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Towards the End of the Pandemic: The Case of Indonesia's Riau Islands Province

Adhi Priamarizki

SYNOPSIS

*The COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia's Riau Islands province has subsided significantly. Day-to-day activities have been allowed to resume almost full scale and the province has been tipped as one of the successful provinces in the country in managing the pandemic. Despite the positive outlook, however, some challenges remain. **ADHI PRIAMARIZKI** addresses some of the problems that could hinder the province's reopening.*

COMMENTARY

On 3 October 2020, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) said he was optimistic that the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia was [subsiding](#). He even stated his confidence that Indonesia would soon overcome the pandemic. However, the situation in the country remains volatile. The number of people infected has been gradually increasing of late. Indonesia's Ministry of Health has even considered [reactivating its Wisma Atlet COVID-19](#) hospital in Jakarta. The resumption of daily activities and the appearance of new sub-variants of the Omicron variant of the virus have triggered a [spike in the number of infected cases](#).



Despite having one of the highest vaccination rates in Indonesia, KEPRI continues to face challenges in managing the Covid-19 pandemic. *Photo by National Cancer Institute on Unsplash.*

Meanwhile, Riau Islands province (KEPRI) has resumed daily activities at top speed. The province's close proximity with Singapore and Malaysia as well as KEPRI's economic importance necessitated the resumption of economic activities to near full capacity. The COVID-19 situation in KEPRI itself has been steadily improving. In fact, in terms of pandemic management, the province has managed to stand out in comparison with other provinces. For example, KEPRI is among the top four provinces in terms of vaccination numbers. In addition, all the municipalities and cities of KEPRI have been under level 1 of public activity restrictions (PPKM) as of [6 November 2022](#), which denotes a low level of COVID-19 spread. This suggests that the pandemic is well controlled. Despite such encouraging signs, however, some problems remain.

KEPRI'S PANDEMIC Management

Overall pandemic management in KEPRI was implemented in accordance with guidelines from the central government. In addition, the province launched its own initiatives to curb the spread of COVID-19. One noticeable [initiative](#) is the partnership between the KEPRI provincial government and the private sector. In early 2020, KEPRI's Indonesian Businessman Association (APINDO) distributed thousands of medical masks in KEPRI. APINDO also significantly contributed to the vaccination programme in the province, including supporting [the vaccination initiative carried out by the Indonesian military \(TNI\) in the region](#). Moreover, KEPRI received [a number of](#)

[aid items from Singapore to support its pandemic management](#). These include test kits, masks, ventilators, and oxygen concentrators.

As in other parts of Indonesia, the TNI has contributed significantly to KEPRI's pandemic management, primarily through enforcement of social distancing measures, health protocols socialisation, and vaccine distribution. In general, TNI worked together with the provincial government, city/municipal authorities, and the national police (POLRI) in helping to control the spread of COVID-19 in the province. Another area of TNI involvement was the establishment of a dedicated COVID-19 emergency hospital and isolation site in Galang Island.

Interestingly, the TNI worked under the direction of the central government, not of the regional authority, in managing the facility in Galang Island. By June 2022, activities in the facility had [significantly waned](#) as the pandemic situation has been under control. In addition to TNI and POLRI, the Indonesian State Intelligence Agency (BIN), through its regional branch (Binda), played a role in KEPRI's pandemic management effort, notably in distributing vaccines to rural areas and islands.

Challenges Ahead

KEPRI's proximity to Singapore and the state of Johor in Malaysia encapsulates one of the unique features of COVID-19 management in the province: the easing of border closures means KEPRI's pandemic management must take note of developments in these neighbouring states. The resumption of activities in the neighbouring countries could lead to an intensification of people movements between KEPRI and these countries. This likelihood requires that the province prepare itself. Ensuring that sufficient numbers of residents are inoculated is one solution.

In this respect, distribution of vaccines to rural areas is still a challenge. The reliance on the security apparatus to distribute vaccines to rural areas can only help as a short-term solution. Connectivity between islands, particularly the outer islands, was [a challenge](#) for the province even before the outbreak of the pandemic. To overcome the problem, KEPRI authorities plan to procure a number of [N219 planes](#) from the Indonesian aerospace company PT. DI.

A more critical issue is coordination between the central government and KEPRI. Although daily activities have resumed under the new normal of living with COVID-19, pandemic protocols are pretty much still intact. For example, having a vaccination booster is still listed as one of the requirements for local residents to travel abroad or even within Indonesia.

However, in the middle of October 2022, the province was forced to temporarily halt its vaccination programme owing to unavailability of vaccines. The shortage was first reported in September 2022. Previously, from July to August 2022, the central government boosted vaccine supplies to KEPRI by redirecting near-expired vaccines from other provinces. This was done because KEPRI residents were considered to be highly amenable to getting vaccinated. However, the KEPRI authorities returned those vaccines to the central government, [citing their expiration](#).

Vaccine shortages are not exclusive to KEPRI; cities in Java, such as Bandung and Surabaya, have also reported shortages. The shortage of vaccines is due to the central government's policy of halting imports of COVID-19 vaccines in order to make way for locally produced vaccines, which were initially scheduled to be distributed in October but later postponed to [November 2022](#). To tackle the interim vaccine shortage across the country, Jakarta was forced to import [5 million Pfizer vaccines](#) at the end of October 2022. Meanwhile, travel between provinces has been impeded due to vaccine unavailability.

KEPRI is likely to suffer as a consequence because full-scale resumption of economic activities will be affected. The rule for travel has since been eased, with travellers being allowed to bring a letter from a local medical centre stating their inability to get a booster shot due to vaccine shortages. Nevertheless, close communication between the central and local governments remains critical both during the pandemic and in normal circumstances. The absence of effective coordination will compromise regional development, which in turn will jeopardise overall national development.

*Adhi **PRIAMARIZKI** is a Research Fellow with the Indonesia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).*

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg