship between state apparatus and local natives. The scientific information is not only irrelevant for locals but also functioned as an important tool to maintain its power toward the natives people. The domination of the state profoundly present from the injustice and discriminative policies conducted by public officials that utilize modern and scientific terms. For natives in Papua or highland Himalaya, the theories thus essential to contest the state authority among which by providing counter narratives against the official explanation.

The framework utilized on these research, I would argue is also relevant to comprehend the contemporary spread of conspiracy theories in Indonesia. Granted, the state is much larger than local communities which were previously discussed before. Nonetheless, as we would examine through the article, the contentious relationship between state and society in regards authority to define the truth, is also deeply entrenched within Indonesian socio-political fabric. In fact, as we will be discuss in the next section, the state played a big role in utilizing conspiracy theories to maintain its power.

CONSPIRATORIAL BEDROCK OF AUTHORITARIAN STATE

The authoritarian regime of New Order, under the leadership of Soeharto, had utilized the conspiratorial framework since the beginning of their ruling. Among scholars of Indonesian politics, the event on early morning 1st September is widely considered to be the one of the most critical juncture in Indonesian political history. In the early morning, a number of mid-level armed forces decided to kidnap a number of generals from their residence to be taken and interrogated in the air force airport. Afterwards, the group that named themselves G-30-S (*Gerakan 30 September*) took over RRI (Radio Republik Indonesia), and broadcasted the reasoning behind their actions. They stated that the actions

are necessary since the generals -who were their superiors in armed forces- had planned a coup d'état against President Sukarno (Roosa, 2008, p. 4). Later on, statement from one of the actors also mentioned how these movement suspicioned that the generals had collaborated with United States of America to topple the power of Sukarno (Roosa, 2008, p. 206). Under the tension of Cold War, the US government had major concern to the development of communism in Indonesia under the leadership of Sukarno. Moreover, internationally Indonesia was also politically close with communist power like USSR and China.

The kidnap and killing of several general was met by resistance with other faction within armed forces. Several military units under the leadership of Soeharto, a young general at that time, quickly blamed PKI (Indonesian Communist Party), as the culprit behind the kidnap and killing of these generals (Roosa, 2020, p.60). In doing so, the army made a rapid action to reclaim strategic broadcast facilities of RRI. They broadcasted the propaganda regarding the role of PKI under the leadership of Aidit, as the one who planned the coup d'état. Under this narrative, the military was justified to do any means considered necessary to quell the existential threat of communism in Indonesia. As noted by many scholars, these series of events thus became the pretext of mass murders toward anyone accused to be associated with communism (Roosa, 2008). For at least the next two years, under the pressure from military (Leksana, 2020; Melvin, 2018), it is estimated that the killing has taken casualties ranging from 500.000 to 1.000.000 people (Cribb, 2001; Melvin, 2018). Another tens of thousands were jailed without any proper trial, and had to suffered the stigma for being associated with communist even after their imprisonment. The mass murder also paved the way for Soeharto to took over presidential seat in Indonesia from Sukarno.

From the very beginning of these events, both military factions employed conspiratorial framework to justify their political actions. The G30S movement justified their actions with the narrative that they were trying to prevent coup d'état planned by the kidnapped generals. Soeharto and his army created other counter-con-

spiracy narrative to justify their actions in killing those who were accused as communist. In such Manichean framework, Indonesian communists were portrayed not just as political rivals but as the source of evil and immorality. Indonesian military also then published false reports that stated PKI had tortured the kidnapped generals. Later on, Anderson (1987) published a counter document based on the forensic reports that dismissed such portrayals. The military also smeared Gerwani, woman organization affiliated with PKI, by circulating rumors on how the woman activists conducted sexual orgy around the corpse of the generals (Wieringa, 2002). On the other hand, Suharto and the armed forces under his command were portrayed as the savior of this nation (Kingsbury, 2003). The binary opposition between the good and evil thus became the bedrock of authoritarian regime of New Order.

Alongside the regime consolidation, the conspiracy regarding communist became well entwined with Indonesian politics. The conspiratorial framework that portrays PKI as the source of an evil threat, was also maintained through series of cultural products (Herlambang, 2011). The regime commissioned an official film regarding the chronology on the night of 30th September. Official military version of the events is used for the main reference. In the film, PKI affiliated characters are depicted as immoral figures. Moreover, the film was mandatory to be watched by all students in Indonesia. The memory of the sadistic torture on generals, therefore is ingrained to many Indonesian students, irrespective the accuracy of such account.

In everyday public discourse, the term communist then transformed beyond the real political rivals, into the elusive bogeyman that could be utilized as label for any societal elements deemed to be dissident toward government. Labor movements for instance, practically absent since the rise of New Order, found it hard to mobilize since any protest aimed against their employers would be easily portrayed as PKI (Hadiz, 2002). The consequence of this accusation could be dire, from intimidation, torture, even killings by state apparatus. A case on point is Marsinah, a labor activist that organized a workers strike for the

raise of wage demand. The factory refused to fulfill the demand; they utilized state security apparatuses instead to quell the protest. The protest was portrayed to be similar with the practices conducted by PKI in the past, hence Marsinah was taken and interrogated. Later on, she was found to be dead, and forensic analysis concluded that the reason of her death is torture (Avonius, 2008).

The label of communists was also attributed to student movements. Since 1978, the regime applied draconian control to depoliticize university students through the regulations of NKK/BKK (Sastramidjaja, 2016, 165). Therefore, when student movements started to be active again around the 80's, the military utilized various means to discredit the legitimacy of their mobilization. Among the most important tool of New Order, is to associate student movements as the political heir of communist in Indonesia. The security apparatuses applied the label of communist to almost any student movements that demonstrate dissent against the regime (Sastramidjaja, 2016, p. 252-256). The student movement were portrayed as a threat to the national security. In consequence, the security apparatuses felt justified to employ violent acts since these students posed an existential threat to their source of power. Among the outcome of such logic, is the torture and alleged killings to number of Indonesian activist students during the dawn of New Order.

While PKI was the main conspiratorial narratives manufactured by government, there were other form of conspiratorial theories that were used by state apparatus. One of the most important scapegoat were groups affiliated to political Islam. Despite the small numbers and largely unorganized during the height of the authoritarian regime, groups affiliated to political Islam often described as a threat against national security. In 1982, New Order issued an order that every organization must use Pancasila as the sole basis of organization. Many Islamic organizations protested the decision since they believe that the regulation is contradictory to Islamic belief (Ichwan, 2004). Some of the hardline groups were then portrayed as a threat of the nation that conspired to topple the legitimate government.

In response, government used its military apparatuses to conduct violent measures against these perceived threat.

One example of such instant was Talang Sari tragedy. It refers to the killings conducted against a number of villagers in Lampung that were framed as subversive movement. The military used heavy artilleries and weaponries to conduct a massacre towards hundreds of villagers that were almost defenseless. In the morning after the massacre, the survivors (mostly women) were rounded, the armies pulled their headscarves and yelled, "these are the wives of PKI (Kontras, 2006)." While the statement sounds contradictory to the initial narrative—a group that was accused to be radical Islam but at the same time being communist—the action fits the earlier framework where PKI functions as an abstract reference of evil.

Despite such atrocities, there were not many criticism aimed toward the killings. One of the reason behind the silence was how military controlled the narratives through official report that was also referred by mainstream media (Akmaliah, 2016). Most of these reports framed the villagers as a dissident group that threatened the security and stability of Indonesia. The violence was overlooked since it was considered as a necessary action to protect the security and stability of Indonesia.

In the final days of New Order, the demand for Soeharto to step down from this office was really strong. The push for him to resign came not just from activists and students but even from Suharto's closest confidantes (Amir, 2013, p. 152). Numerous ministers had resigned from their positions. Mass rallies to push reform were performed on many large cities all over Indonesia. Meanwhile, the inflation went to the level that was unprecedented under the leadership of Suharto. In desperation, security apparatuses propagated conspiracy theories to help keeping Suharto and its regime stay in power. One salient theory described PKI as the one that influenced students to protest and demand the reform.

Another theory was concocted by a group of intellectuals that is affiliated with Prabowo Subianto (Hefner, 2000, p. 202). They put the

blame of crisis in Indonesia to external forces that scheme to topple Soeharto from his presidency. The theory suggests that the leadership of Indonesia under Suharto has threatened global order, particularly Jewish oligarchs. It was said that they are threatened since Indonesia is the largest Muslim majority countries in the world. Therefore, Jewish conspiracy creates a plan to initiate economic crisis as a pretext for demand of reform. The theory also posits that from within the country, the conspiracy was supported by Chinese ethnic group that never has loyalty to Indonesia in the first place. The propagation of such theory was culminated in ethnic pogrom against Chinese minority in Indonesia. Nonetheless, these theories could not prevent the reform pushed by many activists all around Indonesia. Yet, despite the resignation of Suharto political reform in Indonesia, various form of conspiracy theories still lingers.

FRAGMENTATION OF TRUTHS IN DEMOCRATIC INDONESIA

One important change happened alongside the democratization, was the void of centralized power that the defines New Order as a regime. Indonesian reform has made the existing social and cultural forces in society to compete with one another in reclaiming the public authority (Barker & van Klinken, 2009). What was once a hierarchical political arrangement thus changed into fragmented source of authority now located both in state apparatuses and also society. It is now a political landscape where the boundaries between those two is much more blurry than before (Gupta, 1995). One of the dire outcome of these rapid changes was the ethnic and religious conflicts all around Indonesia.

Conspiracy theories were salient feature in many primordial conflicts that happened during the initial years of *Reformasi*. While during the authoritarian regime the state holds dominant control of conspiratorial narrative, the manufacture of these frameworks is now also located within society. Should we follow the proposition of van Klinken & Barker (2009), it is much harder to differentiate these two entities in post-Reformasi Indonesia. A case in point is Moluccan conflict,

where the society was split into two main faction based on their religious affiliations. The conflict was initially started from minor dispute between a group of youths from different villages. The conflict was then escalated into larger incidents where mosque and church were burned (Qurtuby, 2016, p. 23). It did not long before the previously minor disputes turned into an all-out war between every Moslem and Christian in Maluku.

The features of conspiratorial narratives were already present from beginning. One of the first large scale clash was started from the false rumors attacks from Muslim rioters to one of the church (Qurtuby, 2016, p.23). Each group imagined themselves as the representation of good against their evil relatives who has different religion. Moreover, the conflict in Maluku was imagined as the intentional cabal from groups outside of Maluku to reduce the influence of religious rivals in the region. The Moslem faction believes that the Ambonese Christian, with support from Jewish and Christian organizations planned to eradicate the existence of Islam in Maluku (Qurtuby, 2016, p. 56). Christian faction also felt similar animosity against their religious enemies. As a part of religious minorities in Indonesia, there was a strong imagination that the conflict could eventually Islamize the whole Maluku should the Muslim won against them (Qurtuby, 2016, p.77). The perception felt even more justified with the participation of Jihadist from outside the region in Maluku conflict.

It is not the place of this article to examine the truth-value of these perceptions, rather these narratives demonstrate how conspiratorial features were prominent in Maluku conflict. Rumors, suspicion, and animosity against the enemies of religious or ethnic groups were found in many other primordial conflicts as well. Police officials claimed that military conspired to make them looked incompetent in conflict; some Islamic figures believes that the conflict was planned by Christian, Jews and Communist; while rumors among Christian side suggests that Muslim factions intentionally provoke them to create the communal conflicts (Mcrae, 2008). These myriad of rumors heightened the tension felt by those who are impacted during Poso conflict (Aragon, 2001).

Conspiracy theories were not only found in large scale ethnic or religious conflict. The narratives are also present as a crucial tool among vigilante groups to produce moral panic usually against minority groups. Religious minority group such as Shia followers, have been experiencing more persecutions and discriminations after the fall of the authoritarian regime. The prejudices against Shia community has been dominant among conservative Islam in Indonesia even during the time of New Order. However, unlike large scale religious conflicts, the animosity is not always expressed openly in public. Yet, from time to time the sentiment would burst that in some incidents would lead to violence. Within one decade since the democratization of Indonesia, there are multiple local or national incidents where Shia community faced public persecutions.

In early years of *Reformasi*, IJABI (Ikatan Jemaah Ahlul Bait Indonesia) was established officially as one of the earliest organization that openly embrace the identity as Shia organization. In the same year, a group of people attacked Shia pesantren located in Batang, Central Java (Hasim, 2012). Similar form of attacks happened several times throughout the years in all over Indonesia, including the Sampang incident (Formichi, 2015). The Sampang incident still left many families being displaced from their village without any certainties regarding their future (VOA Indonesia, 2018).

To justify these attacks, the perpetrators have portrayed Shia community as the ‘threatening other’ (Ichwan, 2016). On many websites identified as Islamic, it is easy to find contents that frame Shi’a community as evil secretive group that plans to eventually control Indonesia. *Muslim.or.id* for instance, published a translation from the document claimed to be a leaked secrets of Shi’a’ that reveal their ultimate plot to have revolution against the legitimate leaders of Indonesia (Addariny, 2009). Around six years after published article, member of ANNAS (*Aliansi Nasional Anti Syiah Indonesia*) claimed to have testimony from ex-member of Shi’a that exposed the plots of this minority groups to have Indonesian revolution in 2020 (Muttaqin, 2015). Aside from these revolutionary agenda, Shi’a

community is also framed to be sympathetic, if not fully collaborative with Jewish international agenda (Eramuslim, 2020). This association further cemented the idea that Shi’a community is threatening Islamic community in general, aside from Jewish that is also commonly framed as the source of problems for Muslim.

One of the key that enables the dispersion of conspiratorial narratives in democratic Indonesia, is the development of digital platforms. During Maluku conflict, Bräuchler (2003) observed how Internet platform was crucial for both Islamic and Christian camps in antagonizing their perceived enemies. Website and mailing list became the crucial medium to portray narratives that positioned themselves to be threatened by powerful evil. The utilization of this platform, served to amplify and escalate the conspiratorial framework in Maluku, that the conflict is more than just regional disputes. Rather, it is a representation of a holy battle between Islam and Christian that involves the interest of global communities. In consequence, both religious factions in Maluku gained support from international networks and further escalated the conflict.

Since then, the use of Internet in Indonesia have been growing steadily. Recent research suggests that Indonesia has around 171 million internet users (APJII, 2019). From the same survey, almost a quarter of them consider social media as the main reason they use Internet. There are also around 130 million users of Facebook and 62 million users on Instagram (Hootsuite & Wearesocial, 2019). These findings are important since social media is the evolution of Internet platform where its users are also encouraged by algorithm to actively interact and produce content. Therefore, almost anyone with digital platforms has their own potentials to concoct their own version of conspiracy theories, and able to propagate it freely on the same platforms.

In 2017, as observed by Lim (2017), social media is instrumental in the mobilization of identity politics particularly aimed against Ahok, the incumbent Governor. The candidate who happened to hold double minority status (Chinese and Christian), was accused to have conducted blasphemy against Islam. Ahok’s speech that

mentioned Quranic verses, was circulated through multiple digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and also WhatsApp Messenger. The mobilization then is also manifested through Aksi 212, arguably the largest mass mobilization has ever seen in Indonesia since Reformasi in 1998.

One of the reason why the incident could grow to this scale derives from the framing itself. The public anger was addressed not limited to the figure of Ahok and his action, rather of what he represents in Indonesian politics. Ahok's speech was framed not as single solitary incident, rather represents the larger plan among Chinese and Christian communities to control Indonesia not just in economy but political realm as well. In some version, the narratives of conspiracy even included the participation of communist from China (Ichwan, 2016). These kind of conspiratorial narratives were produced and dispersed through digital media platforms that further strengthened the sentiments that were already shared in offline interactions.

Many of the tropes in popular conspiracy theories, such as the threat of other religion, economic dominance of Chinese, or secret plan of minority religious group could be traced even long before New Order regime. Previous scholar (e.g. Formichi, 2015; Mujiburrahman, 2006; Sidel, 2006) have suggest that these issues were prominent from quite a long time. Nonetheless, as discussed before, democratization in Indonesia has shaped conspiracy theories, particularly in term of the determinant authorities and mode of dispersion. The state currently is not the single dominant actor that produce and utilize conspiracy theories in maintaining its power. Elements of society also hold certain amount of authority in the making and propagation of conspiratorial narratives. Digital media platforms further amplify this dispersion of the truth holder in public arena. However, we should not be under the illusion that such relationship is equal. As the article will demonstrates in the case of COVID-19, the state still has the most powerful tools to maintain its grip as the authority to determine the truth-value of information.

COVID-19 AND CONTESTED RATIONALITIES

In the beginning of this article, I have raised the case of Jerinx, a punk musician that has been very active in the propagation of conspiracy theories about COVID-19. During the time of writing of this article, he is charged with criminal offense. Jerinx is not charged with the allegations of conspiracy theories propagation per se, rather because he accused IDI (Indonesian Doctor Association) as the henchman of WHO. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Jerinx is the second public figure that had to be involved with security apparatuses because of their social media contents. Previously, Anji, a well-known pop singer, was also charged with misinformation due to his Youtube interview with figure who claimed to found the cure for COVID-19. These events reflect that, while the claim of truth as discussed in this paper has always been a contested subject in Indonesian political arena, the precarity of pandemic situation has bring it to a new level.

Following the proposition of Butt (2005), based on the work of other scholars (Fenster, 2008; Keeley, 1999), to comprehend such contestations, it is important to examine the disjunctures from the way state rationalize this issue with how it is perceived from the eye of society. In this regard, I propose there at least three aspect to policies links to COVID-19 that would demonstrate the problem with state rationalizations during pandemic. *First*, debates on data transparency; *Second*, the distribution and priorities of economic program; *Third*, the pursuit of medical treatment for COVID-19 patients.

As I have addressed elsewhere (Nadzir, 2020a), since very early, Indonesian government has not been able to provide reliable and transparent data despite its importance during pandemic. Early on in February, Harvard epidemiologist warned Indonesian government that COVID-19 was most likely already existed in Indonesia. Instead of using the information to anticipate the possibilities of pandemic, Ministry of Health, Terawan considered the scientific advice as an insult to Indonesia (Azis, 2020). In other occasion, the minister also suggested for Indonesian

people not to worry the virus, since the patients will be healed by itself (CNN, 2020b). In line with his minister, President Joko Widodo also pushed the agenda to boost tourism (Putri, 2020).

The way Indonesian government downplayed the importance of data was also demonstrated even after Indonesia has the first positive case of COVID-19. Government was reluctant to be transparent regarding the status of COVID-19 in Indonesia. President Jokowi himself admitted that his administration chose not to reveal all information to prevent panic among public (Ihsanuddin, 2020). Moreover, the absence reliable data is also felt by a number of local leaders that decided to air their criticism in mass media (Mursid & Amrullah, 2020). Lately, President Jokowi retracted his position and demanded his officials to be more transparent in presenting COVID-19 data to public (Mashabi, 2020). However, the statement does not seem to be translated in actual changes related to data transparency of COVID-19 in Indonesia. Indonesian epidemiologist for instance, has criticized the COVID-19 data since it does not fit the standard needed to actually reduce the spread of pandemic (Damarjati, 2020).

Despite many criticisms, Jokowi and his administrative are still trying to create the impression that the mitigating the impact of pandemic is the most important priorities. The first measure was the implementation of PSBB (*Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar*/Large Scale Social Restriction). The policy was the outcome of demands from many public health experts to implement lockdown following many countries that already implemented the measure. In realities, PSBB appeared to be a reluctant form of lockdown where people could not move from one region to another, yet still able to move within each respective region. The decision was taken since it was considered to meet the ideal balance between preventing the spread of COVID-19 and minimize the impact to Indonesian economy (Prasetya, 2020). One caveat of this policy, was the dependence of the implementation of PSBB on the capacity of regional leaders. Some leaders such as Mayor of Tegal, Governor of Papua, and Governor of West Papua decided to implement regional quarantine even earlier than the instruc-

tion of PSBB (C. A. Putri, 2020). On the other hand, other regions needed to wait for the permit of PSBB to be issued by Minister of Health in order to apply restriction in their area (Basith, 2020). These inconsistencies were happened when the number of COVID-19 patients have been growing unstopably.

Aside from impact on public health, Indonesian government also realized that COVID-19 is detrimental for the economy. In fact, as shown from PSBB policy, the economic consideration arguably is the more influential than public health judgement, albeit the official statement will not acknowledge this stance. In response toward the threat of economic recession, government prepared a number of economic stimulus targeted to dampen the impact of pandemic. A large portion of the stimulus were prepared to support medical supplies and incentive for medical workers in battling against the spread of COVID-19 (Pryanka, 2020). For the poorest in society, government distributes social safety net that includes staple food packages and cash for couple of months (Ufl, 2020). The stimulus also included economic relief for small and medium business that could help them to survive the crisis (Harmawan, 2020). The government also addressed the need of the unemployed, by launching pre-employment program, which was previously also part of Jokowi's political promise in 2019.

It is yet to be known whether the stimulus provides significant impact in mitigating the impact of pandemic both on public health and economic aspect. However, there were many criticism in regards to the implementation of COVID-19 stimulus package. Plenty of reports demonstrated how the distribution of social safety net were troubled. Almost half of respondents from SMRC survey, felt that the distribution of COVID-19 safety net was not well-targeted (Saputri, 2020).

Similar problems is also apparent in the allocation of funds toward pre-employment program. About 5.6 trillion is allocated for online training program that supposed to provide the participants with competencies to apply for job. In actualities, the program was questioned since many skills provided may not as relevant to labor market as

portrayed by government (CNN, 2020a; Hidayat, 2020). Moreover, the allocation of funds was also criticized for its potentials of conflict of interest since the Belva Syah Devara, the founder of Ruangguru (one of the appointed platform of pre-employment program), was also part of the Jokowi's special staffers (Nadzir, 2020b). Along the way, the parties involved in the program tried to address the criticism. Belva resigned from his position as special staffers, while Ruangguru also promises to donate the income derived from pre-employment program (Mukaromah, 2020). Nonetheless, these problems with fund allocations and social safety net are antithetical to the portrayal of government on their commitment to tackle the issue of COVID-19.

Another aspect that also show gaps in scientific rationalization presented by government, is the health protocols itself, in particular regarding the treatment of COVID-19. As I have mentioned earlier, the initial position of government on the threat of COVID-19 is minimum at best. The virus was described as an ordinary self-limiting disease that does not need specific treatment, aside from maintaining our own immunity. Only after Indonesia had a number of COVID-19 cases, the government changed their stance and present themselves as the authority on health protocols and measures. In one reactive response, the government bought millions of avigan and chloroquine; the medicines were imported from China despite have not yet proven to be effective for COVID-19 treatment (Syambudi, 2020).

In search of the treatment and mitigation, the government also show many other actions that negates their authority on COVID-19. Minister of Agriculture for instance, has pushed the introduction of health necklace based from eucalyptus that was promoted to be effective to prevent the infection of COVID-19. Later on, the minister reserves his endorsement since it was heavily criticized; for the necklace might misinform people to conduct risky behavior (Rahman, 2020). The tendency to neglect science is also apparent on the search of treatment for COVID-19 patients. The collaboration of Unair (Airlangga University), Indonesian Armed Forces, and BIN (Indonesian State Intelligence) has been promoted

to have found the cure for infected COVID-19 patients. Contradicting to their scientific claim, the parties involved have not been opened with the research process involved with their findings (Prabowo, 2020). These problematic events further destabilized the claim of government as the authority on scientific rationale.

Amidst the precarity of social and economic condition during pandemic, the government has failed to establish themselves as scientific authority. Alongside the spread of COVID-19 that have not shown the sign of weakening, government apparatuses from local to national level repetitively shown the contradictions between their claim on scientific rationale and their actions. Scientific rationale on health information in this regard, could not be perceived to be held as the truth. Rather it serves only as partial explanations for the largely unintelligible phenomenon such as COVID-19 pandemic. It is within this context that conspiracy theories such as the one endorsed by Jerinx, are received by society to provide more explanations since it might help the believers to comprehend the complex situation.

As illustration, let us look one theory propagated by Jerinx on COVID-19. He insisted that the fear of COVID-19 is conspiracy of global elites such as WHO and Bill Gates (Kumparan, 2020). Jerinx believes the so-called global elites gained economic benefit from the restriction imposed as part of health protocols. Among the evidence that he found was the obligation of rapid test for pregnant woman who would want to give birth in hospitals. Of course there are no evidence that could support the conspiracy to link WHO evil plan with deceased pregnant woman in Indonesia. Nevertheless, the injustice framework against the poor in dealing with health services is hardly new in Indonesia. Even in ordinary circumstances, it is common for Indonesian citizen to rely on personal relationships and informal network in order to access necessary health services (Berenschot et al., 2018). During pandemic, the uncertainties faced by the poor is even more dire for the absence of personal network. Moreover, the poor class is often represented as the black sheep for the disobedience to health protocols. This is a perception that is not only produced by

government but also reinforced by middle class (Sambodho, 2020).

Setting aside the sensational aspect of conspiracy theories, the criticism towards government thus has legitimate aspect within society. Jerinx and many social media influencers are therefore meaningful for their audiences since not only they provides explanation for the largely unintelligible phenomenon, but they also exposes problems within scientific rationalization that is strongly pushed by the government. Social media in this regard, amplify their authority since they could practically speaking about anything to large scale audiences.

While social media influencers has further contest the authority of government as the source of information, it does not translated into as the blurry lines between state and society. On contrary, as also found in similar research While social media influencers has further contest the authority of government as the source of information, it does not translated into as the blurry lines between state and society. On contrary, as also found in similar research (Butt, 2005; Mathur, 2015), the distinctions between both entity is getting much more clear than it was during the time of early Reformasi. The distinction is apparent on the way government categorize and labels as false information.

When pandemic was at its early phase in March in Indonesia, the government already strictly imposed its regulation against what was categorized as hoax, which on practical level often used interchangeably with other terms such as disinformation, fake news, including conspiracy theory. Official from Ministry of Communication and Information Technology even stated that the hoax regarding COVID-19 is much more threatening than the virus itself (Hermawan, 2020). In the implementation, the categorization of hoax is often applied arbitrarily. In May 2020, police had arrested more than 100 suspects related to hoax propagation about COVID-19 (Putra, 2020). None of them are part of high rank public officials, despite many of them repetitively endanger public by the undermining tone toward COVID-19.

Some criticism towards the way government handle the virus were also simply dismissed as hoax. It was experienced among which by Ahmad Arif, Kompas journalist, who has been very critical toward COVID-19 handling in Indonesia (Rudiana, 2020). The arbitrary tendency was also demonstrated when Anji, famous pop singer, was criminalized since his social media channel endorsed herbal medicine for COVID-19 treatment. At the same time, there is not any legal consequences for Minister of Agriculture that promoted his herbal necklace that arguably posed greater danger to society since it came from public officials. The contradictions of treatment to the categorization of false information establish the clear boundaries between state and society. As much as part of society tries to contest the authority of information, even with the use of social media, they are still threatened by the coercive tools monopolized by the state.

CONCLUSION

The article is initiated by questions that seek to understand the social and political structures which enable propagation of conspiracy theories in Indonesia during COVID-19 pandemic. Conspiracy theories as discussed in this article have been intricated as important feature within the fabric of modern politics in Indonesia. Soeharto utilized conspiracy theories to pave his place in leading the authoritarian regime of New Order. Within such frameworks, the label communist has turned beyond political enemies into abstract entities that represent evil in general. The tropes of communist thus applied to almost anything that was considered to be threatening the stability and security of Indonesia. The label thus applied to labor movement, student movement, even religious movement. The institutionalization of communist as an evil entity has left the term persisted even until today on any political debates related to conspiracy in Indonesia.

In *Reformasi*, the state is not the only actor that could produce and propagate conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories were prominent during the ethnic and religious conflict. Similar conspiratorial narratives are also salient in discriminative actions against religious minority

in Indonesia. The complexities of conspiracy propagation are exacerbated by the development of social media that provides the medium of people to freely spread information regardless the truth value.

These backdrops serves as the complication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Conspiracy theories questioned the legitimacy of government as the authority in information. Despite its sensational claims, it fills the incoherence demonstrated by the government on the handling of the pandemic. At the same time, the way government arbitrarily applies the category of hoax establish the fine line between state and society. The line is presented on how public officials are exempted from the consequences of law despite propagating false information that might also endanger public. These contestation of the truth value of information, exacerbated the risk of COVID-19 in Indonesia. It is harder for public to gained credible information related to COVID-19 since either government or society has participated in relativizing the truth value of information.

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