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## POLITICS | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Simultaneous regional elections during the Covid-19 pandemic: Confrontation between democracy and religion in Indonesia

Anom Wahyu Asmorojati<sup>1\*</sup> and Suyadi<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** Several developed countries opposed general elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in decreases in voter turnout from 66–73.8%. Similarly, simultaneous regional elections in Indonesia during the COVID-19 period were opposed by several Muslim religious leaders placing the election at odds with the democratic process. However, concerns over COVID-19 safety results in an increase in voter participation by 79.13%. The purpose of this study is to find a harmonious model whereby upholding democracy and fulfilling Muslim religious teachings of respecting human life (*Khifdzul Nafs*) are both achieved when conducting simultaneous regional elections. This model was expected to increase voter participation and the control further spread of Covid-19. This research focuses on legal and policy issues namely, the Regional Election regulations and COVID-19 prevention policies in three districts (Sleman, Bantul and Gunungkidul), Special Region of Yogyakarta. Data were collected from legal document reviews and survey results from respondents involving 43 election organizers and 200 voters. The results show that the simultaneous regional election model in Indonesia is not only a democratic event but is also an avenue through which the government campaigns the prevention of

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Dr. Anom Wahyu Asmorojati, SH., MH, Lecture at Faculty of Law of Universitas Ahmad Dahlan Yogyakarta, was born on November 17, 1979, in Yogyakarta. She earned her Bachelor of Law degree from the Faculty of Law at the Universitas Islam Indonesia in 2001. Subsequently, she became a lecturer at the Faculty of Law of Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa Serang, Banten, from 2005 to 2012. She pursued her Master's degree (S2) at the Faculty of Law of Universitas Jayabaya Jakarta in 2007. Her dedication to legal studies led her to achieve a Doctorate in Legal Science from the Doctoral Program in Legal Science at the Universitas Islam Bandung (UNISBA) in 2015. Since 2013, Dr. Anom has been a lecturer in the Master of Law Program at the Faculty of Law of Universitas Ahmad Dahlan (UAD), Yogyakarta, Indonesia. She is responsible for teaching various courses in Constitutional Law, including Introduction to Indonesian Law, Constitutional Law, Local Government Law, State Institutional Law, and Constitutional Court Procedure. In addition to her teaching role, Dr. Anom is an active member of the research division of the Association of Constitutional and Administrative Law Educators in the Special Region of Yogyakarta (AP HTN HAN DIY). Her dedication to legal education and research has made her a respected figure in the field of Constitutional Law and Administrative Law in Indonesia. Professor Dr. Suyadi, M.Pd.I is a prominent figure in the field of Islamic education. He currently serves as a lecturer at the Faculty of Islamic Studies Universitas Ahmad Dahlan (UAD), Yogyakarta, Indonesia. With a distinguished career in academia, Professor Dr. Suyadi has achieved the prestigious rank of Professor in the field of Islamic Education. His scholarly pursuits are centered around various aspects of Islamic education, including research in Islamic education, Islamic studies, anti-corruption studies, and curriculum development in Islamic education.

COVID-19 which adheres to the idea of *Khifdzul Nafs*. Thus, the simultaneous regional election model applied during the COVID-19 pandemic can be used as a model for the 2027 Indonesian national simultaneous regional elections and even for general elections in other countries. Although the COVID-19 pandemic will cease, the best practices for simultaneous regional elections during it can be used to subsequent infectious disease outbreaks such as tuberculosis (TBC) and HIV.

**Subjects:** Legal Theory; Regulation; Elections; Local Government; Political Leaders; Political Parties; Regulatory Policy; Political Behavior and Participation; Religion

**Keywords:** politics; law; democracy; regional elections; religion; Covid-19

### 1. Introduction

Despite the growing number of cases of COVID-19 infections in Indonesia (Olivia et al., 2020), the Indonesian government carried out its plan to conduct a nationwide simultaneous regional election on 9 December 2020 (Rangkuti, 2020). This was a difficult decision to make but very important for the sake of upholding democracy. This democratic event was contested by 715 pairs of candidate spread across 270 different regions in Indonesia consisting of 9 provinces, 37 cities and 223 districts (Marisal et al., 2020). This regional election was the second biggest election event after the US election which involved 100.3 million voters. Despite the global economic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesia was still willing to spend a very significant sum, some 20.45 trillion rupiah (over USD1.4 billion), for this election, making it the costliest election in the world (Pebratama & Adnan, 2020).

Indonesia which adheres to the principle of direct democracy and has the largest Muslim population in the world (Suyadi, 2018; Suyadi & Widodo, 2019), the holding of simultaneous regional elections during a pandemic, was met with the opposition of several Muslim religious leaders. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia on 19 March 2020, religious leaders complied with COVID-19 protocols, such as changing religious practices, closing houses of worship, postponing religious ceremonies and cancelling the pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia (Barry et al., 2020; Mietzner, 2020). Given this situation, they questioned the government over its plan to hold elections while worship practices were forced to change, be postponed or cancelled (Wildman et al., 2020). In fact, one leading academic and religious figure in Indonesia had threatened to abstain if the elections remained as scheduled (Rachmawati, 2020).

Concerns raised by some Muslim religious leaders over the conduct of religious practices in the light of planned elections also resonated with some voters' concerns over the risk of infection at polling stations (Norris & Gonzalez, 2020) (Editors & The Editors, 2020). This concern is based on the fact that general elections held amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in several countries such as the United States, Germany, and Italy had increased the fatality and infection rates (Landman & Splendore, 2020). In Indonesia alone, during the campaign period leading up to the regional elections, there was a surge in the spread of COVID-19 due to the long holiday (Pertana, 2020), mass protests rejecting the Omnibus law (Prabowo, 2020), and the large number of supporters of Haji Rizieq Syihab, the leader of *Front Pembela Islam* (Islam Defenders Front) who gathered to greet him upon his return from self-exile Saudi Arabia (Nabila, 2020) making a total of 203 new cases of Covid-19. In an attempt to resolve safety concerns the Indonesian government, in addition to conducting the election, also sought to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Nabella, 2020).

So far, studies related to religion opposition to democratic elections amidst the COVID-19 pandemic can be broken down into three themes. First, a study of general elections during the COVID-19 pandemic which were conducted in a number of developed countries. The study analyzes the pre-election in 14 states before the main election for the President of the United States on 7 November 2020. The data shows that there were very high levels of deaths and infections in

the US, especially in New York (Johnson et al., 2020). In South Korea, voting was conducted on 15 April 2020, but only 66% of eligible Koreans cast a ballot (Kim et al., 2020; Lee & Choi, 2020). Even so, South Korea in developing its smart city concept applied adequate COVID-19 countermeasures technology (Sonn & Lee, 2020). France even decided to cancel the second round of local elections planned for 29 March 2020 (Landman & Splendore, 2020).

Secondly, researchers have studied the history of secularism in Britain (Catterall, 2020) and the principles of secular democracy gaining paramountcy over religious dogma (Latterell et al., 2016). Other studies examine the strength of democracy in Indonesia under President Jokowi (Fealy, 2020; Power, 2018) and the debate over holding simultaneous regional elections amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the systematic reviews mentioned earlier are on public opinion regarding the pros and cons of holding simultaneous regional elections amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Yunaldi, 2020). The present research places more emphasis on public concerns about the emergence of new clusters in polling stations and other safety considerations. Another similar research paper attempts to offer an alternative method to conducting elections at polling stations such as the use of technology including online elections (Tanaamah et al., 2019), and indirect or representative elections (Kennedy & Pradana Suhendarto, 2020; Utomo, 2020). The most recent research is conducted by Persada on the use of digital technology in a democratic system, so that voting can be carried out online (Sutera & Persada, 2020).

After reviewing previous relevant research, the present research aims to fill a gap in the literature. This study has two fundamental differences. First, this study refutes Fealy, Power and Meister's argument there has been a decline of democracy in Indonesia (Fealy, 2020; Mietzner, 2020; Power, 2018). The robustness of democracy in Indonesia can be evidenced by the fact that despite the COVID-19 pandemic, simultaneous regional elections were still conducted. Second, regional elections in Indonesia are different from general elections in other countries because there was a greater density of voters, with a higher potential for a spike in infections (Johnson et al., 2020). In fact, the potential for a spike in infections from regional elections in Indonesia has provided a focus in efforts to prevent Covid-19, thereby saving the lives. The benefit of this research is to show how simultaneous regional elections are not just a democratic event but also provided the momentum for measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19. This work to save human life is consonant with religious principles of respecting life.

This research focuses on three questions related to the enforcement of democracy through simultaneous regional elections amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. First, what is the scenario for the simultaneous regional election regulations amid the COVID-19 pandemic? Second, how does the election committee organize simultaneous elections that are democratic and safe from COVID-19 and what is the level of voter participation in simultaneous regional elections amid the COVID-19 pandemic? Based on these problem formulations, the objectives of this research are to propose changes in the protocol for simultaneous regional elections amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, describe the successful implementation of simultaneous regional elections amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and examine the level of voter participation in simultaneous regional elections amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The three findings of this research will greatly contribute to the implementation of simultaneous regional elections in other countries and can serve as a model for the implementation of simultaneous regional elections amidst infectious diseases outbreaks, such as tuberculosis (TBC), and HIV.

This research argues that democracy must be upheld even in the event of a pandemic such as COVID-19 (James, 2020). The opposition of several religious leaders became a part of a public discourse of holding safe elections so that it did not threaten the lives of voters. The postponement of regional elections risked threatening democracy and the existence of religion itself. The expiration of the term of office of regional heads would have a significant impact on COVID-19 prevention. This is because their positions would be temporarily replaced by appointed officials who would not be able to carry out major government programs, including implementing strategic

policies to manage Covid-19. On the other hand, delaying the regional elections until COVID-19 can be controlled is considered a weaker argument because all policies implemented currently have not been able to control the spread of COVID-19 in Indonesia (Abdullah, 2020). The alternatives to replace the regional elections do not have a formal juridical basis so that the regional elections must be prioritized (Landman & Splendore, 2020). Thus, the regional election should be used as a medium to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

## 2. Literature review

The timing of elections and the need to prevent the loss of life in a pandemic attracted controversy during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, if the practice of holding elections can be dangerous, especially in the case of Covid-19, careful review and reconsideration may be necessary. People's participation is the key underlying value in a democratic system and it is regarded as the safest mechanism to control how the government is run, particularly in formulating state law (Suseno, 1997). This concept continues to blossom in many Asian countries as it offers a promising prospect (Saefulloh Fattah, 2000). However, people's safety is of the utmost importance and people cannot be placed in a situation of unacceptable risk in upholding democracy (Febriana, 2020). This research attempts to offer alternatives on how democracy can be upheld while still maintaining people's safety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 2.1. Regional election planning and Covid-19 protocols

In Indonesia, there are three types of elections: presidential elections, legislative elections, and regional head elections also known as Pilkada which is an election to elect regional heads and deputy regional heads including governor and deputy governor, regent, and deputy regent; and mayor and deputy mayor. In 2020, simultaneous regional elections were held in Indonesia with the participation of 19 political parties including 4 (25%) political parties with strong religious affiliation in Islam. However, the rejection of the simultaneous regional elections did not come from these religiously affiliated political parties, but from religious figures outside the political parties. The influence of religious leaders seems to be greater than that of political parties but due to lack of political legitimacy, it is the political parties that become the reference point for the implementation of simultaneous regional elections. Thus, the role of religious leaders in shaping public opinion cannot be ignored.

The simultaneous regional election conducted in December 2020 had been previously held in December 20 February 2015<sup>17</sup>, and June 2018. Indonesia will see its next nationwide election in December 2027 (Nugroho & Anom, 2019). The government decided to hold the 2020 election as planned, and although this had a strong legal foundation for its conduct, it was not viewed favorably by certain groups. A good government relies on good ideas and in this case elected politicians need to maintain a sound working relationship with bureaucrats. In a well-functioning democracy, the bureaucracy enjoys a latitude to concentrate on problem-solving (Editors & The Editors, 2020). COVID-19 with its various restrictions had disrupted normal working relations between the executive and the bureaucracy.

The conduct of simultaneous regional elections show that democratic practices in Indonesia have become more voter centric compared to the recent general elections in the US (Roberts, 2020). Community participation in elections increased but in the 2020 regional election in Indonesia a particular effort had to be placed on ensuring voter safety getting stronger while on the other hand, regional elections are not yet able to create people's welfare. Therefore, it is necessary to re-examine this system so that this system ultimately leads to improved community safety. the welfare of the community. Democracy would be meaningless if people are not supported to deliver a mandate for a new government. Indeed, this is not in line with the goals of the country which have been aspired to so far (Saraswati, 2014).

## 2.2. Confrontation and harmony among religion, democracy, and the Covid-19 pandemic

The opposition of several religious leaders needs to be contextualized in terms of concerns over safety and the timing of the election. The growth of democracy is based on several principles and values inherited from the past including religious freedom generated by reforms and the experience of religious conflict (Nugroho & Anom, 2019). As a democratic country that upholds the sovereignty of the people, Indonesia does not seek to exclusively separate state affairs from religious matters. On the contrary, Indonesia guarantees the religious rights of its citizens in its constitution. In its implementation, simultaneous regional elections, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, caused opposition from some religious leaders, because of concerns over the safety of people.

Indonesia is the only Muslim majority country that accepts a co-existence of religion and democracy without bloodshed (Rosyidin, 2020). This condition is different from some theocratic states in the Middle East, which continue to experience conflict with democratic practices (Sumaktoyonathanaelmu, 2019). Nevertheless, the holding of the 2020 regional elections in Indonesia faced opposition from a number of Muslim leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic because it was deemed contrary to *Khifdzul Nafs*, that is there was a risk to life.

The debate about religious teaching and democratic practices in the case of regional elections during the COVID-19 pandemic has been widely discussed in various forums. The argument to postpone the regional election seems to illustrate that the implementation of simultaneous regional elections during a pandemic is something that endangers the safety of citizens. The cost of regional elections during the pandemic is one of the reasons why elections amid a pandemic are considered less desirable. From the point of view of the state, democracy means that participation is necessary to build a government that is accountable, transparent and responsive to the needs of society. The absence of participation will only nourish an authoritarian and corrupt government (Seekings & Natrass, 2020).

Meanwhile, from the people's point of view, participation is the key to empowerment. It provides space for the community to fulfil their needs and rights, develop local potential and initiatives, activate the role of society and build an independent society (Nicoleta, 2013). In this context, participation puts society in a democratic relationship with its citizens. First, society does not enslave its client who becomes the object of legal oppression but rather empowers the client as a citizen. Slaves shows total obedience, but the citizen is empowered with full rights. Second, the citizen continues to partner the government in managing governance and development. Third, participation is not a gift from the government but it is a right belonging to the citizens themselves. Fourth, society is not merely a passive object of beneficiaries of government policies, but as an actor or subject who actively determines policies (Suyatno, 2016). Therefore, careful consideration and calculation are needed to be able to carry out democratic elections as large as the direct simultaneous regional elections to be held in 270 regions with a fairly high-risk of COVID-19 transmission (Freckelton QC, 2020).

The political position of the state during a pandemic has certainly changed, in light of the COVID-19 outbreak which has claimed lives in all parts of the world and whose end cannot be predicted (Johnson et al., 2020). In a situation like this, there is a conflict between the desire to continue to run democratic elections normally or to postpone it for the sake of people's safety. The role of government is very much needed by the people in a situation like this because theoretically, the government has to approach this situation with a duty of care, a sense of justice and without seeking political advantage, to make decisions which protect the lives of all people (Johnson et al., 2020). The inadequate response of the Indonesian government at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was one of the factors why many parties doubted that the simultaneous regional elections could be carried out successfully in a pandemic like this (Mietzner, 2020).



Additionally, the government must allocate a much bigger budget in order to make adjustments required in the election conducted during the pandemic. They must have sound ideas and autonomy that allows it to concentrate on solving problems (Mukherji, 2020). The exercise of democracy in the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to a tension between the democratic rights and safety of citizens. Solutions have been offered by various parties, especially regional parliaments (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah* – DPRD) which is one of the alternatives to conducting elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe that it can indeed be an alternative. This alternative certainly needs to be supported by a guarantee that representatives can maintain accessibility for citizens in the regional parliament (Mătușescu, 2013) because if citizens do not have access to their parliamentarians, democracy will not achieve its goals.

The large-scale social distancing restriction policy is contrary to human nature as a social being. It is therefore very common that this restriction has been opposed by people in various countries. It takes extraordinary efforts from the government to be able to limit the social activities of its people during this pandemic, because the impact of this pandemic is not only on health but also socio-economic and political aspects of a country.

Government openness and accountability in handling this pandemic is key to identifying whether a government system is running democratically (Editors & The Editors, 2020). Authoritarian regimes tend to hide the real data so that their legitimacy is not doubted within the country (Power, 2018). Likewise in Indonesia, the openness of the government in handling a pandemic is one indicator of a democratic nation. Various democratic activities that must be carried out by the government as mandated by the law are the main priorities that must be regulated properly (Mătușescu, 2013). Given that Indonesia adheres to the rule of law, no legal action is carried out without a clear basis of authority from laws and regulations (Sukmayadi, 2020). However, the simultaneous regional elections held during this pandemic must also pay attention to several risk indicators, namely the rate of infection, death, recovered patients, and COVID-19 transmission (Creswell, 2010; Norman & Denzin, 1997; Russell Bernard, 2012; Wicaksono, 2020).

### 3. Method

This study applied empirical juridical method (Jaja et al., 2020) to examine normative legal provisions and the empirical implementation in society. Therefore, the data sources in this study are all regulations that regulate the mechanism of simultaneous regional elections amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, especially Law No. 6 of 2020 concerning the Election and Law No. 6 of 2018 on Health Quarantine as well as other regulations related to COVID-19 protocols.

Furthermore, the implementation of all these regulations was confirmed through field observations and in-depth interviews. Field observations were conducted in three districts in the Special Region of Yogyakarta Province, namely Sleman, Bantul, and Gunungkidul. They were chosen because the voter turnout was higher compared to other areas (Winarno et al., 2018). Moreover, before the simultaneous regional elections, the three areas were the greenest areas on Java Island (Prasetyadi, 2020). However, before the simultaneous regional elections, they evenly became a red zone (Suyadi et al., 2020). This requires stricter implementation of COVID-19 protocols with adequate mass casualty anticipation. Thus, the simultaneous regional elections in Yogyakarta can represent the simultaneous regional elections in 28 other provinces (37 cities and 221 districts). In-depth interviews were conducted with the Chairman of the Regional General Election Commission of the Special Region of Yogyakarta and the voting committee (Yusmaliana et al., 2020). The interview focused on the policies in implementing simultaneous regional elections, the COVID-19 protocols, and mass casualty anticipation.

The data analysis was conducted descriptively, which included data display, reduction, and interpretation. The observation data was confirmed with the interview data, and vice versa, to

find deep meanings as answers to the problems. Miles and Huberman (1992:20) describe the process of qualitative research data analysis as follows.

#### 4. Results

The main findings of this research are presented as three main themes. These three themes are important components in developing a regional election model that is safe from COVID-19 to ensure the safety of people (*Khifdzul Nafs*). The safety aspect indeed was the major issue raised by a number of religious leaders in opposing the holding of regional elections at this time. The first theme concerns the regional election policy framework and the mitigation of COVID-19 through countermeasures. This policy framework consists of changes and/or adjustments to the Law, General Election Commission Regulations, four General Election Commission Decrees, and six General Election Commission Circular Letters. The second theme deals with holding Covid-19-free elections. It includes facts or evidence which show that simultaneous regional elections in Indonesia did not create new COVID-19 clusters. Thirdly, the data suggest that voter participation in simultaneous regional elections increased by 79.13% compared to the last election.

##### 4.1. The regulation scenario of simultaneous regional election: democracy and Covid-19 mitigation

The regional election is not a one-day event when people cast their vote. It consists of several pre- and post-election stages which include recapitulation of the voting results prior to making an election declaration. In Indonesia, the 2020 regional election had three major stages. The first stage was for candidate registration and campaigning running from 26 September to 5 December 2020. It was followed with a pre-election to a suspension of campaigning and media coverage from 06 to 7 December 2020 and the election day on 09 December. The vote count is then recapitulated from 09 to 15 December. Therefore, given there are a number of stages, concomitant planning for mitigation measures is also needed.

The number of voters in the Special Province of Yogyakarta Indonesia for this regional election was 2 160 932 people. Considering that the regional election regulations limit the numbers of voters at a polling place to 500 voters, the Yogyakarta General Elections Commission (*Komisi Pemilihan Umum* – KPU) had provided 6110 polling stations. Each polling station consisted of seven officials of the Polling Station Organizing Group (*Kelompok Penyelenggara Pemungutan Suara* - KPPS) so that the total number of KPPS officials in Yogyakarta was 42 770 people. With the number of voters and KPPS officials, the potential for large crowds was very high. Therefore, the Indonesian government had designed a regulatory framework to scenario that can anticipate and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 at the polling stations. In this case, the KPU Chairperson of the Special Region of Yogyakarta stated:

“Regional elections in Indonesia have been running for the last five years, so it is not new for us. During the COVID-19 pandemic, general elections were also held by other countries such as Singapore, Italy, Germany, South Korea, the United States and others. Therefore, if simultaneous regional elections are not carried out, the absence of regional heads could worsen the spread of COVID-19 itself. Why? It is because temporary replacement officials cannot make strategic policies regarding the pandemic. However, considering the current situation, the government is also preparing a different regulatory structure where the simultaneous regional election regulation will be consolidated with the Task Force for the Acceleration of COVID-19 handling.” (Interview with HK, 45 years old: Chairperson of the Yogyakarta Special Region Province (DIY) KPU on 16 December 2020.

HK’s statement stands in contrast to the views of UJ, one of the religious leaders who represents the largest socio-religious organization in Indonesia. UJ says:

“PBNU [*Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama* – PBNU (Nahdlatul Ulama Executive)] and Muhammadiyah propose that the 2020 regional elections be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a clear reason for this proposal. The number of positive cases of



COVID-19 continues to increase and reached 248 852 as at 21 September 2020. This figure is predicted to continue to soar until the end of the year 2020. UJ said that the PBNU and Muhammadiyah are talking about postponing the 2020 regional election on behalf of the people so that people do not become victims of the virus during the five-year electoral political contest”. (Nasution, 2014)

Concomitant with this discourse, Indonesia had made several changes and adjustments to the simultaneous regional election laws in consideration of the COVID-19 protocols, shown in Table 1. The column “Type of Regulation” contains the category of the regulation (Law, Regulation, Decree and Circular), the middle column (regarding regulations) contains the title and substance of each regulation, and the coding column contains the required changes and/or adjustments to these regulations in compliance with the COVID-19 protocols.

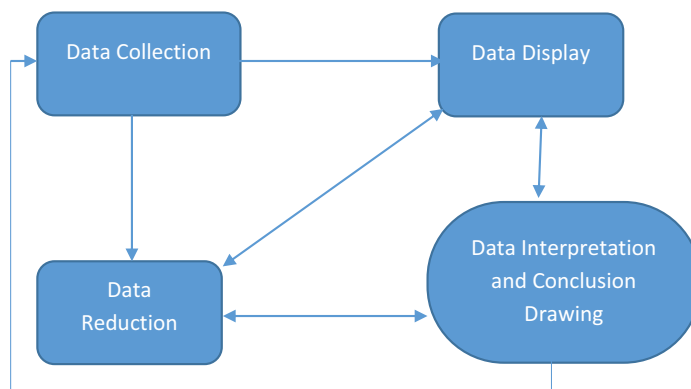
By passing multi-layered regulations for COVID-19 protocols at each stage of the elections as stated in Table 1, the Indonesian government was optimistic that it would be able to make the regional election Covid safe. The regulations cohere with the policy argument that the simultaneous regional elections during the COVID-19 pandemic prioritizes the safety of voters, but without sacrificing people’s constitutional rights.

#### 4.2. Covid-19 free simultaneous regional elections

The values within the narration of simultaneous regional elections in Indonesia were honesty, fairness, directness, freedom, and confidentiality as well as Covid safety. This narration was often given prominence by several pairs of candidates in their campaign, using slogans such as “Healthy Election, Strong Citizens”. In the COVID-19 emergency, candidate pairs were prohibited to gather in groups of more than 50 people to promote their vision and mission. Therefore, they could only campaign online and/or by going door to door. This was still possible to do because on average each pair of candidates had 200 volunteers/campaigners who could reach out to voters. The unavoidable consequence is that these regional heads’ candidates must ensure COVID-19 protocols are followed by their volunteers before going door to door to voters’ homes. In fact, all the measures taken by the teams must be communicated to the COVID-19 Response Acceleration Task Force. In this regard, the Deputy Chairman of the General Election Commission of the Special Region of Yogyakarta WW stated:

“They go door to door to residents’ houses having implemented strict health protocols: first carrying out rapid tests, wearing masks, washing hands in front of the residents’ houses, keeping their distance and not being allowed to enter the house, but only on the porch (open space outside the house). If there is a village in a red zone or a patient is confirmed positive, then all teams are not allowed to enter the village. ”. (Interview with WN, 43 years old, Secretary of the DIY KPU on Wednesday, 16 December 2020 at the DIY KPU Office)

Figure 1. Data analysis.



Technically, the implementation of the COVID-19 protocol at all stages of the regional elections is regulated in the General Election Commission Circular Letter No. 19 of 2020 concerning the Work System in the New Normal Order. This circular letter was issued by the General Election Commission, Provincial Election Commission/Aceh Independent Election Commission, General Election Commission of District/City and Independent Election Commission.

**Table 1. Regional election regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic**

No	Type of Regulation	Regional election regulations during the pandemic	Coding: adjustments with health protocols
1	Constitution	Law No.6 of 2020 concerning the Stipulation of Laws No.2 of 2020 concerning the Third Amendment to Law No.1 of 2015 concerning the Stipulation of Government Regulations in place of Law No.1 of 2014 concerning the Election of Governors, Regents and Mayors into Law.	Regional election regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic
2	General Election Commission regulation	General Election Commission Regulation No. 13 of 2020 concerning the Second Amendment to the General Election Commission Regulation No. 6 of 2020 concerning the Implementation of the Election for the Governor and Deputy Governor, the Regent and Deputy Regent and/or Mayor and Deputy Mayor.	Obligation to apply health protocols for election organizers, limiting mass gathering in the campaign to a maximum of 50 people, and updating data door to door.
3	Decree	General election commission of Yogyakarta Decree No. 20/HK.03.2-Kpt/34/Sek-Prov/Vi/ 2020 concerning the Formation of a COVID-19 Management Team within the General Election Commission of the Special Region of Yogyakarta in 2020.	The officials have to be 30 to 50 years old and be physically and mentally healthy.
		General Election Commission of the Republic of Indonesia Decree Number 515/ PP.09.1-Kpt/07/KPU/X/2020 concerning the Need for and Technical Specifications for Health Protocol Equipment for Corona Virus Disease (Covid-19) Prevention and Control in the Implementation of Elections for Governors and Deputy Governors, Regents and Deputy Regents, and/or Mayors and Deputy Mayors Follow Up in Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) non-geological Disaster Conditions.	The KPPS committee is obliged to do a rapid test 14 days before the simultaneous regional elections, use a mask/face shield, gloves, wash hands, sanitize, maintain social distancing.
		The General Election Commission of the Republic of Indonesia Decree Number 179/pl.02-kpt/01/KPU/III/2020 concerning the postponement of the election stages for governors and deputy governors, regents and deputy regents, and/or mayors and deputy mayors in 2020 to prevent the spread of Covid-19.	The simultaneous regional elections in Indonesia were postponed for three months because COVID-19 could not be controlled.
		The General Election Commission of the Republic of Indonesia Decree Number 179/pl.02-kpt/01/kpu/III/2020 concerning the postponement of the election stages for governors and deputy governors, regents and deputy regents, and/or mayors and deputy mayors in 2020 to prevent the spread of Covid-19.	The KPPS committee is obliged to do a rapid test 14 days before the simultaneous regional elections, use a mask/face shield, gloves, wash hands using sanitizer, maintain social distancing.

(Continued)

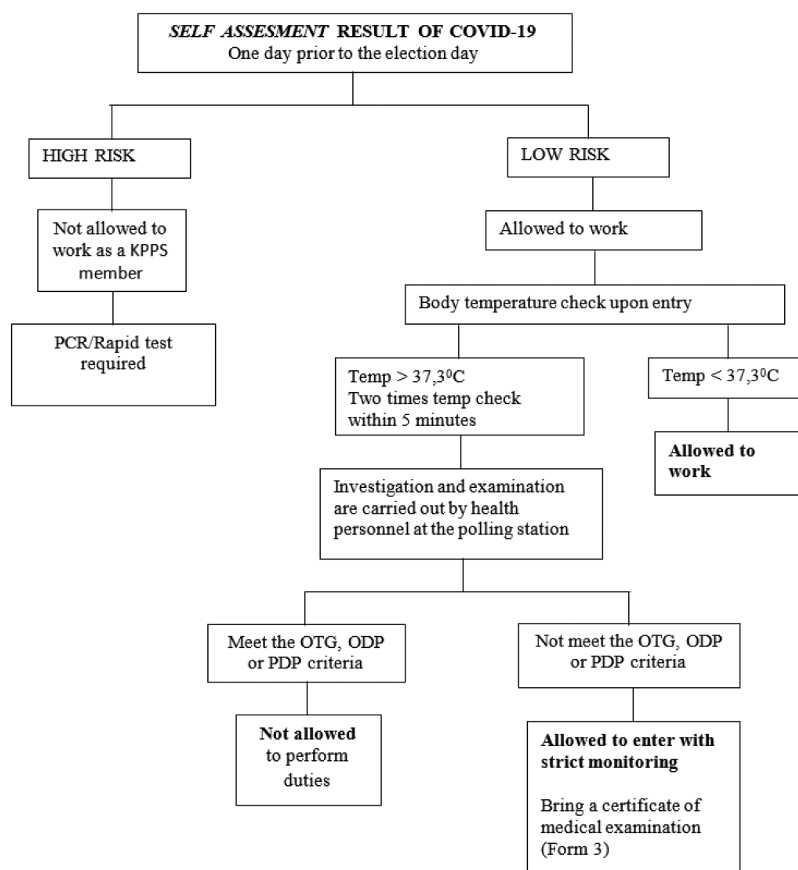
**Table 1. (Continued)**

No	Type of Regulation	Regional election regulations during the pandemic	Coding: adjustments with health protocols
4	KPU circular letters	Circular letter No. 31 of 2020 concerning the Implementation of Plenary Meetings and Decision-making in Plenary Meetings which are Held Online as Efforts to Prevent and Control the Spread of Covid-19.	Changes in decision-making mechanisms in closed plenary meetings and online routine plenary meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic
		Circular Letter No. 19 of 2020 concerning the Work System in the New Normal Order in the General Election Commission, Provincial Election Commission/Aceh Independent Election Commission, General Election Commission/Regency/Independent Commission of City Election.	Adjustment of the work system for KPU officials, with the Work from the Home mechanism.
		Circular letter No. 12 of 2020 concerning Restrictions on Travel Activities Outside the Region and/or Homecoming and/or Leave Activities in Efforts to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 in the KPU, Provincial KPU/Aceh KPU, and Regency/District KPU/Independent Election Commission ( <i>Komisi Independen Pemilihan – KIP</i> ).	Limitation of Travel Activities Outside the area and or homecoming activities in an effort to prevent COVID-19 transmission.
		Circular letter No. 11 of 2020 concerning the time Extension to Prevent the Transmission of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) in the KPU, Provincial KPU/KIP Aceh, and Regency/City KPU/KIP.	Time extension to prevent the transmission of Covid-19.
		Circular letter number 20 of 2020 concerning the Elections for Governors and Deputy Governors, Regents and Deputy Regents, and/or Mayors and Deputy Mayors in 2020 in Non-geological disaster Conditions.	Procedures for implementing the COVID-19 Protocol at Polling Stations.
		KPU Circular Letter No. 8 of 2020 concerning the Implementation of KPU Decree Number 179/PL.02-Kpt/01/KPU/III/2020 concerning Postponement of Election Stages for Governors and Deputy Governors, Regents and Deputy Regents, and/or Mayors and Deputy Mayors in 2020 to Prevent the Spread of Covid-19.	The postponement of simultaneous regional elections for 3 months to prevent the spread of Covid-19

First, a self-assessment of the risk of COVID-19 infection was carried out one day prior to the regional elections. The results of the risk assessment can be divided into two, namely a location with high risk and low risk. The KPPS officials facing high risk were required to do a Rapid Test. If the results are reactive, an additional swab PCR test is needed. If the result is positive for Covid-19, they must self-quarantine. As for KPPS officials facing low risk, a body temperature check was required. The highest body temperature allowed was 37.3 °C. If the body temperature was less than 37.3 °C then the KPPS could continue to carry out its duties. However, if the body temperature was over 37.3 °C then an investigation and examination would be carried out by health officials at the polling station. The results of the investigation can be divided into two. The first category was for those who met the criteria as a positive case of exposure to Covid-19, both the criteria for People without Symptoms (*Orang Tanpa Gejala – OTG*), People Under Observation (*Orang Dalam Pemantauan – ODP*) and Patients under Supervision (*Pasien Dalam Pengawasan – PDP*). The committees who met the criteria as OTG, ODP or PDP were prohibited from performing their KPPS tasks and had to be replaced, while those who

**Figure 2. Flowchart of the implementation of the COVID-19 protocol in the simultaneous regional elections in Indonesia.**

(Source: KPU Circular Letter No 19 of 2020)



did not meet these criteria could continue to perform their KPPS duties. In summary, the application of the COVID-19 Protocol is regulated in the flow chart as shown in Figure 1 below.

The implementation of strict health protocols in this regional election, as shown Figure 2 above, proved to be very effective in reducing the spread of COVID-19 in Indonesia. Online news reports from Kompas.com state that from 13 000 testings of KPSS officials, there were only seven who were reactive. The Minister of Internal Affairs, Muhammad Tito Karnavian in an interview with Metro TV stated that:

We did daily monitoring for seventy-one days of the campaign period. The results show that the red zone turned to an orange zone. People participating in this regional election are much more disciplined than those who enjoy holidays. In addition, we aim to change people’s mindset about the regional elections. The regional elections aren’t just the government’s political agenda. We want people to think that election can provide momentum for people to suppress the spread of Covid-19”. (Muhammad Tito Karnavian Minister of Internal Affairs, Source MetroTV)

Based on the Minister’s statement above, the Indonesian government and the KPU worked to ensure that all election organizers stayed healthy and safe from Covid-19.

**4.3. People’s participation in the simultaneous regional election**

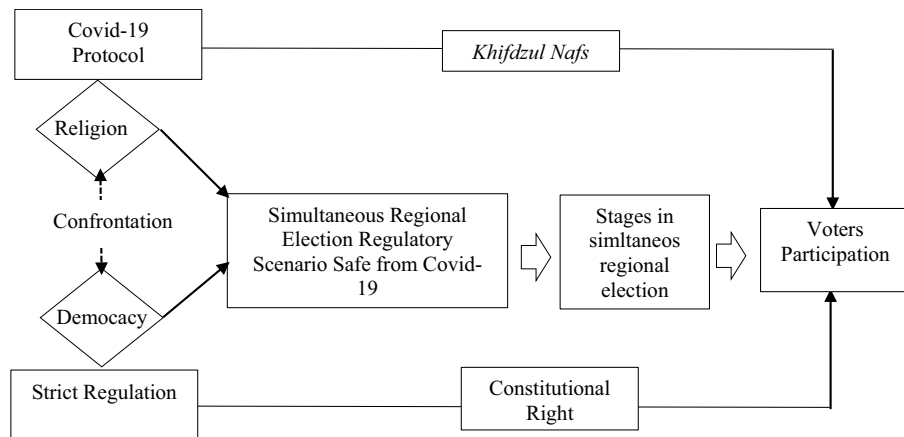
A survey conducted by the research team showed that the level of compliance of voters and the entire voting committee with the COVID-19 protocol reached 89%. They wore masks, washed their hands before entering the voting booth, had their temperature checked, wore plastic gloves

**Figure 3. The implementation of COVID-19 protocols during elections.**

Source: <https://pilkada2020.kpu.go.id/>



**Figure 4. Covid-19 free model for simultaneous regional Election.**



prepared by the officials, and maintained a safe physical distance. There were no queues at each polling station because the invited voters on a scheduled basis so that no one came at the same time. The committee also provided a special booth away from the polling station for voters whose temperature was above 37.3 °C.

**5. Discussion**

Based on the three main findings, the Indonesian government prepared a very good regulatory framework to anticipate new cluster break out at each stage of the regional elections. The increase in the percentage of voter turnout in the 2020 simultaneous regional elections during the COVID-19 period shows that the theory of democracy as an ideal system of government (Nasution, 2014) is still relevant to Indonesia. Voter turnout shows that in a democratic system, people’s participation is at its core because it is a way to control state laws (Jaja et al., 2020).

The objections raised by some religious leaders were resolved with strict regulation and health protocols. Thus, simultaneous regional elections as an expression of the constitutional rights of the people were able to be upheld, without neglecting the safety of voters which is consonant with *Khifdzul Nafs* (Latterell et al., 2016; Nuryana et al., 2020). Figure 3 is a model for simultaneous regional elections that is safe from Covid-19, thereby encouraging increased voter participation. Meanwhile, Figure 4 is a Covid-19 free model for simultaneous regional Election

The findings of this study differ from findings on the same topic for other countries. The differences are clearly seen in at least three aspects. First, the concept of simultaneous regional elections in Indonesia is different from the concept of general elections in many other countries. Elections in Indonesia upholds the values of honesty, fairness, directness, openness, freedom, confidentiality and staying safe from COVID-19 (Prasetyadi, 2020; Winarno et al., 2018). Religion in Indonesia plays an important role and it helped to protect the safety of the voters (Catterall, 2020; Suyadi et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the concept of general elections in other countries tends to prioritize the upholding of democracy and the political system of government without substantial religious control. Secondly, the adjustments made in terms of the regulations in Indonesia (Yusmaliana et al., 2020) were made in response to the COVID-19 emergency, while the regulations in many countries, notably South Korea had been prepared in advance. South Korea, which had been greatly affected by the MERS outbreak in 2015, created new government policies to manage the outbreak, and by 2020, the policy was activated by the leadership to contain COVID-19 (Winarno et al., 2018). Both Indonesia and South Korea have implemented their regulations very strictly, so that the regional elections in both countries were COVID-19 safe. Third, the level of voter participation in DIY was higher (79.13%) than voter participation in several other countries ranging between 66–73.8% (Rachmawati, 2020). In fact, during the simultaneous regional elections in Indonesia, there were no reports of a new COVID-19 cluster. This condition is different from the general elections in several mega cities and countries, especially New York, Italy, France and Germany where elections was a factor in the increase of COVID-19 transmissions and the number of Covid-related deaths (Norrlöf, 2020).

The difference between regional elections in Indonesia and the election in other countries is due to three factors. First, religion plays a significant role in Indonesia especially the role which religious organizations such as Muhammadiyah played in mobilizing its assets to tackle COVID-19 (Febriana, 2020). Even though many socio-religious organizations, including Muhammadiyah itself, opposed the simultaneous implementation of regional elections because of the risk of the spread of COVID-19 during the election stages. Second, the implementation of the Pentahelix strategy that is the collaboration between academics, the socio-religious community, business, the government (the COVID-19 task force) and media (Nurulwahida et al., 2020), in implementing the COVID-19 protocol throughout election process has proven to be extremely important (Fitriati, 2020). Third, the election management was successful in anticipating the risk of COVID-19 transmission. For instance, in the campaign stage for regional head candidate gatherings were limited to a maximum of 50 people. At the voter verification stage, KPPS officials implemented health protocols when coming to voters' houses, including not entering homes and maintaining a safe distance. Age restrictions also applied for KPPS officials (20 to 50 years). In addition, polling stations were in an open place and scheduling was also used to avoid crowds forming. Fourth, many voters encouraged others to come to polling stations which increased participation rates.

The implementation of simultaneous regional elections in Indonesia considered the importance of conducting a safe election in the conduct of regional elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the end, democracy and the people's sovereignty prevailed (Nemţoi, 2014). In fact, several Indonesian legal experts recommended that simultaneous regional elections were carried out using a representative system (Yunaldi, 2020). This recommendation, however, only receives 4.7% support. The processes for conducting the regional elections, however, were successfully adapted with the inclusion of strict COVID-19 protocols meaning that religious leaders' concerns about voter safety were not realized.



## 6. Conclusion

The simultaneous regional election was conducted successfully with several adjustments to procedures made to mitigate against COVID-19 transmission. These adaptations were able to assuage the concerns of several religious leaders over safety concerns. The success of the regional elections can be epitomized in three regencies namely Sleman, Bantul and Gunungkidul of the Special Region of Yogyakarta. The constitutional right of the people to vote in this election became a paramount consideration which had to be upheld despite concerns over safety voiced by several religious leaders. In this case, the Indonesian government created a regulatory framework which incorporated health protocols to make sure that the election was Covid safe. The conduct of simultaneous regional election with its adapted procedures was met with an increase in voter participation by up to 79.13%. The findings concerning this election model support such as a model being used for simultaneous regional elections in the COVID-19 pandemic one which led to increased voter participation. This model affirms that the democratic steps taken by the government to continue implementing direct elections simultaneously during the COVID-19 pandemic are a step forward in the development of democracy.

The scope of this study, which only covers three regencies in one province, is a limitation of this study. The simultaneous regional elections in Indonesia were held in 270 regions (9 provinces, 37 cities and 224 districts). Thus, this study only represents the regional elections in one province, not across Indonesia as a whole. Based on these limitations, this study recommends conducting survey research in all constituencies especially within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research can also be used to create policies in conducting simultaneous regional elections nationwide in 2027 involving all regions in Indonesia.

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