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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

***Bapakism* in Jokowi's Pandemic Handling: The Cultural Dimension**

By Muhamad Arif & Sigit S. Nugroho

SYNOPSIS

The Jokowi administration has been widely criticised for its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, given its slow response, as well as inconsistent and unclear policies. Is there a cultural explanation for the president's less than satisfactory posture during this pandemic period?

COMMENTARY

IN AN interview in March 2020, Achmad Yuriyanto, the government spokesperson for COVID19, [defended Indonesia's less than transparent handling of the pandemic](#). Yuriyanto, an army medical corps colonel and the health ministry's director general for Disease Control and Prevention, drew an analogy with family relationships when describing the administration's communication strategy.

Justifying why some information had to be withheld, the government, he claimed, projected itself as a father figure for the citizens so as to prevent panic and maintain public trust. Based on this belief, Yuriyanto felt that citizens should trust the government's system of "truth management" (*manajemen kebenaran*).

Deliberate Withholding of Information

Yuriyanto was not merely speaking for himself. It might reflect the approach taken by the whole government in handling the COVID-19 crisis. After the initial discovery of

COVID-19 cases in the country in early March, President Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) admitted that [the government had deliberately withheld some information](#).

Furthermore, President Jokowi also centralised information management, forbidding provincial governments from disclosing new cases. A month later, following criticism, [Jokowi finally yielded](#), instructing the release of more detailed information on the pandemic to the public.

Apart from the lack of transparency, the government was also portrayed as inconsistent and indecisive when enacting COVID-19 mitigation measures. For example, [President Jokowi himself confused the public](#) by initially banning the Aidil Fitri exodus (*Mudik Hari Raya Idul Fitri*), yet he allowed people to go back to their respective hometowns (*pulang kampung*).

In other instances, government policy seemed unsynchronised with different agencies coming up with different, often conflicting, positions. As trivial as it might sound, Yurianto’s remarks offers a clue to the persistent role of Javanese culture in shaping contemporary politics under the Jokowi administration. Yet this is not a new phenomenon.

Father and Family: Indonesian Leadership Style

The role of culture in Indonesian politics is always evident, shaping regimes’ behaviour, and influencing some of its most [strategic decisions](#). During the three decades of the New Order, President Suharto institutionalised paternalistic values – dubbed as Bapak-ism – as an integral part of the political ideology [linking family life with political life](#).

As Saya Shiraishi, the Japanese Indonesia watcher, observed: “Suharto runs the state and guides the nation as Father President (*Bapak Presiden*); his officials as well as citizens follow him like children; and the entire nation is imagined as a family.”

Suharto’s authoritarian paternalism was observable in how the regime managed information. The state apparatus controlled the press through prohibitive licensing. Journalists were imprisoned for writing articles to which the government [objected](#). People were basically allowed to know only as much as the regime wished them to know. This, the regime argued, was for the people’s own good.

Suharto’s *Bapak-ism* manifested authoritarian traits when facing intra-government dissent. While maintaining, even encouraging [healthy rivalry](#) among his close aides, Suharto made sure none became powerful enough to challenge his political primacy. In 1974, after the infamous [Malari](#) riots, the security chief General Sumitro was ousted.

Then in the 1980s, Suharto deprived the privileges of several retired generals involved in the group of 50 dissidents known as [Petition of Fifty \(Petisi 50\)](#). In 1993, Suharto [discharged Minister of Defence General L.B. Murdani](#), a loyalist who became critical of the president in his latter years.

Alternative Lens to Jokowi’s COVID-19 Handling

What can cultural insights inform us about the Jokowi administration's COVID-19 handling? Compared to the Suharto government, how are familyism and *Bapak*-ism manifested in the Jokowi administration?

First, as mentioned above, Yurianto's remarks and Jokowi's actions indicated traces of paternalistic values which remain influential in shaping the government's view of its relationship with society, in particular in information management. These values arguably have their roots in President Jokowi's [self-portrayal](#), like Suharto, as [a Javanese ruler](#).

Furthermore, like his predecessor, Jokowi also espoused economic developmentalism: enacting [several grand economic development agendas](#), that included [the relocation of the capital city](#). The driving force of the Jokowi administration in the early phase of the pandemic seemed to minimise the impact of COVID-19 in order to preserve the stability essential for his developmentalist agenda.

In doing so, Jokowi returned to the old playbook of keeping the public in the dark for the "greater good".

Personal Leadership

Second, at the level of personal leadership and intra-governmental management, Jokowi's *Bapak*-ism seems to depart from his predecessor's authoritarian tendencies. Unlike *Pak* Suharto, *Pak* Jokowi displays the more benevolent traits of paternalistic leadership: embracing inclusivity and collective decision-making.

He adopts a hands-off approach, delegating authority to his trusted advisors and ministers, and largely [restrains from taking drastic measures](#) that could endanger Indonesian democracy.

When facing internal dissent, President Jokowi prefers to employ non-confrontational approaches. Rather than ousting problematic cabinet members, thereby undermining government harmony, Jokowi compensates for ministerial ineptitude by utilising other avenues. One notable example is Jokowi's penchant to utilise the military (TNI), in assisting civilian authorities in handling the pandemic.

In the final analysis, we can say with confidence that the Jokowi government's current handling of the pandemic can be explained in cultural terms. The paternalistic tendency in the form of *Bapak*-ism in post-*Reformasi* Indonesian politics is still prevalent, even arguably making a comeback.

There are similarities and dissimilarities between Jokowi's and Suharto's paternalistic patterns. The old "information management" playbook endures. Yet, Jokowi's tendency to display "benevolent" stances might enable him to keep accommodating criticism and compensating ineptness. All in all, these insights are valuable for understanding how Indonesia's leadership think and work, especially as the country enters the [New Normal phase and restart the economy](#).

Muhamad Arif is a researcher at The Habibie Center's ASEAN Studies Programme. He also lectures at the Department of International Relations, University of Indonesia. Sigit S. Nugroho is a research associate at the Indonesia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is part of an RSIS Series.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg