

The Making of a Paper Crisis: Coexisting with COVID-19 in Indonesia

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The COVID-19 pandemic is certainly far from over in Indonesia. In fact, as I write this piece (June 6th), the COVID-19 infections are constantly escalating. Each day we set a new record of infection numbers. However, many people do not feel like we are approaching a critical juncture of the pandemic. The public, for one, is not as vigilant compared to the first weeks after the first and second infections announced by the President.

The Indonesian government is introducing what they called a “new normal”. Malls, restaurants, and recreation places are reopened after being closed for weeks. White-collar workers have to go to their office again after getting accustomed to working from home. Measures are being set to minimize the risk of infection, but people may take this with a grain of salt since many of the government’s previous instructions regarding the pandemic are poorly implemented. Although this is widely thought to worsen the COVID-19 situation in Indonesia, criticisms toward the government’s new normal or their previous actions (or inactions) to the crisis are not widespread.



damhuri muhammad
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Jakarta udah macet lagi. Hore...

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I still remember how people were angered when Indonesian government officials were dismissive toward the danger of the COVID-19 outbreak in the country. As an Indonesian student in Germany, I noted that [the German federal government was making similar blunders](#) during the early phase of the pandemic as well. But, while the German federal government approval rate [soared to an unprecedented level as they attempted to contain the pandemic](#), the Indonesian public

A friend's Twitter post showing how Jakarta traffic started to be jammed again (translation: "Jakarta is jammed again. Yay...")

continually resented their government for their earlier mistakes and fully blamed the government for the material and life losses due to COVID-19. Such discontentment is curiously not visible during this transition toward a 'new normal'.

Signs suggested that this indifference can be explained by people's exhaustion with the obligation to socially distance. People seem to be hesitant in sharing social activities as in the earlier phase of the outbreak, and netizens were blasting famous people or government officials who uploaded them. Still, even though my social media connections do not upload their outdoor activities due to the worry of being reprimanded, they were already actively meeting with others. Friends who regularly counted the number of the world's COVID-19 deaths and infections back then, who felt as if the incessant growth of COVID-19 heralded the end of the world, expressed their enthusiasm for being able to do the things they like

after the new normal. News outlets and pictures shared by peers showed vehicles and people crawling the streets during the last days of the government-imposed social restriction.



People playing cards in a restaurant in my neighborhood despite the government's instruction of social distancing

WHO remarked that COVID-19 will be with us for a long time. Joko Widodo, the Indonesian president, added that [citizens need to make peace with the virus](#). But, if the ignorance toward the disease's growth and the eagerness to live in the new normal has hinted anything, it is that people will coexist with COVID-19 by separating our daily reality with the actual crisis caused by the virus. COVID-19 infections and deaths will soar but it will be thought of as something detached from many people's everyday life.

The sense of COVID-19 crisis was initially established by powerful, unnerving images. The scenes of cities in other countries being eerily empty, lines representing the number of confirmed cases and deaths due to COVID-19 that were interminably climbing, stories and news about how someone or their relatives who had caught the virus were the features of people's everyday life during the first weeks of the outbreak. Nevertheless, as people in our proximity are seemingly untouched by the virus and life continues to be carried out as usual, these images have ceased to be as effective.

Many are simply not thinking about these images or their responsibility to not contract or spread the virus as people are drawn back to their pre-pandemic life. However, the remarks of Indonesian internet users who actively dismissed the COVID-19 pandemic show how the pandemic needs to be present in their everyday life to be considered as “a real crisis.” “It is said that there are more than one thousand Corona caused deaths in Indonesia,” a Facebook user commented on a piece of news on COVID-19. “Where are the bodies or the photo of their graves? Insolent news!” It is hard to measure the commonness of such an explicitly dismissive attitude. Still, the constant appearance of similar expressions in my social media feed or chat rooms, and also the way that some outspoken personalities kept demanding hard evidence of the severity of COVID-19 pandemic, suggest that it is not an exceptional attitude.

As signs of the pandemic cannot be immediately perceived or are losing their initial impact, reported infections and deaths are turned into *paper* infections and deaths. The losses caused by COVID-19 will continue to be reported but it will not startle people as much as it had previously. And there are reasons why the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths are not as high as it should have been even if they are increasing rapidly. The number of COVID-19 tests in the country are fairly low compared to other countries. There is a tendency to be concerned about testing positive among some people, which makes them hesitant about taking the COVID-19 test even if the test is free. Local governments are possibly also suppressing the case number in their locales. [Collaborative journalistic investigations found](#) that suspected COVID-19 deaths in an Indonesian province were not included in official numbers simply because the deceased did not have the opportunity to be tested before their demise.

Many Indonesians have actually grappled with other crises in a similar manner. A crisis loses its urgency as soon as it seemingly stops affecting people’s everyday life. The example that I have in hand is the Jakarta great flood that occurred at the beginning of this year. The catastrophe forced tens of thousands of citizens to evacuate, caused by an abnormally high rainfall, and catapulted the discourse of climate crisis into public conversations. After the flood subsided, however, conversations on the climate crisis, as frightful as the future scenarios it posed might be, followed suit. We rarely talked about it again despite the conversations that the city will be unlivable in the upcoming decades were everywhere during the flood.

In coexisting with the pandemic, most people would probably not turn to conspiracy theories to justify their dismissal of the COVID-19 danger. The sense of crisis simply disappeared as they are weary of not being able to bask in social enjoyments that are the casual part of their everyday life beforehand and as result the crisis fails to constantly at the forefront of their minds. Boredom, exhaustion and the unawareness that follows may become a threat to the effort to curb the disease that we cannot simply address by condemning them as irresponsible.

Further attention is required in considering the irony that Indonesians are enthusiastically going back to their everyday life while the pandemic worsens on a daily basis. Even I do not have the same vigilance toward the disease when compared to the early days of its outbreak, despite the fact that the present COVID-19 situation in Indonesia is much worse than it has ever been. I was obsessed with sanitizing my hands every time I touched a surface in public area earlier on. Now, it is easy to forget doing so, even though things have not been getting significantly better.

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