



Ear to Asia podcast

- Title:** Is Indonesia's covid-19 response too little, too late?
- Description:** As the Indonesian government's coronavirus response has shifted from deep denial to broad action, some of its key directives are meeting with public resistance. So what is the pandemic telling us about political leadership, and about existing fault lines in Indonesian society? Long time Indonesia watchers Prof Tim Lindsey and Dr Ian Wilson join host Ali Moore to examine the impact of covid-19 on the world's fourth most populous nation. An Asia Institute podcast.
- Listen:** <https://player.whooshkaa.com/episode?id=657499>
- Voiceover:** The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.
- Tim Lindsey:** It's a set piece of Indonesian history that rioting in the streets, large numbers of demonstrators is something that will intimidate governments. And I think the great anxiety this government currently has is that if large numbers are plunged into poverty, if there is widespread dissatisfaction with the way that the government is handling the pandemic, that this could develop, at some point, into similar sorts of events.
- Ian Wilson:** Seeing the way that the government has been so paranoid of legitimate criticism, points to their concern that this kind of crisis could generate new kinds of social forces and social movements that are looking for more genuinely responsive forms of government.
- Ali Moore:** Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia. In this episode, is Indonesia's pandemic response too little, too late? Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne. The reported numbers of COVID-19 infections and fatalities in Indonesia so far seem rather modest for a country boasting the world's fourth largest population. Indonesia has as many cases per capita as China, and fewer deaths per capita than South Korea, a country widely lauded for its response to the virus. Yet, while it may seem like a relative success story in the making, Indonesia's handling of the pandemic appears to have been anything but stellar or timely, with potentially profound health and economic implications for ordinary Indonesians.
- As Jakarta's responses to COVID-19 move from deep denial to broad government action, what does it say about Indonesia as a political leadership? What existing fault lines, social and economic are being harshly highlighted by this crisis? Who's faring better and who worse? And what lessons might Indonesia take into its post-pandemic future? Joining us to



discuss what COVID-19 is revealing about Indonesian society, its politics and its economy, a Melbourne Law School Asia Law Specialist, Professor Tim Lindsey, and Murdoch University Politics and International Affairs Researcher, Dr. Ian Wilson, both longtime observers of Indonesian affairs. Welcome, Tim. And welcome, Ian.

Tim Lindsey: Thanks, Ali.

Ian Wilson: Thank you, Ali.

Ali Moore: If we start by going back to the beginning of this crisis for Indonesia, it wasn't until early March that the country reported its first infections, which was pretty extraordinary given what was happening in neighbouring countries. Tim, what do you make of that time when Indonesia officially had a zero infection rate? And what was the government telling Indonesians and indeed the rest of the world?

Tim Lindsey: Well, I don't think there's much mystery about what was going on. Indonesia to its own public was denying the existence of the virus in the archipelago, but the government knew full well that there was an issue. When on March the second, President Jokowi finally admitted that the virus was present in Indonesia, he also acknowledged at the same time to use his own words that the government had been covering it up in order to prevent panic. So for January and February, they knew there were cases in Indonesia, but they were denying it. And they were denying it in the most bizarre ways. We had the Health Minister saying prayer was the reason.

The Home Affairs Minister was urging the public to eat more bean sprouts and broccoli. Jokowi said traditional herbal remedies would do the trick. Other government officials said that the virus couldn't get into Indonesia because it couldn't get a visa. So it's a mixture of bizarre recipes for health and jokes were used to evade the issue. But although he admitted that the virus was present, the cover up continues to an extent. We don't have the full data on deaths, we don't have the full data on the extent of the infection even now. So there's a pattern in government of trying to reduce wherever possible the impact on the public of this pandemic by evading the facts.

Ali Moore: So Tim, what do we know? What officially are the statistics as they stand in the third week of May?

Tim Lindsey: Officially, there is a total of 17,514 infections. There are 1,148 deaths to date. Infections were in fact trending down in late April, early May but they began increasing again in the last week. 13th of May saw or a new record of 689 infections, new infections in a single day. There's now about a 21% growth in infections. That means that on government figures, there are currently about 240,726 cases under surveillance. That means a person who



has travelled to an infected area or has had contact with a confirmed case is being monitored. And there are some 27,000 others under treatment who had not yet confirmed as having the COVID infections.

So the official figures are a lot smaller than the figures you might refer to as being under suspicion. So we don't really know the full extent of this. And one of the reasons for that is that there's just not enough testing going on. Only about half of the 104 and or so testing labs set up to do this are actually functioning. Testing has increased. It's increased by about 24%, but it's still below the 10,000 a day tests that Jokowi set some time ago. The official figures cannot reflect the real levels of infection just because there's not enough testing going on to be able to tell us with any certainty where it sits.

Ali Moore: Ian, do you agree with Tim? Do you trust the numbers and what do you think has been driving that denialism?

Ian Wilson: I agree with Tim that the numbers it's hard to consider them as accurately representative of the extent to which Coronavirus has spread throughout the country. The initial response from the Jokowi administration, if you compare it to some other governments around the world, sort of populist governments and this is certainly a populist administration, have all shown a similar kind of initial response, which is downplaying degrees of misdirection and then when it sort of becomes evident that they can't ignore the reality of Coronavirus, they focus primarily on how it's going to impact upon the economy.

You saw early on the Health Minister, for example, Terawan Putranto, who is a medical doctor, but a very controversial one. He was appointed to the ministry many suspect because he was the doctor responsible for treating Jokowi's mother for cancer. The Indonesian Medical Association had also warned that he was linked to many controversial kind of treatments. And his initial response as the face of the health ministry was making light of the risk and then proposing conspiratorial or quite absurdist kinds of theories. The humidity in Indonesia that it wouldn't be a problem. He even invoked ethnicity and race by saying that Malays as an ethnic group were somehow immune to the infection.

So you saw, I guess, in a broader sense, a kind of a populist initial response perceiving the reality of this as a threat less to the public health, and as a threat to the kind of political power and legitimacy of the administration itself. And it was really begrudgingly in many respects that you saw the government move to take more swift forms of action when it became undeniable. And also, particularly when there's increasing pressure from regional and local level governments who responded much more quickly,



and recognise the reality of it as a significant threat to Indonesia much more early on than the national government.

Ali Moore: Ian, I want to look at those localised responses in a minute, but do you see it as a national level that it was more of a concern about what it could do to economic development, which is so important to Jokowi's political legitimacy? Is that what was behind this, what were many would categorise as an incredibly slow response? Was it that concern about economic development more than health?

Ian Wilson: I think that's certainly part of it. The administration's default kind of response to these kind of crisis is to what extent it can impinge on Jokowi's idea of legacy, which is very much invested in idea of economic growth and infrastructural development. I think the other element to it as well though with this sort of populist administration, is that there's a deep strains of kind of anti-scientism, and there's also maybe an overt concern with particular key backers of the administration. And that then includes some religious groups who've had very mixed kind of responses to understanding the nature of the threat of COVID-19. And I think those kind of factors have all played in together, apart from the fact that the national government is really divorced.

I think from many of the everyday realities that people face, it's a broader problem. But this crisis has really brought that to bear. In some respects, it wasn't even cynical. They just couldn't comprehend the kind of realities on the ground. And local governments have because they're much more involved in problem solving on a daily basis than national governments are. So if anything sort of feeds into the idea of kind of divorced elites, I think this has also been a real factor here, when looking at how the national government has been so slow. Initially slow to respond.

Tim Lindsey: Ali, if I could just jump in there for a second, I just wanted to add two things to what Ian said. First is just as perhaps evidence of this detachment from reality of this excessive focus on the economy over welfare, particularly the poor back in that period before Jokowi admitted in early March that there was a problem. He was planning to offer discounts up to 30% to attract tourists to Indonesia. This is in February. And had allocated about \$8 million to pay social media influences or tourism promotions to encourage visitors to Indonesia, singularly sort of bizarre response when other countries were closing down.

But this criticism I'm making, and I think that Ian is making, this is not an external position uniquely. It is also a view held by many in Indonesia. And there are a group of workers from small businesses in Central Java in Yogyakarta, Jakarta who have now initiated a class action against Jokowi and his Government. They're suing them for negligence in their handling of the



pandemic, particularly in that period up to the second of March. The government has previously been held liable in similar cases. Their poor response to managing fires, burning of fires in parts of Sumatra and Kalimantan that led to haze spreading into parts of Indonesia, but particularly Malaysia and Singapore as well.

The government had been held liable for its poor management of fires and haze in 2015. So it is legally possible that the government might be held liable for this. In fact, it's so likely that Jokowi has issued an emergency law, stating that the government cannot be sued in civil or criminal cases for implementing policy in good faith. So it's not clear whether that regulation will be enough to prevent Jokowi and the government from being held liable, whether it will give them the impunity they want. That's one to watch because it is a focus point for popular dissatisfaction with the way that government's managed this.

Ali Moore: Ian, when we look at how the government's managed it, what exactly at a central government level has been put in place? What sort of lock downs are in place, and how strict are the restrictions?

Ian Wilson: Well, in terms of the process, I listen to a lot of my Indonesian friends and it's very confusing. So you had early March a recognition by the government that this was a significant public health threat, and you had the announcement of a crisis package for social assistance, et cetera. Again, in their initial response, a real focus on the fact that this was likely to have a damaging impact on the economy. But this wasn't really linked to a very clearly delineated strategy for lockdowns and shutdowns. And in fact, the initial problem that had emerged is that, again, local regions and city mayors had already taken forms of shutdown action.

And the national governments initial response was, I think, largely to see this as a kind of challenge to authority. And in fact, overruled many of those decisions and set in place a kind of a process whereby regional administrations and city administrations. For city administrations there's over 540 in Indonesia, had to individually apply for their own lockdown strategies that had to be approved. So a kind of a bureaucratic process that delayed action significantly. And even then, really mixed messages coming from the government about say, Jokowi for example, had encouraged people to pray and work at home, and some regional administrations, Jakarta specifically under Governor Anies Baswedan had taken this as an order and immediately shut down bus transportation systems or reduced the number of bus transportation.

And then it then was clarify that this wasn't in fact in order, it was just a suggestion. So you had the production of these really appalling circumstances where an unclear messaging from the national government



was, in fact, leading to situations where there was a likelihood of increased infection. So you had more people still going to work, but then reduced public transport services in place. This has sort of been an ongoing problem as these really mixed even incoherent messages that people have found deeply confusing?

Tim Lindsey: Yeah. So you've you've actually got, I think, these large scale social restrictions or PSBBs, they're called. I think they've only been implemented now in just four provinces and only in about 72 cities or couple parts in there called rural area equivalent to a city. So that's a very small number. And those that haven't actually formally enforced these official large scale social restrictions, some of them have applied other restrictions. There are some villages that decided to seal themselves off. There are some villages that were sealed off by local authorities. It's really quite chaotic in that sense.

Ali Moore: Chaotic, but Ian, I guess, notable for the fact that if anything, it's been a bottoms up approach. It is those local governments, those regional centres, those small villages who are taking matters into their own hands.

Ian Wilson: Yes, most definitely. I think that's one of the, I guess, the big takeaways from what's been happening in Indonesia is this real lack of synchronisation between national level responses and local level responses. When I'm talking about local level responses, I'm talking about all the way down to neighbourhood levels through to district, regional and city administrations. Again, we don't have a really a clear picture of the extent of the spread of the virus. Of course, there's been a lot of conjecture over the actual death rates as well due to issues around under reporting.

But I think if we were to make the assumption that it hasn't been as bad as it could have been based on what we know, I think really these local level responses are what helps to explain that rather than anything that's happened at a national level. As Tim was mentioning, at the Kabupaten level, we have places like the city of Tegal in Central Java, for example, where the mayor very quickly and well prior to the national government taking action, already introduced a city based lockdown, shutting buses coming from other parts of Central Java. And this was seen as a key factor as to why Tegal's now got virtually no cases whatsoever.

So I think it speaks to that broader problem of kind of a detached national government that has its own client of particular obsessions that in many respects are pretty divorce from what people are experiencing on the ground. And you've seen these two worlds have some very high levels of competency in some regional and city administrations. And then a huge amount of self-organisation amongst elements of society as well. In some villages that I've heard of people not having access to tests, but doing their own reporting on symptoms, including people self-reporting they have



symptoms. And that being the basis for trying to contain things whilst nationally the government was still twiddling its thumbs, failing to really deliver adequate resources throughout the country.

Ali Moore: Tim, if you look at that twiddling your thumbs that inconsistency and the confusion, the mixed messaging, you've got a country where some 60% of workers work in the informal sector. Are they are the ones who have borne the brunt of the response so far?

Tim Lindsey: I think that's fair to say that 60 or 70% of workers in the informal economy are also in many cases, outside the state system. Many of them would not be registered workers, many of them work for themselves or work in an informal fashion whereby they're not on the books. Most of them would be living hand to mouth or close to it, they would be just above the poverty line. And so once the groups that they service, the middle class people, the office workers and so forth, once they start staying at home, then their food store will have to close, they will not be able to provide whatever services they normally provide. And their income just dries up.

About 25 million live below the poverty line and a significant number live just above it. About 50 million in total living in poverty or vulnerable to it. And the poverty line is about US \$1.90 a day. Poverty is about seven times higher in remote provinces like Papua compared to Jakarta. So we've got informal workers outside the big focus population in Jakarta and elsewhere in Java losing their jobs. The estimates are that about 90% of workers have either lost their jobs or received pay cuts. So large numbers will have been pushed below the poverty line. And there is concern as to when they would be able to recover from it because the economic implications of this are going to will outlast the virus.

And it will take a lot of economic growth in a hurry to pull those people who've slipped below the poverty line back above it. And it should be borne in mind that that poverty line also is a pretty arbitrary line. It doesn't mean that you are living comfortably if you're above it. Indonesia is a nation of gross economic disparity. The four richest billionaires in Indonesia have more wealth than the poorest 40% of Indonesians, that is 100 million people or so. So I think one of the outcomes of this pandemic will be large numbers below or at the poverty line, larger numbers than we've seen in recent years for some time to come.

Ali Moore: And quite apart from the humanitarian crisis, and we'll look at that in more detail in a moment. But Tim, those huge numbers, do they represent a political threat to Jokowi?

Tim Lindsey: Well, this is the great anxiety of Indonesian governments, that the large numbers of poor will get out into the streets and directly challenge the



government. Major political change in Indonesia has always been accompanied by riots and demonstrations in the street. The biggest political crisis of Jokowi's first term, the protests against his former close colleague, the then governor of Jakarta, Ahok led on some estimates to over 700,000 in the streets of Jakarta protesting against Ahok but also ultimately against Jokowi. And that led him to allow the prosecution of Ahok to go ahead and Ahok lost his governorship and was eventually jailed for blasphemy.

I recount that episode just because it's an indication of the traditional anxiety Indonesian politicians have about a breakdown in order and instability led by rioting and demonstrations in the street. Last year, we had a similar episode when proposals to introduce new laws that would have greatly restricted a range of freedoms that Indonesians currently enjoy led to more demonstrations in the streets, the biggest political rights some size since 1998. And again, the government backed down on that legislation fairly quickly.

So it's a set piece of Indonesian history that rioting in the streets large numbers of demonstrators is something that will intimidate governments. And I think the great anxiety this government currently has is that if large numbers plunge into poverty, if there is widespread dissatisfaction with the way the government is handling the pandemic, that this could develop at some point into similar sorts of events. That perhaps explains the securitize nature of the government's response to the pandemic, almost every person appointed to the agency set up to deal with a pandemic have got a military background.

And it also I think explains the widespread arrest of critics who have been attacking the government's policies on social media. At least 76, I think the numbers are greater than that now, have been arrested for insulting or defamatory remarks made on social media about the government. So I think the government is concerned about this. I also think that these social restrictions issues, the concerns about the spread of the pandemic would not stop people protesting in the streets if it came to that.

Ali Moore: Ian, do you see the threat as Tim does? And indeed, there's also quite a paternalistic attitude in Indonesia, isn't there, towards the less wealthy? That extraordinary statement from the national government spokesman at the end of March, the rich should take care of the poor so they can live without hardship, whereas the poor can look out for the rich by not infecting them with the virus.

Ian Wilson: Yeah. When it comes to the government spokesman's response, I mean, again, that is a very much deeply institutionalised paternalistic kind of view that the poor and working class Indonesians are likely to be not the victims, the most vulnerable and those who are most likely to fall victim to the virus



but as a source of the virus. And in fact, the early sort of work that was being done in Jakarta as the epicentre of the pandemic that was mapping its spread through the city, and Rujak Centre for Urban Studies has done a lot of excellent work in that regard, was in fact showing that it was linked to social mobility.

So it was middle class and upper middle class Indonesians, many of whom had been enjoying the discounted airfares offered by the government to encourage domestic tourism that was becoming the vectors for infection in the early stages. Whereas, certainly in the case of Jakarta, the poor are less mobile and more confined geographically because of the economic position. This kind of early analysis offered the opportunity to provide interventions to protect some of the most vulnerable communities specifically the kind of work I've done in Jakarta. Many of the urban poor neighbourhoods early on had very low reported cases.

But in the last few weeks, that unfortunately started to shift quite significantly, much to the despair of many urban poor activists who've been spending the last month trying their hardest to get adequate resources allocated to try and protect these communities. Who haven't been the source of the infection, but are because of the realities of poverty, particularly in urban poverty, where issues around sanitation, access to water, adequate health service is a real issue. But this could manifest in a huge increase in casualties.

Ali Moore:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a note to listeners that Asia Institute has launched a new online publication on Asia and its societies, politics and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia review website, which again you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au.

I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by Politics and International Relations Researcher Dr. Ian Wilson of Murdoch University, and Asia Legal Expert, Professor Tim Lindsey of the Melbourne Law School. We're talking about how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting Indonesia and what it's revealing about existing social and political fault lines there. Ian, you were just talking about social mobility. Of course, there's another form of this, and that is mudik, which is coming up later this month. Part of the government's national response has been a ban on that, the traditional visit home for millions of Muslims at the end of Ramadan. How important is mudik?

Ian Wilson:

Well, at the end of Ramadan, the holy month of fasting, you have one of the biggest holidays of the year in Indonesia, and it sees 10s of millions of



people returning to their place of origin or wherever they consider that to be. In many of the large cities such as Jakarta, you'll see millions of people leaving and travelling to villages, to often remote parts of the country, to spend time with family and friends. And of course, this coming up in the midst of a pandemic is a significant problem because that kind of mobility is in effect the perfect kind of infection vector for spreading the virus from its epicentres in places like Jakarta to regions that till recently have been relatively unaffected.

There are a few problems, of course, in how does any government intervene in a way to stop this deeply established tradition of people returning to their regions. And again, we've seen really confused and contradictory messaging from the national government. The President, for example, did announce that mudik was discouraged, but he played on language in a way that again was very confusing. So mudik is the practise of returning home at the end of Ramadan. But he said, if you wanted to pulang kampung, however, which is go back to your home neighbourhood, then that was still acceptable because people needed to go back for economic reasons, et cetera, et cetera.

How do you explain this? Again, returning to the issue of a populist government that has a particular constellation of groups that have been crucial to its political power base, I think within the administration there was a deep reluctance to cancel one of the most popular religious holidays of the year. And that this could be used either by their political enemies to revive older arguments that this administration is actually hostile to Islam, and also that it may alienate it from one of its largest support base organisations such as the Nahdlatul Ulama, which is the largest Islamic organisation in the country and has been a key political ally of the administration.

Tim Lindsey:

Yeah. Just on that, first Jokowi was discouraging, as Ian says he did. He officially banded on the 21st of April. And that led to about 170,000 police and soldiers being deployed to try and prevent mudik happening which was a fairly haphazard and chaotic exercise. And the response to it was people on pilgrimage putting their cars in the backs of trucks, other people cramming themselves into the luggage lockers of buses. One bus was found travelling at night with the lights off with all the passengers reclining back in their seats so they wouldn't be seen. So these sort of measures were taking place. And obviously the ban wasn't working despite the deployment of large numbers of police and soldiers.

So on the 12th of May, he actually relaxed the ban and allowed transport to resume. And that's led to a sort of resumption of mudik travel, and we've got large queues in some airports, aircraft which are booked to capacity flying between the provinces. So in the end, we've had a late rush to what would be something close to a normal sort of mudik. It remains to be seen



exactly how it will pan out. And if you look at what's been happening with infections, the curve had flattened in late April, early May, but in the last couple of weeks it's began to increase again. You have to wonder whether that might be in fact linked to the relaxing of the mudik ban in the middle of this month. I don't know.

But what's quite likely is that once mudik is complete and pilgrims return back home to the cities of which they came in early June, that not only might infections have been taken to the home villages, but infections might be brought from the villages back to the city. So there is an expectation amongst health workers in Indonesia that we may well see a spike of infections in mid to late June. This is particularly concerning because at the moment the plan is for large scale social restrictions to be lifted. Late May, early June, for example, in Jakarta, they're going to lift it or they're going to consider lifting. So you might see restrictions lifting at the same time as these large scale mudik travel actually takes place, including the return back to the city. And that could be real problematic.

Ali Moore: Tim, don't both mudik and also the lifting of restrictions well before many would say it is time, don't they both illustrate the dilemma that is facing Jokowi? As Ian was saying, with mudik, Jokowi is between a rock and a hard place. Put a hard ban in place, he'll be criticised as anti religious. Do nothing he'll be criticised for helping spread the virus.

Tim Lindsey: I don't know that he was being criticised for being anti-religious. I think Ian is absolutely right that he was extremely concerned about that, because there's been a standard trope of criticism of him by his opponents. But many of the major Muslim organisations in Indonesia came out with fatwa and other statements saying that mudik was not a great idea and should not take place this year well before the government got around to banning it.

So the Muslim organisations had already been speaking in favour of some sort of ban. And it was really in response to that that the government felt comfortable about introducing the ban. However, having got to that point, it's now relaxed it about a week ago. I think it was an issue at the start. But I think now it reflects more the government's incapacity to enforce a ban and it's deep concern about the economy.

Ali Moore: Is that what's at the heart of this, that this is not a health driven response? This is a response driven by the concerns about the broader impact, whether or not that sort of lives versus livelihoods debate, which is been held in so many other countries is live in Indonesia, is that the underlying theme of a government response?

Tim Lindsey: I think that's one of the issues. I think the other is, as Ian said, a really deep anxiety about political stability.



Ali Moore: We've touched very much on the politics of this but the dire predictions at the outset about what might happen in Indonesia were in part based on, I guess, an assessment of just how prepared the country's health system is to cope with a crisis like this. Ian, how easy is it to access the health system? And how prepared is it for something like COVID-19?

Ian Wilson: In terms of the bearishness of the Indonesian health system, to put as simply as I can, it's not prepared for this kind of level of crisis. I mean, if you look at sort of more endemic problems in the country like corruption, for example, and the health sector has been plagued by issues around this for some time. Corruption around procurement of equipment and access to services, and I think all of these things have left it in quite a battered state. The level of service really varies considerably, depending of course, on who you are and where you are.

In some sort of rural, more remote parts of the country have relatively poor health infrastructure. You have to find better health infrastructure in many of the larger towns and cities, but then it often shifts to a problem of who's able to equitably access these kinds of services. Again, the crisis has sort of heightened awareness of these deeper kind of structural problems about the public's access to these core kinds of infrastructures.

Ali Moore: Tim, as I understand it, Indonesia actually has one of the lowest per capita health expenditures of major economies in the region. Is that right?

Tim Lindsey: Well, it's got extremely poor health outcomes across the board. It's got just 4 doctors and 12 hospital beds for every 10,000 people, which is way below World Health Organization's and even for regional Asia-Pacific standards, it's got a severe ventilator shortage, which is highly problematic in this pandemic. It's got extremely poor maternal and infant mortality outcomes, worse than many Sub-Saharan countries such as Malawi, Angola, and so forth. Child stunting is serious. It has the second highest smoking rate in the world. Nearly 70% of all adult Indonesian men smoke, in all it's five leading causes of death are all tobacco related, all. That means that it is extremely vulnerable to death from a respiratory virus such as COVID-19.

The problems were so bad in terms of preparedness at hospitals that famously doctors were forced to turn up in raincoats instead of proper protective equipment. And it's taken a long time for that protective equipment to circulate through the health system, and many remote hospitals still can't access not only protective material, but also testing kits, even though more testing kits are now available. And that's why, for some time, in the early months of this pandemic, healthcare workers represented about 10% of deaths.



So the health system is one of the worst in the region, and has outcomes that you would associate with countries much further down the development scale. It's been neglected and I think this is now becoming quite clear as a result of this pandemic. It's been neglected for decades, and this is the wrong time to have so backward and poor a health system.

Ali Moore: And indeed, when you look at the official numbers of infections and deaths which you've both cast doubt on, I guess, Ian when it comes to healthcare, are there some people who just never come into contact with the health system?

Ian Wilson: Yes. And this is a broader problem that comes from the large numbers of people who live from informal kinds of labour. And if I use the example of somewhere like Jakarta, many of the poor won't be registered as residents in the city, for example. And this puts in place numerous sort of administrative and bureaucratic obstacles for them to access adequate health services. And you see the same kind of trends that you've seen in other parts of the world with increasingly large private system. I use a pay system I've seen online, packages being advertised by private hospitals in conjunction with hotels.

So, upper middle class Jakartans can have self isolation packages where they can be tested for the virus and the whole thing can be a comfortable experience. Whereas for many of those living in informal neighbourhoods, not only do they face problems in gaining access to the social assistance funds that have been provided by the government, and there has been, in financial terms, at least, a relatively significant amount of money allocated for this. But then problems of equity of access come to the fore. And for many of the poor in particular, it's difficult for them to access these systems.

Tim Lindsey: Yeah, that's right. Because if you look at Jakarta's official population, it's around about 11 million or so, but the real population of greater Jakarta is something like 30 million. And a large number of those people, as Ian says, are not registered to be living in Jakarta. Some of them aren't registered for anything. And they not only aren't able to access health provisions, but even the rice that's being handed out and some of the kitchens that are being set up to provide food for the poor, they're unable to access those as well. So they are on their own.

Ali Moore: Tim, if I can just broaden this out to a bilateral question here, and this is a conversation that many countries are having at the moment about China. Of course, not insignificant amounts of money and funding for Indonesia's economic development comes from China. Do you think that this crisis will change how Beijing is viewed in Indonesia? I mean, we talk about pre-existing fault lines and anti-Chinese sentiment is never far away, is it?



Tim Lindsey: We have seen some commentary particularly on social media holding China responsible for the virus using Trumpian terms like the Chinese virus and so forth. There have been some outbreaks of anti-Chinese sentiment. Whilst that seems to be contained for the moment, none of that makes it easy for the government to deal with China. Indonesia has a deep seated tradition of anti-Chinese sentiment that in part is directed at ethnic Chinese Indonesians who are usually the scapegoats at times of political tension or difficulty.

Secondly, Indonesia, has institutionalised anxiety about communism that reflects the rise of Suharto's new order on the back of the killings of 1965/66 of the political left, which had annihilated. Communism is not just still a criminal offence in Indonesia, it's a common slur against political opponents to directed at Jokowi, for example. And communist China is still an object of fear and loathing in Indonesia. This puts Jokowi in a difficult position because Indonesia underperforms in relation to foreign investment, and Jokowi looks to Northern Asia in particular to China for investments.

So he's always walking a fine line between wanting to attract Chinese investments. But not being seen to be too close to China because of the political difficulties it creates for him. I don't think any of that will change as a result of China's providing assistance to Indonesia during this time.

Ali Moore: So Ian, how does Indonesia recover from this? It is, of course, very early days, we've talked about how Jokowi relies on good economic performance for his political legitimacy, the enormous impact on the poorer members of society in Indonesia. How does the country recover?

Ian Wilson: In economic terms, it's going to be a long and bumpy ride. But I think for a lot of Indonesians it could lead to a new perception of what they expect government to do. I was going to mention before, you've seen the government also showing a certain degree of opportunism at this time where they've continued trying to push through very unpopular, significant changes to law. The so called Omnibus Laws, which seek to radically change labour laws, wage conditions and sort of opening Indonesia up for a more free reign for foreign investors.

This has been pushed forward at the same time as people aren't able to mobilise in the streets or don't want to mobilise in the streets in the same way that they would, because it's something that would definitely mobilise significant opposition from trade unions and a whole range of different organisations. And I think, also seeing the way that the government has been so paranoid of legitimate criticism, in a sense, points to their concerns that this kind of crisis could generate new kinds of social forces and social pressures that could hit a number of different directions, including if you're going to be an optimist, and I try to remain optimistic.



Indonesia's case, the emergence of new social forces and social movements that are looking for more genuinely responsive forms of government. And again, this major cleavage that's emerged in this crisis has been the relative competency of some local level administration's and local level leaders, but also the massive and largely unreported sort of DIY responses to this crisis throughout the country. The neighborhood's I know in poor parts of Jakarta had been organising their own logistics, they've been producing their own hand sanitizers.

Ian Wilson: They've been engaging in inter-neighbourhood kitchens providing food, massive forms of social organisation, which in a sense, heighten, I guess, the incompetency for want of a better word of the national government's response. What interests me to as an observer of Indonesia is to look at to what extent this may coalesce into new kinds of demands from what people expect from government.

Ali Moore: Tim, do you share that relative optimism that this could be a silver lining shifting expectations?

Tim Lindsey: I'm a bit of a pessimist on this one. I do agree with the sentiment Ian's expressing. But look, when Indonesia acknowledged the existence of COVID-19, the University of Indonesia said the outcome could be two and a half million infections and quarter million deaths. That would have been 1% of the population. Spain, Italy, the UK, Belgium, around 5%. So this prediction, horrific, though it sounds would have been a reasonable one in that international context.

They predicted this possibly by May. Now that didn't happen. And Indonesia while it has got a growing infection and high numbers of deaths for the number of infections, and although we don't trust those figures, from the government's perspective, it hasn't turned out to be apocalyptic. And I think the government is probably optimistic that it can keep the system that allows it to maintain power in place. But I think it would become very anxious if the pandemic spread, if the outbreak recurred. And we started getting infections and deaths like those at the University of Indonesia predicted. It has been fundamentally chaotic, but securitized response from the government.

It has been bouncing backwards and forwards, reversing itself, being deliberately vague and so forth, looking for ways to minimise political damage and maintain its legitimacy. It hasn't done a particularly good job. And to deal with that it has been pretty tough on its critics, and pretty tough on its whole approach to the management of the pandemic. Now, if things got worse, I think you would see that ratchet right up. And it would share the view that Ian's expressed, that these events could well lead to new expectations on the government, and it would not want that to happen.



So we could well see if the return from mudik and the current increasing of the curve of infections, if both of those things create a new spike, we might well see a much tougher government response to this. But at the moment, I think it's a muddle through, which if you spent a lot of time watching Indonesia would not surprise you in the least.

Ali Moore: Tim, not necessarily an optimistic note to end on at all. But as with every single country, we really are very much still in early days. And as you say, there is much to watch to see exactly how this unfolds in Indonesia. Thank you so much to both of you for your time and for your insights.

Tim Lindsey: Thank you.

Ian Wilson: Thank you.

Ali Moore: Our guests have been Melbourne Law School Asia Legal Expert, Professor Tim Lindsey, and Political and International Relations Researcher, Dr. Ian Wilson of Murdoch University. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify or SoundCloud.

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