

## FROM EMERGENCY TO REGULATION: AGENDA SETTING FOR INDONESIA'S COVID-19 POLICY THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVES OF GOVERNMENTALITY AND THE POLICY CYCLE

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the Indonesian government to immediately take various policy measures in response to the health crisis, which had become a more complex problem. However, this policy agenda-setting process is not simply viewed as a simple response to public health issues, but also as a result of broader governmental rationality. This study aims to analyze how agenda-setting in COVID-19 policy in Indonesia occurs by combining the policy cycle perspective and Michael Foucault's concept of governmentality. The method chosen is descriptive qualitative research with a literature review approach, utilizing government policy documents, academic sources, and ongoing previous studies. The analysis focuses on the formation of the policy agenda, starting with the establishment of the COVID-19 Task Force and continuing through the implementation process involving various regulations for handling the pandemic throughout 2020. The research findings indicate that the pandemic was successfully elevated to the government agenda as a public issue requiring a rapid response, but also necessitating policy development that proceeded not solely based on public health logic. The government has classified COVID-19 as a national emergency and a non-natural disaster, allowing for expanded state intervention through various social, economic, and security regulatory instruments. This study concludes that the establishment of the COVID-19 policy agenda in Indonesia is the result of the interaction between the need to address the health crisis and the rationality of power exercised through population management mechanisms. Incorporating a governmentality perspective into policy cycle analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between power, knowledge, and the public policymaking process.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, agenda setting, policy cycle, governmentality, public policy, Indonesia.

### A. INTRODUCTION

In less than a month, the Indonesian government issued four major regulations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These included the establishment of the COVID-19 Task Force through Presidential Decree No. 7 of 2020 on March 13, the declaration of a

Public Health Emergency through Presidential Decree No. 11, and the implementation of Large-Scale Social Restrictions through Government Regulation No. 21 on March 31, leading to the declaration of COVID-19 as a National Disaster through Presidential Decree No. 12 on April 13, 2020. The speed of these regulatory productions reflects the state's agility in responding to the global crisis. However, behind this seemingly responsive legislative rhythm, more fundamental questions lurk regarding the rationality of addressing the health crisis, which is being regulated through the logic of disaster and national security, rather than solely through public health authorities.

Numerous studies in Indonesia addressing the COVID-19 response have focused on the government's slow response, weak coordination between the central and regional governments, inconsistent public communication, or problems with policy implementation on the ground. These studies often frame the pandemic as a matter of administrative capacity and bureaucratic effectiveness. However, there are still few studies that examine the rationale behind the policy agenda construction process itself. It could be argued that existing studies are insufficient to explain how the pandemic was produced as a specific policy object and why circulating issues were prioritized over issues within the government's agenda-setting process. However, we generally overlook more fundamental questions: why the pandemic response agenda was constructed in a certain way, and what power mechanisms were at work in that construction process.

Policy studies using the policy cycle framework tend to treat agenda setting as a rational, technical process in which health problems are identified, prioritized, and translated into policy instruments. This approach ignores the reality that this translation process is never neutral and is always shaped by specific rationalities that determine who has the right to define the problem. Subroto (2011) used the policy cycle framework to map the complexity of the policymaking process in Indonesia using a systems dynamics approach, treating each stage involved, from agenda setting to evaluation, as a causal process that can be quantitatively modeled. In the context of the pandemic, Siahaan and Adrian (2021) examined public perceptions of the COVID-19 vaccination policy, while Sitorus and Rahmadi (2021) analyzed the desynchronization of government policies and weak inter-agency communication in handling the pandemic. These studies provide important insights into what happens in the policy process: how the stages unfold, where coordination fails, and why implementation does not go as planned. However, overall, these studies stop at the level of procedural description and evaluation, failing to address the more fundamental question of why the pandemic response agenda is constructed in a particular way. Sitorus and Rahmadi (2021), for example, noted that since the beginning of the pandemic, the Indonesian government tended to prioritize economic considerations over public health. However, this finding was not further developed to question the rationality of the power that shaped these choices. An assumption acknowledged by Subroto (2011), citing Kay (2006), fails to embrace the real complexity of the policymaking process.

This article fills this gap by integrating a governmentality perspective into the policy cycle analysis to unpack the logic of power at work behind the agenda-setting of Indonesian COVID-19 policy. It also discusses the fact that agenda-setting does not operate solely through public health rationality in fulfilling COVID-19 policy in Indonesia. Placing the

pandemic within the framework of disaster and national security is a choice that systematically shifts policy authority from medical to military power, when the situation urgently requires producing policy subjects who are managed not merely as patients but as populations in need of discipline and economic recovery. Using the policy cycle as a descriptive map and governmentality as a critical lens, this article traces how the agenda-setting process took place from the formation of the Task Force in March 2020 to the optimization of the national vaccination program in October 2020, revealing how the rationality of power operates behind each stage.

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Governmentality Theory**

Governmentality refers to the ways in which governments exercise power through various techniques, rationalities, and institutions to regulate the behavior of individuals and populations. Foucault argues that modern governance extends beyond direct coercion and instead operates through mechanisms that encourage individuals to regulate themselves according to governmental objectives (Foucault, 1991). Governmentality emphasizes the relationship between knowledge and power, where data, expertise, and administrative practices become tools for managing society (Foucault, 2007). In the context of public health crises, governments employ regulations, surveillance systems, and behavioral interventions to maintain social order and reduce risks. Therefore, governmentality provides a useful framework for understanding how the Indonesian government framed COVID-19 as a national emergency and implemented regulatory measures to manage the population during the pandemic (Foucault, 2008). Indicators of Governmentality

- Population management
- Behavioral regulation
- Surveillance and monitoring mechanisms
- Use of expert knowledge and data
- State intervention through policies and regulations

### **Policy Cycle Theory**

Policy Cycle Theory explains public policy as a sequence of interconnected stages through which public problems are transformed into governmental actions. The model generally consists of agenda setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, implementation, evaluation, and termination (Subroto, 2012). Agenda setting is considered a critical stage because it determines which issues receive governmental attention and policy responses. The theory assumes that public issues compete for limited governmental resources and decision-making capacity. Consequently, Policy Cycle Theory is useful for analyzing how COVID-19 evolved from a public health concern into a policy priority that prompted the Indonesian government to issue various emergency regulations and interventions (Subroto, 2012). Indicators of Policy Cycle Theory

- Agenda setting
- Policy formulation
- Policy adoption
- Policy implementation

- Policy evaluation

### **Agenda-Setting Theory**

Agenda-Setting Theory explains how certain issues gain prominence and become priorities within governmental decision-making processes. The theory argues that public problems do not automatically receive policy attention; instead, they must be framed, communicated, and recognized as requiring governmental action (Şķestere & Darĝis, 2022). Agenda setting involves interactions among political actors, institutions, media, experts, and the public in defining the urgency of a particular issue (Silvia et al., 2024). The process influences how policymakers perceive problems and what policy alternatives are considered appropriate. In the context of COVID-19, Agenda-Setting Theory helps explain how the pandemic was constructed as a national emergency and subsequently placed at the center of Indonesia's policy agenda, leading to rapid regulatory responses and broad governmental intervention (Şķestere & Darĝis, 2022). Indicators of Agenda Setting

- Problem recognition
- Issue framing
- Political attention
- Policy prioritization
- Stakeholder influence

### **C. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a library research method. The data used are government policy documents related to the handling of COVID-19 in Indonesia, such as Presidential Decree Number 7 of 2020 concerning the Task Force for the Acceleration of COVID-19 Handling, Presidential Decree Number 11 of 2020 concerning the Determination of a Public Health Emergency, Government Regulation Number 21 of 2020 concerning Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB), and Presidential Decree Number 12 of 2020 concerning the Determination of the Non-Natural Disaster of the Spread of COVID-19 as a National Disaster. Furthermore, the research utilizes scientific articles and academic literature discussing public policy, agenda setting, and the concept of governmentality.

The analysis is conducted by combining the policy cycle framework, particularly the agenda setting stage, with Michel Foucault's governmentality perspective. The policy cycle is used to map the process of forming the COVID-19 policy agenda, while governmentality is used to identify the rationality of power underlying the construction of problems and government policy choices. The data were analyzed interpretively by exploring how the pandemic was constructed as a policy object and how power relations influenced government policy priorities. To increase the validity of the analysis, this study employed source triangulation techniques through comparisons between government policy documents, academic journal articles, and theoretical literature on the policy cycle and governmentality. This approach enabled researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the agenda-setting process of COVID-19 policy in Indonesia and the rationale behind its formation (Subroto, 2012); Datta et al., 2011).

## **D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Agenda Setting in the Initial COVID-19 Response**

According to Agustino (2020), the government's slow response in the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic was due to a low sense of crisis, which led to delays in strategic decision-making. The agenda-setting phase of COVID-19 policy in Indonesia was highly responsive, as the government issued several regulations that formed the basis for handling the pandemic between March and April 2020. From a policy cycle perspective, this situation demonstrates that COVID-19 successfully entered the government's agenda as a public issue requiring a swift response. However, what is interesting is not only the alertness and rapid response, but also how the pandemic was defined and framed by the government. Rather than positioning it as a public health issue, the COVID-19 pandemic was constructed as a national emergency and a non-natural disaster. This shift in framing broadened the scope for state intervention by allowing for the involvement of actors from several sectors beyond the health sector, including security forces and disaster management institutions. Research (Susanti & Supartono, 2023) shows that the handling of COVID-19 in Indonesia has been marked by policy inconsistencies between the central and regional governments and weak inter-agency coordination. This situation suggests that the policy agenda was not formed through a fully coordinated process, and that this process also took place in a negotiation arena rife with conflicting interests among policy actors.

### **Governmentality and the Production of Policy Rationality**

Foucault (1991) explained that governmentality is a set of techniques and rationalities used by the state to direct the behavior of individuals and populations. In a pandemic, these mechanisms are evident through various mobility restriction policies, mandatory mask use, contact tracing, and vaccination programs aimed at shaping public behavior in line with government goals. In other words, COVID-19 policies function not only as public health instruments but also as governmental technologies that enable the state to manage risks and maintain social order. This perspective is reinforced by Foucault's (2008) concept of biopolitics, which positions the population as the primary object of state intervention. In the context of COVID-19, data on daily cases, death rates, vaccination rates, and public mobility form the basis for government decision-making. The production and use of this data demonstrate how knowledge and power are intertwined in the process of population management during the pandemic.

From this perspective, policies not only function to solve problems but also play a role in shaping how society understands and responds to them. Research (Satispi & Murod, 2023) explains that various pandemic management policies demonstrate that the government focuses not only on health issues but also on protecting economic stability and the continuity of social activities. In the context of COVID-19, the government has constructed a narrative that the pandemic poses a threat to social, economic, and national security stability. This narrative serves as the basis for legitimizing various forms of population regulation, from restrictions on public mobility and monitoring of community activities to national vaccination programs.

The Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) policy provides a state instrument for regulating citizen behavior in the name of protecting public health. At the same time,

economic policies, such as Government Regulation in Lieu of Law (Perppu) No. 1 of 2020, demonstrate that pandemic management is directed not only at disease control but also at stabilizing the national economy. Thus, the government treats the public not merely as patients in need of healthcare, but as a population whose productivity and stability must be maintained.

### **The Dominance of Economic Considerations in the Policy Agenda**

Judging from the COVID-19 pandemic that has hit Indonesia, various studies have shown that the government often balances and even prioritizes economic considerations over health approaches. This finding aligns with research (Nuralia & Andrianto, 2021), which shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has attempted to maintain national economic growth through various fiscal instruments and economic recovery policies. Therefore, COVID-19 management policies in Indonesia cannot be understood as merely gratuitous, but as a public health response and a strategy to maintain the sustainability of the economic system and government stability. From a governmentality perspective, (Duminggu, 2022) suggests that pandemic regulations can be understood as instruments that enable the state to manage the population through mechanisms of supervision, control, and shaping public behavior. Some of the decisions chosen and implemented are not merely technical choices, but rather a reflection of government rationality, striving to maintain economic sustainability while controlling the social risks posed by the pandemic. Therefore, the COVID-19 agenda setting in Indonesia can be understood as a political process involving the growth of new scholarship, the formation of critical narratives, and the use of various instruments of power to control the population. Policy agendas do not emerge neutrally, but are shaped by specific rationalities that determine how problems are understood and solutions are developed.

### **E. CONCLUSION**

Based on research conducted using the perspectives of the policy cycle and governmentality, the results show that the determination of the COVID-19 policy agenda in Indonesia is not solely based on public health aspects, but also on other factors such as government logic aimed at maintaining social, political, and economic stability. Within the context of the policy cycle, the COVID-19 pandemic has succeeded in becoming a primary government concern as a public issue requiring a swift response and action, as evidenced by the series of regulations issued quickly in early 2020. However, from a governmentality perspective, this process appears to have not been without the impact of the pandemic, which was then positioned as a national emergency requiring broader measures to control the population.

The declaration of COVID-19 as a public health emergency and a national disaster, along with the implementation of various social restriction policies, reflects how the state utilizes regulatory instruments to regulate public behavior while ensuring the continuity of economic activity. In this context, the public is not simply considered as individuals who need to be protected from a health perspective, but also as a population that must be managed, monitored, and directed to maintain national stability. Therefore, the formation of the COVID-19 policy agenda in Indonesia can be seen as the result of an interaction

between the need to address the health crisis and the logic of power that functions through various modes of governance.

This study demonstrates that incorporating a governmentality perspective into policy cycle analysis can provide a better understanding of how public problems are constructed, who holds authority in the policy-making process, and how power plays a role in setting the policy agenda. The results also demonstrate that public policy studies cannot simply focus on the stages of the policy process but also need to explore the logic and power relations that shape that process.

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