

Article

Government officials first, then opposition: The spreaders of political and religious conspiracy theories during Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia

Sri Yunanto^{1,*}, Angel Damayanti²¹ Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta, Banten 15419, Indonesia² Universitas Kristen Indonesia, East Jakarta 13630, Indonesia* **Corresponding author:** Sri Yunanto, sri.yunanto@umj.ac.id

CITATION

Yunanto S, Damayanti A. (2024). Government officials first, then opposition: The spreaders of political and religious conspiracy theories during Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia. *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*. 8(10): 8060.
<https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd.v8i10.8060>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 18 July 2024

Accepted: 23 August 2024

Available online: 18 September 2024

COPYRIGHT



Copyright © 2024 by author(s). *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development* is published by EnPress Publisher, LLC. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract: Conspiracy theories during Covid-19 pandemic spread worldwide, including in Indonesia. What political and religious factors explain their spread in Indonesia with particular reference to the DKI Jakarta province, its surrounding municipalities, and West Sumatera province? This study aimed to answer the questions. It employed a qualitative approach with multi-data collection methods, including those from media, documents, and interviews. The spread of Conspiracy theories benefited from the democratic system that promotes the freedom of information in using social media. First, the government officials initially spread conspiracy theories to satisfy people's anxiety about the obscured Pandemic. However, they resulted in the government's ambiguous, controversial, and reckless policies leading to people's distrust of the government. Jokowi-Makruf Amien, political opponents capitalized on the government's poor policies to spread conspiracy theories which partly discredited the Jokowi-Amien administration. Both government officials and the opposition capitalized on politics and religious teaching or supra-natural pretexts to posit their conspiracy theories.

Keywords: conspiracy theory; Indonesia; Jakarta; politics; religion

1. Introduction

Since 2019, people in countries globally have suffered from the Covid-19 outbreak. They not only suffered from the lethal virus but also fake news, which the World Health Organization (WHO) calls an "infodemic." It was an epidemic of fake news, misinformation, and conspiracy theories with an impact as dangerous as the virus (Kompas.com, 2020). People in the countries tended to capitalize on social and political pretexts and fatalistic and extreme interpretations of religious teaching to propagate conspiracy theories. The conspiracy theorists disagree on who and what was to blame for the Pandemics. Some even materialized their conspiratorial beliefs into intimidation and violence, such as attacking vaccination centers, politicians, and journalists. (Buttler and Knights, 2023).

Indonesia is not an exception. Several national and local surveys on the issues were conducted in areas such as the DKI Jakarta province and its municipalities, including Bogor Region, Bogor City, Bekasi Region, Bekasi City, Depok City, Tangerang City, Tangerang Region, and South Tangerang City, West Sumatera, and Bali Provinces. Interestingly, DKI Jakarta province, its surrounding municipalities, and Padang of Western Sumatera Province are homes of the majority government opposition and Muslims that follow the fatalistic and extreme religious streams. Very often, they capitalized on Islamic symbols for social and political purposes. The results showed that many people believed that Covid-19 was the product of a global

conspiracy. The conspiratorial theorists in Indonesia spread hoaxes and conspiratorial messages about Covid-19 on Instagram, Twitter, Instant Chat, Facebook, and WhatsApp (Ayojakarta.com, 2020; Thejakartapost.com, 2021). At the outset of the outbreak, Indonesian government officials were involved in spreading conspiracy theories. They downplayed the Pandemic and denied the presence of the virus in the country. They spread false narratives and fatalistic religious interpretations to calm people's panic. Unfortunately, they resulted in distrust as the people trusted more on the various kinds of media that broadcasted facts on the transmission of Covid-19 in several countries. The government's poor responses and other massive information stimulated widespread conspiracy throughout the country, resulting in information bias on Covid-19 among Indonesians (Nadzir, 2020; Yustisia and Asharianto, 2020). Consequently, those believing in conspiracy theories exposed their unconstructive attitude in handling the Covid-19 pandemic, such as rejection of vaccination and the health protocol to prevent virus transmissions. Such health measures include wearing masks, leaving homes with unurgent agendas, social distancing, washing hands with soap and sanitizer, and vaccination (Kompas.id, 2021).

Studies on the nexus between political and religious aspects of conspiracy theories during Covid-19 globally, as was experienced by Indonesia, are voluminous. They found that poor policies and strategies adopted by their government officials in their countries, international figures, and big countries are the source of conspiracy theories. In Eastern European and Arab countries, public officials were blamed for spreading conspiracy theories through official channels. Because of this, people in these countries consider conspiracy theories to be legitimate knowledge. In Germany, conspiracy believers blamed and alleged the government authorities as the creators of conspiracy theories to destroy democracy. In Korea, poor trust in the government, social networking services, alignment with minority parties, blame attribution, and the quality of Covid-19 information and health and emotion contributed to the growing conspiracy theories during Covid-19 (Kim and Sunhee, 2021). The belief in conspiracy theories in the UK has resulted in lower support and compliance with government policies and strategies to deal with the spread of Covid-19 and further contributed to the increasing transmission (Peitz et al., 2021). Other studies pointed out the leading figures and big countries as the Covid-19 creators. In France, people pointed out George Soros, Israelis, and the US Government as the master minds of Covid-19 to achieve their political and ideological goals. At the same time, conspiracy theorists in other countries suspected Bill Gates of being the creator of Covid-19 and told a lie about them.

In Brazil and Spain, conspiracy believers suspected Chinese and Russian communist political plots had engineered the viruses (Buttler and Knights, 2023; Miller, 2020). In addition to political factors, handling the Covid-19 pandemic was spoiled by conservative, fatalistic, and extreme religious interpretations. The white Evangelists in the US strongly supported President Trump's rhetoric, which downplayed the severe threat of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Christian Nationalists rejected the scientific-based Covid-19 policies to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic (Suwarno, 2022). Violent Islamist extremist groups facilitated and multiplied the transmission of Covid-19. However, the extent of their relationships varied individually (Basith 2021; Rottweiler, 2022). In some countries like India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Brunei

Darussalam, Tablighi Jamaat disseminated fatalistic Islamic arguments which triggered conspiracy theories resulting in the acceleration of the Covid-19 transmission in their big gatherings (Burhani, 2020).

The issues on the nexus between conspiracy theory and political and religious variables in Indonesia were understudied. This work is of importance despite the withering Covid-19 pandemic. We argue that conspiracy theories will always emerge in Indonesian democracy and color social and political dynamics. The study aimed to explore the political and religious factors contributing to the spreading conspiracy theories in Indonesia, particularly in the selected regions. It sought to answer how the government and the opposition used political and religious conspiracies) to handle the Covid-19 pandemic and how that influenced Indonesia's health Covid-19 crisis.

2. Materials and methods

Indonesian regulations do not recognize conspiracy theories. However, they are included in the hoax concept and are used interchangeably. Hoaxes broadly refer to false information, content, or deliberate news manipulation to attract people with misunderstanding. Conspiracy theories link and combine hoax contents to challenge personal authority, politics, or even the world system with malicious intent (Fahmi, 2020; Gramedia.com, 2022; Malau, 2022). From a political perspective, conspiracy theories are defined as genuine fear with no evident truths and illegal or secret poor attitudes that imperil others by partly aiming to promote particular political interests or even taking over political power. They become inherent components in authoritarian and democratic political systems and are inevitable by-products of public distrust of the government, extremism, populism, or far-right activism. In a democratic state that promotes freedom of expression, conspiracy theories are parts of the public sphere or deliberation to change people's opinions of the government or specific incidences. Their spreading indicates the beginning of gaining public trust or producing another way (Giry and Tika, 2020).

In these circumstances, elites of government officials capitalize on conspiracy theories by spreading propaganda or agitation to control and direct public opinion toward incidences and truths while terming their opposition as the public enemy (Marmura, 2014). On the other hand, conspiracy theories are also created and disseminated by the government's opposition aiming at delegitimizing its power or even overthrowing it. Both government and opposition capitalize on ideology, party, social class, or gender to justify their arguments. For instance, they misinterpret or twist supernatural or religious texts, some with fundamentalist perspectives. They do this to meet the basic needs of their followers, such as the need to know and own private property (Giry and Tika, 2020; Lowicky et al. 2022). This article will focus on how government officials and oppositions capitalized on political pretexts and fatalistic religious interpretations to justify their conspiratorial propaganda.

This research used a qualitative approach with multi-data collections and follow the analysis steps comprising of data collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion (Miles and Huberman, 1992). In the first stage, we collected the data from various resources, including media news and social media enterprises. We collected media news mainly from online resources such as Kompas.com (2020),

Beritasatu.com (2015), Tempo.com (2020). We then deepened and snowballed the collected data from media news with interviews with social media activists, including Ismail Fahmi and Rustika Herlambang, to find more insights into the spread of conspiracy theories in social media. To get government perspectives on the spread of conspiracy theories, we interviewed Antonius Malau, an official from the Ministry of Communication and Informatics, and to get insights from Islamic clerics, we interviewed Azrul Tanjung from the Indonesian Ulema Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia/MUI). Finally, we interviewed Prof. Ehwil Daniel from Andalas University, Padang West Sumatera, to better understand the spread of political and religious conspiracy theories in Padang, West Sumatera.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. The spread of conspiracy theories (CTs) in Indonesia

During Covid-19 pandemic CTs grew rampantly in Indonesia. It negatively impacted people’s disobedience to health protocol, increasing virus transmission (Khalil et. al., 2021). Several survey institutions conducted several surveys on the spreading of CTs during the outbreak in 2021 at the national and local levels, including; the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) (Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat), Jakpat, The Center for Innovative and Governance survey (CIGO) and Spektrum Politika. The scope and results of their surveys are as following **Table 1**.

Table 1. Surveys on the spreading conspiracy theories (CTs) during Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia.

No	Survey Institutions	Scope	Results
1	Jakpats	National	More than half of the 390 surveyed respondents expressed their unwillingness to vaccinate, and about 85% needed more detailed information on Covid-19 before deciding to accept vaccination (Permatasari et al., 2022).
2	Center for Study of Islam and Society (PPIM)	National	20%–31% of Indonesian students believed in conspiracy theories. Some believe that Indonesian hospitals treat non-Covid patients as Covid-19 patients or ‘covidization’ (Aditya, 2021).
3	The Center for Innovative and Governance Survey (CIGO)	DKI Jakarta province and its surrounding municipalities	22.5%–24% of people from lower education and economic income in DKI Jakarta and its surrounding municipalities believed that Covid-19 is a by-product of global conspiracy (Arifianto, 2020).
4	Spektrum Politika	Padang, West Sumatera Province	39.9% of respondents believed that the pandemic resulted from a global conspiracy created by big countries (CNN Indonesia, 2020). More than half of the 390 surveyed respondents expressed their unwillingness to vaccinate, and about 85% needed more detailed information on Covid-19 before deciding to accept vaccination (Permatasari et al., 2022).
5	The Ministry of Communication and Informatics of the Republic of Indonesia	Padang, West Sumatera Province	Two thousand one hundred forty-eight hoaxes news spread amongst society through social media during the beginning of the 10th month of the Covid-19 outbreak (Malau, 2022).

According to Bubandt, CTs spread in Indonesia, duplicated and modified with conspiracy theories in other parts of the world (Bubandt in Butler and Knight, 2023). They were rooted in low trust in conventional and authoritative media, government policies intertwined with collusion, the absence of political consensus, low level of education. Under-surface political dynamic determines the visible real political game

(Bubandt, 2023; Khalil et. al., 2021). However, our findings reveal that hoax and conspiratorial content hailed from purely international, local, and the modification of international content to meet local interests. The conspiracy theories contain religious, secular, social, political, and economic messages.

3.2. The spread of government-created conspiracy theories in Indonesia

The government-created conspiracy theories in Indonesia are a combination or system of false information, content, and manipulative news that government officials spread to influence people for specific political objectives. At the outset of Covid-19 pandemic, Indonesian government officials, including the President, vice president, and their ministers, exhibited partial and controversial rhetoric in response to the Pandemic (Kompas.com, 2020). The government officials should have conveyed valid and reliable information and were counterproductive to Covid-19 prevention efforts. For example, the Minister of Health, Terawan Agus Putranto, rejected Harvard's university prediction that Covid-19 had hit Indonesia, considering it an insult. He asserted that the outbreak is a self-limiting disease that would cure itself and is not even more dangerous than Difteri or influenza.

Moreover, the viruses would not survive in Indonesia with high humidity, meaning they would not infect Indonesians. Terawan also convinced people that traditional herbal would cure Covid-19 and blamed the Public for wearing the mask. Other senior ministers even covered their ignorance of the outbreak with jokes. For instance, they stated that the virus is reluctant to come to Indonesia because of the complicated permits, equating it with wife and eating traditional cuisine and beverage would cure Covid-19 (Cnbcindonesia.com, 2020; Suara.com, 2020; Tempo.com, 2020).

The rhetoric indicates that the officials demonstrated untrue facts about the peril of Covid-19 despite the evidence. As McVeigh and Mac Lachlan argue, the official's response to the outbreak and Terawan's denial of Harvard's prediction demonstrated confirmation or self-bias. The Public also accused the government of being slow to respond to the outbreak and failing as it is a clique of capitalism laden with personal interests controlling its performance (Tempo.com, 2021). Government officials have created pseudo-conspiracy theories because they have developed untrue facts or hid the information to influence people or opposition groups to follow their desired goals, such as leading daily lives and refraining from panic (Girry and Tika, 2020; Marmura, 2014).

The government's creation of conspiratorial rhetoric was expectedly to influence the Public to trust and support its misguided policies to deal with the pandemics at the outset of the outbreak, as outlined below:

- 1) While several countries in the world adopted lockdown strategies and closed down the infected areas from people's movement and prioritized the prevention of Covid-19 transmission, the Indonesia countries adopted Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar/PSPB (Big Scale of Social Restriction) and still allow people to move, with the restriction of big local- gathering Finally, Jokowi admitted that the PSBB strategy failed as the number of infected people increased (Kompas.com, 2020; Tempo.com, 2021).

- 2) With the PSPB strategies in mind, the Indonesian government opened the country to promote tourism by providing tickets and hotel discounts and hiring media influencers to market tourism. The government also launched economic and social programs to help people survive, though, they did not result in effective outcome (Kompas.com, 2020; Nadzir, 2020; Tempo.com, 2021).
- 3) The distribution management of the allocation of pre-employment program was problematic as it did not match the labor market demands (Nadzir, 2020).
- 4) The spreading suspicion that two Jokowi's ministers, Luhut B Panjaitan and Erick Tohir, allegedly took personal advantages in the business of Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) and Anti-gent tests (Kompas.com, 2022; Nadzir, 2020).
- 5) The lack of transparency in appointing the supplier of the goods, freedom of opinion, and the identification of the virus to the Chinese community (Abhipraya, et al., 2020; Nadzir, 2020).

Government officials' rhetoric received massive critiques from diverse communities for its ambiguous policies, such as vaccination programs and social restrictions. In the meantime, the number of Indonesians infected by Covid-19, including medical officers, was ranked among 13 countries globally. However, as the positivity rate continued to peak, the number of vaccinated people and testing, tracing, and treatment programs were still low. Moreover, the spread of pseudo-conspiracy theories and the government's poor response to the Covid-19 outbreak in the early days increased public distrust of the government, triggering the spread of conspiracies in society (Fahmi, 2020; Nadzir, 2020)

3.3. The government opposition's propaganda in spreading the conspiracy theories

The majority government opposition from political parties and society capitalized on the media to magnify their distrust and oppositional stance and create the real conspiracy theory with aims to criticize, delegitimize and possibly topple their presidency (Giry and Tika, 2020). The spread of Conspiracy theory was evident in DKI Jakarta province, its surrounding municipalities, and West Sumatera provinces, as figured out in the following two graphs in which people and parties of Jokowi-Makruf opposition dominated the political landscape. As later described in the table, Jakarta, its surrounding Municipalities, and Padang, the capital city of West Sumatera Province, are homes to the majority of Prabowo-Sandi followers and political parties that supported them. They opposed Jokowi-Makruf who triumphed in the 2019 election. Although Prabowo and Sandiaga Uno later joined Jokowi-Makruf Amien consecutively as the Minister of Defense and Tourism and Creative Economy, the polarization of their followers continued.

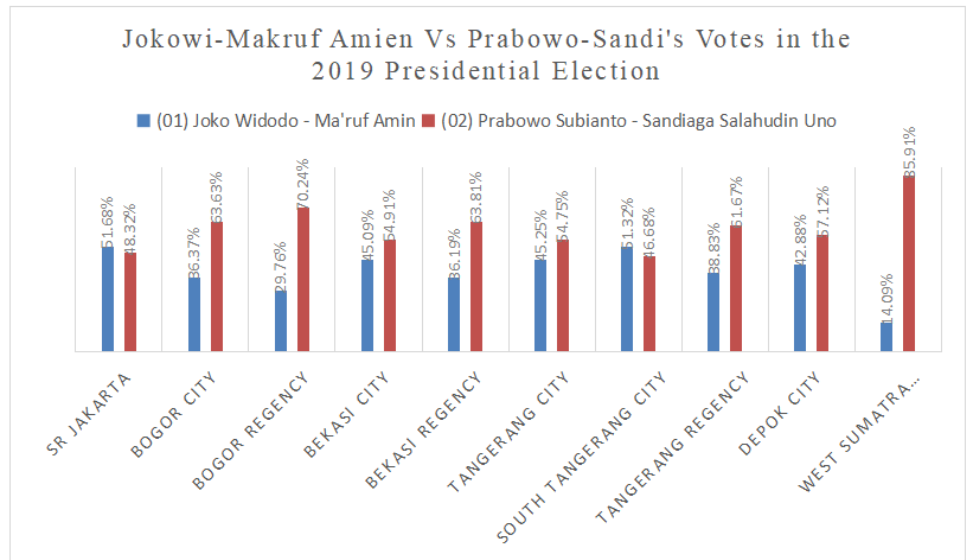


Figure 1. Jokowi-Makruf Amien vs. Prabowo-Sandi's votes in the 2019 presidential election.

Figure 1 shows that Jokowi-Makruf's opposition or Prabowo Sandi supporters dominated votes in most municipalities surrounding DKI–Jakarta, including Bogor City, Bogor region, Bekasi City, Tangerang regions, and Depok City and West Sumatera province. On the other hand, Jokowi-Makruf slightly triumphed in DKI Jakarta province and South Tangerang municipality.

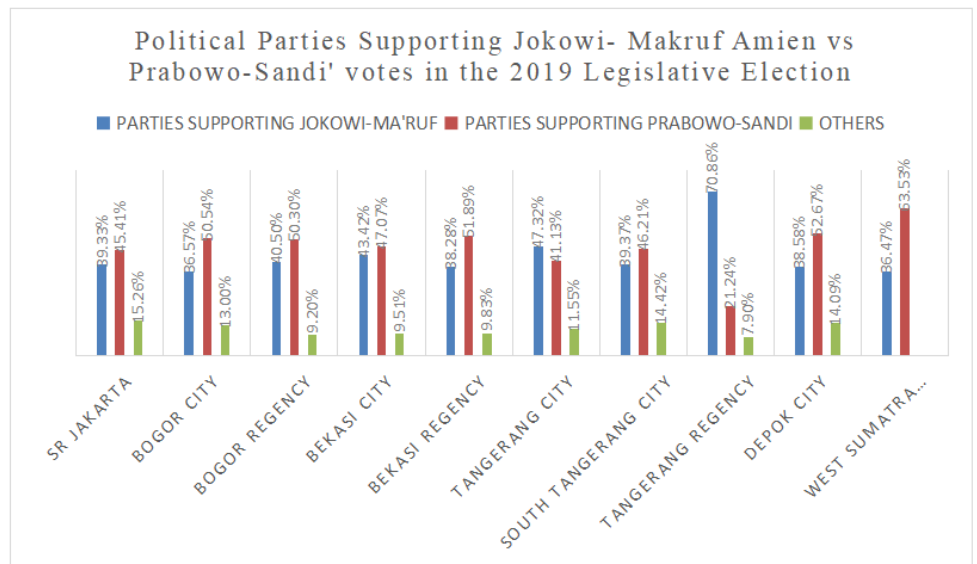


Figure 2. Political parties supporting Jokowi-Makruf Amien vs. Prabowo-Sandi's votes in the 2019 legislative election.

Likewise, **Figure 2** shows that in the 2019 election, political parties of Jokowi-Makruf Amien oppositions dominated votes in DKI Jakarta province and its surrounding municipalities and West Sumatera Province. On the other hand, the political parties of Jokowi-Makruf Amien only triumphed slightly in Tangerang city municipality and a lot in Tangerang. West Sumatra people dislike Jokowi, nor do they like Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan/PDIP (the Indonesian Democratic Party

of Struggle (PDIP) (Daniel, 2022). In the 2019 presidential election, Jokowi-Makruf Amien received support from political parties which passed the Electoral Threshold, including; Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan/ PDIP (the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), Nasdem Party, Golkar Party, Partai Persatuan Pembangunan/PPP (the United Development Party), and Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa/PKB (The National Awakening Party). On the other hand, Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno received support from political parties which passed Electoral Threshold, including Gerindra Party, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera/PKS (The Justice and Prosperity Party), Partai Amanat Nasional/PAN (the National Mandate Party), and Partai Demokrat/PD (the Democratic Party).

The spreading of conspiracies in the selected regions was partly motivated by the widespread government-officials conspiracy at the outbreak's outset resulting in the government's ambiguous, controversial, and reckless policies. Both government and opposition created conspiracy narratives benefit from the freedom of expression and the freedom of media that people have struggled with since the reform time. The freedom of media manifests the freedom of belief, expression, and the public sphere (Girry and Tika, 2020). The freedom explains why social media has gradually become the primary important communication medium that replaces traditional ones (Girry and Tika, 2020). The freedom of expression manifested the freedom of communication using diverse social media, mainly Twitter and hangout forums in traditional cafes. As a result, health issues became one of the most critical disinformation during the Covid-19 outbreak.

The conspiracy theories that hailed domestic resources, to be discussed in the following, are those spread by government officials and opposition. They capitalized on religious adherence and cultural values to posit their rejection of the presence of Covid-19 in Indonesia. For the example, the Minister of Health Terawan and the Vice President, Makruf Amien, stated that Ulema's Qunut Nazilah prayers had invited God Almighty's help to expel Covid-19 from Indonesia, Covid-19 is Allah's troops deployed to people on earth to awaken them to the path of truth, and believing in God almighty for protecting Indonesia from the transmission of Covid-19. The fact is the other way (Cnbcindonesia.com, 2020). While conspiracy theories modified from international sources are those disseminated by hard-line clerics, such as the spreading Covid-19 as Muslim depopulation, Bill Gates and his Pharmacy companies produced the viruses. Some of them twisted the theories to attack the Jokowi-Makruf Amin government.

Since the outset of the Covid-19 outbreak, the political parties and social opposition groups in the province and municipalities have capitalized on social media to spread the distrust of government and religious pretexts to engineer real conspiracy theories. The politicians from oppositional parties, such as from PKS, mainly criticized Jokowi- Makruf Amien policies in tackling Covid-9. They argued that the Jokowi and Makruf Amin governments were slow in addressing the Covid-19 recovery, resulting in a high positivity rate and problematic vaccine distribution. Social and religious leaders of the Jokowi and Makruf Amien's opposition spread conspiracy messages by twisting religious interpretations to posit their critiques of the government administration. The aims were delegitimizing Jokowi-Makruf's policies and opposing, attacking, or even overthrowing them from their power (Daniel, 2022;

Fahmi, 2022; Nadzir, 2020). The controversial conspiratorial contents resume the polarization between President Jokowi's loyal followers-Anis, Baswedan as DKI Jakarta Governor, the debate over lockdown versus PSBB, and the demand for the Minister of Health's resignation (Gustomy, 2020; Herlambang, 2022; Suara.com, 2021).

3.4. The capitalization of fatalistic and adversarial interpretation of Islamic teachings

Another critical explanatory variable in the spreading conspiracy in Indonesia, as Lowiskey et al. (2022) posit, is the capitalization of religious and supernatural arguments to support their conspiratorial messages, which means that high-ranking government officials and their oppositional figures have used fatalistic, religious interpretations to support their arguments, such as overthrowing Covid-19 pandemic and its solution to the supra-natural sphere. Government officials, including Vice President Makruf Amien, the coordinating Minister of Human Resource Development, and the Minister of Health, disseminated confirmation bias or self-bias by collecting and spreading religious beliefs resembling myths to strengthen their belief, hid the fact or elements of the truth. President Jokowi openly confessed that the government prefers not to disclose all information on Covid-19 to the public in order not to cause panic (Nadzir, 2020). The Minister of Health Terawan and the Vice President, Makruf Amien, stated that Ulema's Qunut Nazilah prayers had invited God Almighty's help to expel Covid-19 from Indonesia. Such prayers are part of realizing the first pillar of Pancasila's ideology, which stipulates the belief in God (Liputan6.com, 2020; Merdeka, 2020; Suara.com ,2021; Tempo.com, 2020). Similarly, the coordinating minister of Human Resource Development and Culture, Muhajir Effendy, urged people to use spiritual, in addition to a rational approach, to deal with Covid-19 Pandemic. He considered Covid-19 is Allah's troops deployed to people on earth to awaken them to the path of truth. He thanked God almighty for protecting Indonesia from the transmission of Covid-19 (Cnbcindonesia.com, 2020). Amien, Terawan, and Effendy's statements were parts of the government-created conspiracy manifested in capitalizing religious values to haphazardly answer people's anxiety.

Like the high-ranking government official's capitalization of fatalistic religious teachings, hard-line religious and political leaders of government opposition in the DKI Jakarta province, its surrounding municipalities, and West Sumatra province also exploited religious texts to justify their conspiratorial agendas. This type of cleric disseminates their conspiratorial locally and internationally modified propaganda content as follows:

- 1) The pandemic is a punishment from God to Muslim enemies that plotted to ruin Islam. A striking example of this cleric is Ustad Abdul Shomad (UAS). He considered Covid-19 as a punishment from God for attacking the China government, which had enforced repression of Uighur Muslims (Suara.com, 2021).
- 2) The Covid-19 pandemic is a sign of the Day of Judgment from God to punish those who commit adultery and free sex, particularly those spreading on social media. Such a pandemic has never happened before, and it is difficult to find a

medical cure (Upeks.co.id, 2020).

- 3) The 40 days and 40 h of lockdown become a simulation of Dajjal (the Messiah). Approaching the day of Judgement, people will forcefully experience lockdown with technological devices such as cell phones, television, and electricity. Nevertheless, people are still fortunate with the current lockdown because such electronic devices are still available (Muslimobsession.com, 2020).
- 4) Social distancing, closing mosques, and praying at home policies to prevent Covid-19 transmission, will cut off Muslim brotherhood and weaken Islamic movements centered in mosques. In addition, the priority of vaccination programs to clerics would kill them, and restricting Muslims from having activities outside the home will weaken Muslim business (Liputan6.com, 2020).
- 5) The increased daily need impacted by the outbreak will impoverish Muslims, while the government officials who work from home enjoy a full salary (Liputan6.com, 2020).

The second type constitutes those disappointed with Jokowi's administration combined with religious pretexts to attack the government. Clerics of this type disseminated domestically fabricated conspiratorial contents such as speculating that greed and anti-Islam motives controlled the presidency. They pointed out that the President could not accommodate Muslim aspiration to only have the halal vaccine in the current standard time when its availability is abundant. Another example of this typical cleric was Muhammad Najih, a well-known cleric who modified international content to religious issues to attack Jokowi's government. The cleric twisted the depopulation theory to depopulate Muslims and the alleged involvement of the Jokowi administration in the evil vaccination program (Fahmi, 2022; Hops.id, 2021; Taufik, 2021; Tanjung, 2020). MUI easily influenced the first type of clerics to refrain from conspiracy theories and support the government and people's efforts to overcome the pandemic. However, the council could not influence the second group (Tanjung, 2022).

The conspiracy theories are mostly fabricated, produced and reproduced in DKI Jakarta province and its surrounding municipalities which become hotbed of hardliners and Puritan intolerant groups, and centers for radical vandalistic Islamic movements (Ayoindonesia.com, 2017; Beritasatu.com, 2015; Kompas.com, 2018). The cities experienced many protests and street rallies by hardliners, Islamic groups, and university students. The hardliner groups capitalized on religious or Islamic symbols to oppose Jokowi. West Sumatran also adhere fatalistic interpretation of Islamic texts in looking at the Covid-19 pandemic. West Sumatra province is home to 5.6 million, or 97% of Muslims that follow a strict or Puritan religious stream (Katadata.co.id, 2021). The Puritan Islamic leaders and traditional authorities have agreed to incorporate religious teachings into their traditions, embodied in the principle of tradition based on religious law hailed from Islamic holy books. Tradition and religion matter in the lives of ordinary West Sumatran Muslims, making traditional authorities and religious leaders the most influential figures in society (Daniel, 2020; Noorbani, 2014). West Sumatran people believing in conspiracy theories ignore government warnings on complying with health protocols to prevent Covid-19 transmission. Specifically, 40% disobeyed the health protocols, practiced the hanging out culture in traditional coffee shops, and ignored wearing masks and social distancing. The cafes have become an effective medium for transmitting and

spreading conspiracy theories (Daniel, 2020). As a result, it has significantly contributed to the high virus transmission in the province.

Using traditional and social media channels, political elites of the government opposition massively spread conspiratorial narratives to provoke respected religious, traditional leaders, and the lay people to delegitimize Jokowi's policies in dealing with the Covid-19 outbreak (Daniel, 2020; Kompas.id, 2020). Most West Sumatra province conspiracy theories' nature and content were local products. For instance, religious leaders considered the government's policy of imposing health protocols of praying, studying, and working from home to prevent the transmission of the virus as jeopardizing Islam and weakening Muslims. Obeying the health protocols that distance them from practicing religious adherence means abusing religion. Therefore, they urged their followers to prioritize practicing religious teachings over obeying health protocols. The religious leaders stated that only God Almighty disposes of human health, including those possibly affected by Covid-19 (Daniel, 2022).

As discussed previously, the widespread belief of conspiracy had detrimental effects on handling the Covid-19 outbreak in Indonesia, particularly on compliance with health protocols and vaccination programs in the study area. It has also disrupted government efforts in handling the pandemic and imperiled people to stigmatize hospitals, medical staff, and the pandemic survivors. Furthermore, people stigmatize the ongoing recovery process, resulting in distrust of medical staff, poor compliance with the halal status of the vaccination programs, and non-compliance to health protocols (Khalil et. al., 2021; Tanjung, 2022). The survey by Lapor Covid-19 in October 2020 found that 69% of respondents expressed hesitance and refusal of vaccination programs (Aa.com.tr, 2021; Tanjung, 2022). Due to the widespread infodemic of conspiracy theories, Indonesia is among the five worst countries whose people consume false medicines, use the wrong disinfectants, and finally lose their lives. In addition, the infodemic has resulted in information bias on Covid-19 among Indonesians (Ganto.co, 2021; Nadzir, 2020; Yustisia and Asharianto, 2020).

4. Conclusion

Since December 2019, the Covid-19 outbreak has had adverse effects on countries globally, including Indonesia, fueling the spread of hoaxes and conspiracy theories. This study aimed to explore the political and religious explanation of the spreading conspiracy theories in Indonesia with particular reference to DKI Jakarta province, its surrounding municipalities, and West Sumatra province. Like several other countries, this study found the nexus between political and religious interpretations of the Covid-19 pandemic and conspiracy theories. The conspiracy theories were created by high-ranking government officials and government opposition. At the outset of the Pandemic, government officials spread False information, content, and manipulative news. They also referred to Covid-19 recovery in-jokes that were counterproductive to the recovery.

The officials fabricated untrue facts or information bias, rejected facts. The aims are to refrain the public from panic and to influence the public to trust its misguided policies to respond to the Covid-19 outbreak at the initial stages. The government's conspiracy theories and misguided government policies partly motivated the hostile

attitude of the Jokowi opposition, consisting of political, social, and religious leaders who spread conspiracy messages to attack and criticize the Jokowi administration. This study also found that government officials and the opposition capitalized on religious adherence for political motives. The government opposition then capitalized on the government's poor handling of Covid-19 and conspiratorial content to criticize the government. The spread of CT in Indonesia has resulted in poor government handling of Covid-19, such as the low people's trust in the government and the low number of testing and tracing leading to the peaking positivity rate, which was ranked among 13 countries in the world.

The spreading of conspiracy theories capitalized on the freedom of expression offered by the democratization in this country, which take the form of using diverse media, such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The findings confirmed Girry and Tika's theory (2020) that conspiracies serve as an inherent public sphere in a democratic state. They are also similar to other studies in several countries in the world. This study enriches the debate on the nexus between politics, religion, and conspiracy theories in the world as has been studied previously and synthesized previous surveys on the spread of CTs during Covid-19 in Indonesia and their political and religious explanation. Theoretically, the study synthesized Girry and Tika's theory (2020) on the distrust of government as the precursor of conspiracy theory, Mamura's theory (2014) on the objective of government's conspiracy to control public opinion, the political mission of opposition's conspiracy theory to delegitimize or overthrow the government, and Lowicky et al.'s (2022) theory on capitalizing on religious adherence for political missions.

Additionally, the study's findings also distinctively theorize two sources of conspiratorial messages: purely domestic and the modification of international conspiracy contents. Finally, the study also mapped out two characteristics of hard-liner-clerics of the conspiracy theories spreader. First, those capitalized on exclusive, fatalistic, and adversarial Islamic interpretations to posit their conspiratorial theories. The second are those who capitalized on the religious interpretation that produced conspiracy theories that attack and criticize the Jokowi-Makruf Amien administration, which has disappointed them.

Author contribution: Conceptualization, analysis, methodology and supervision, SY; finding resources, writing draft preparation, review and editing, AD. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgments: We express our gratitude to Ismail Fahmi, Ehwil Daniel, Rustika Herlambang, Antonius Malau and Azrul Tanjung for providing us time to conduct interviews and discussions.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Aa.com.tr. (2021). Hoax Pollution Amidst the Corona Vaccination Movement (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.aa.com.tr/id/berita-analisis/polusi-hoaks-di-tengah-gerakan-vaksinasi-korona/2122211> (accessed on 2 June 2023).

- Abhipraya, F. A., Pahlevi, M. E. T., & Amrurobbi, A. A. (2020). The Democratic Decline in Indonesia Under Covid-19 Pandemic. *JWP (Jurnal Wacana Politik)*, 5(2), 99. <https://doi.org/10.24198/jwp.v5i1.28581>
- Ayojakarta.com. (2020). In 10 months, there were 2,020 hoaxes circulating in the community (Indonesian). Available online: <https://ntmcpolri.info/sampai-oktober-tercatat-2-020-konten-hoax-ada-di-media-sosial/> (accessed on 12 June 2023).
- Banten.Suara.com. (2021). Alluding to Ustaz Abdul Somad's Lawas Statement, Netizens Accuse UAS of being an enemy of Allah (Indonesian)? Available online: <https://banten.suara.com/read/2021/07/13/103957/singgung-pernyataan-lawas-ustaz-abdul-somad-netizen-tuding-uas-musuh-allah> (accessed on 22 June 2023).
- Basit, A. (2021). Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism: Similarities, Differences, and the Implications. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 13(3), 9.
- Beritasatu.com. (2015). Bogor is the most intolerant city according to Setara. *Beritasatu* (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.beritasatu.com/news/322494/bogor-kota-paling-intoleran-versi-setara> (accessed on 25 June 2023).
- Bisnis.tempo.co. (2021). Economist Criticises Covid-19 Handling: President Jokowi Influenced by Power. *business* (Indonesian). Available online: <https://bisnis.tempo.co/read/1476765/ekonom-kritik-penanganan-covid-19-presiden-jokowi-dipengaruhi-kuasa-modal> (accessed on 29 June 2023).
- Bogor.ayoindonesia.com. (2017). Extreme groups in Bogor must be de-radicalised. *Bogor (Ayo Indonesia)* (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.ayobogor.com/umum/pr-31865653/kelompok-ekstrem-di-bogor-harus-dideradikalisasi> (accessed on 28 June 2023).
- Bubandt, N. (2023). Dis-Spiracy Theory: Why Corona Rhymes with Corruption in Indonesia. In: *Covid Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective*. Routledge.
- Burhani, A. N. (2020). Comparing Tablighi Jamaat and Muhammadiyah Responses to Covid-19. Available online: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_75.pdf (accessed on 13 June 2023).
- Buttler, M., & Peter, K. (2023). *Covid Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective*. Routledge.
- Cnbcindonesia.com. (2020a). No Corona Case Yet, Coordinating Minister for PMK: RI is Still Protected by God (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20200217130044-4-138357/belum-ada-kasus-corona-menko-pmk-ri-masih-dilindungi-tuhan> (accessed on 21 June 2023).
- Cnbcindonesia.com. (2020b). Prevent Corona ala RI Officials: Jamu, Wild Horse Milk, Kapau Rice (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20200312153157-4-144410/cegah-corona-ala-pejabat-ri-jamu-susu-kuda-liar-nasi-kapau> (accessed on 23 June 2023).
- Daniel, E. (2022). Interview. Interview with Daniel Ehwil.
- Databoks.katadata.co.id. (2021). 97.6% of West Sumatra's population is Muslim as of June 2021 (Indonesian). Available online: <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/datapublish/2021/09/20/sebanyak-976-penduduk-sumatera-barat-beragama-islam-pada-juni-2021> (accessed on 2 July 2023).
- Fahmi, I. (2021). Tren "Hoaks Vaksin Covid-19. Fahmi Ismail's Personal Twitter Account. Available online: <https://twitter.com/ismailfahmi/status/1355222293408956425> (accessed on 2 July 2023).
- Fahmi, I. (2022). Interview. Interview with Ismail Fahmi.
- Ganto.co. (2021). Infodemics as a Pandemic Catastrophe in Indonesia (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.ganto.co/berita/4410/infodemik-selaku-malapetaka-pandemi-di-indonesia.html> (accessed on 12 July 2023).
- Gatra.Com. (2021). PPIM Survey: 20%-31% of Students Believe Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.gatra.com/news-532942-nasional-survei-ppim-20-31-siswa-percaya-teori-konspirasi-covid-19.html> (accessed on 12 July 2023).
- Giry, J., & Tika, P. (2020). Conspiracy Theories in Political Science and Political Theories. In: *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. Routledge.
- Gramedia.com. (n.d). Definition of Hoax: History, Types, Examples, Causes and How to Avoid It. *Gramedia Blog* (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.gramedia.com/literasi/pengertian-hoaks/> (accessed on 22 July 2023).
- Gustomy, R. (2020). Pandemic to Infodemic: Political Polarization in Twitter Users' Covid-19 Discourse (Indonesian). *Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Pemerintahan*, 5(2), 193. <https://doi.org/10.14710/jiip.v5i2.8781>
- Herlambang, R. (2022). Interview. Interview with Rustika Herlambang.
- Hops.id. (2021). Najih Says Government Massacre Through Vaccines, Not Just any Kyai Apparently (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.hops.id/trending/pr-2942110761/gus-najih-bilang-pemerintah-pembantaian-massal-lewat-vaksin-bukan-kyai-sembarangan-ternyata> (accessed on 23 June 2023).

- Khalil, R. A., Apsari, N. C., & Krisnana, H. (2021). Behavior Against Health Protocols Influenced by Covid-19 Virus Conspiracy Theory Reviewed by Symbolic Interactionism Theory (Indonesian). *Jurnal Kolaborasi Resolusi Konflik*, 3(2), 168–178. <https://doi.org/10.24198/jkrk.v3i2.35150>
- Kim, S., & Kim, S. (2021). Searching for General Model of Conspiracy Theories and its Implication for Public Health Policy: Analysis of the Impacts of Political, Psychological, Structural Factors on Conspiracy Beliefs about the Covid-19 Pandemic. *International Journal for Environment Research and Public Health*, 18(1), 266. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18010266>
- Kominfo.go.id. (2020). Fact Check: Communist, Jewish, and Christian Conspiracy Hoax Utilizing Covid-19 to Destroy Islam (Indonesian). Available online: https://www.kominfo.go.id/content/detail/26472/hoaks-konspirasi-komunis-yahudi-dan-nasrani-manfaatkan-covid-19-untuk-menghancurkan-islam/0/laporan_isu_hoaks (accessed on 2 June 2023).
- Kompas.com. (2020). Here's Why People Believe in Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.kompas.com/sains/read/2020/04/20/180200923/ini-alasan-mengapa-orang-percaya-pada-teori-konspirasi-virus-corona?page=all> (accessed on 12 June 2023).
- Kompas.id. (2020). More than a third of people in West Sumatera believe Covid-19 is a global conspiracy (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.kompas.id/baca/nusantara/2020/10/05/lebih-sepertiga-masyarakat-sumbar-percaya-covid-19-konspirasi-global> (accessed on 2 June 2023).
- Kompas.id. (2021). Observing Vaccination Resistance in West Sumatra (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.kompas.id/baca/riset/2021/03/01/mencermati-resistensi-vaksinasi-di-sumatera-barat> (accessed on 2 June 2023).
- Liputan6.com. (2020). Ma'ruf Amin: Thanks to Kiai and Qunut Prayers, Corona Moves Away from Indonesia (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4190703/maruf-amin-berkat-doa-kiai-dan-qunut-corona-menyingkir-dari-indonesia> (accessed on 22 June 2023).
- Łowicki, P., Marchlewska, M., Molenda, Z., et al. (2021). Does religion predict coronavirus conspiracy beliefs? The centrality of religiosity, religious fundamentalism, and Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 187, 111413. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.111413>
- Malau, A. (2022). Interview. *Pflegezeitschrift*, 75(9), 18–20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41906-022-1909-1>
- Marmura, S. M. E. (2014). Likely and Unlikely Stories: Conspiracy Theories in an Age of Propaganda. *International Journal of Communication*, (8), 2377-2395.
- Megapolitan.kompas.com. (2018). The Issue of Radicalism in Jakarta Mosques that Emanated from the Meeting at the Palace (Indonesian). Available online: <https://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2018/06/07/08324081/isu-radikalisme-di-masjid-jakarta-yang-berembus-dari-pertemuan-di-istana> (accessed on 2 June 2023).
- Megapolitan.kompas.com. (2021). Luhut and Erick Thohir reported to police over PCR business, considered collusion and nepotism (Indonesian). Available online: <https://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2021/11/16/17285821/luhut-dan-erick-thohir-dilaporkan-ke-polisi-soal-bisnis-pcr-dianggap?page=all> (accessed on 2 June 2023).
- Merdeka.com. (2020). Before there was a positive patient, the government underestimated the threat of Corona Virus (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/sebelum-ada-pasien-positif-pemerintah-dinilai-remehkan-ancaman-virus-corona.html> (accessed on 6 June 2023).
- Miles, M. A., & Huberman, A. (1992). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Method*. In: *Analisis Data Kualitatif: Buku Sumber tentang Metode–metode Baru*. Jakarta: Universitas Indonesia Press.
- Miller, J. M. (2020). Psychological, Political, and Situational Factors Combine to Boost Covid-19 Conspiracy Theory Beliefs. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, (53), 327-334. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000842392000058X>
- Muslimobsession.com. (2020). Lockdown; Dukhon Simulation in the Era of Dajjal (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.muslimobsession.com/lockdown-simulasi-dukhon-di-era-dajjal/> (accessed on 23 June 2023).
- Nadzir, I. (2020). Conspiracy Theories and Modern Disjuncture Amidst the Spread of Covid-19 In Indonesia. *Masyarakat Indonesia Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial Indonesia*, 46(2), 160-162.
- Nasional.tempo.co. (2021). Criticism for Jokowi in Handling the Pandemic, Playing with Terms to Lack of Plans. *Tempo* (Indonesian). Available online: <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1428508/kritik-untuk-jokowi-dalam-tangani-pandemi-bermain-istilah-sampai-minim-rencana> (accessed on 12 June 2023).
- Nasional.kompas.com. (2020). 6 Months of Covid-19 Flashback: Controversial Statements by Officials about Corona Virus (Indonesian). Available online: <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/09/02/09285111/kilas-balik-6-bulan-covid-19-pernyataan-kontroversial-pejabat-soal-virus?page=all> (accessed on 23 June 2023).

- National.tempo.co. (2020). Getting Memes from Luhut, Mahfud Md: Corona Like Wife (Indonesian). Available online: <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1346404/dapat-meme-dari-luhut-mahfud-md-corona-seperti-istri> (accessed on 23 June 2023).
- Noorbani, M. A. (2014). Development of religious sects/ideas in West Sumatra (Indonesian). *Jurnal Multikultural & Multireligius*, 13(1), 174.
- Peitz, L., Lalot, F., Douglas, K., et al. (2021). Covid-19 conspiracy theories and compliance with governmental restrictions: The mediating roles of anger, anxiety, and hope. *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*, 15, 183449092110466. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1834490921104666>
- Permatasari, D., Sari, Y. O., Ranofan, R., et al. (2022). Covid-19 Vaccine Acceptance in Padang City, West Sumatra, Indonesia. *Open Access Macedonian Journal of Medical Sciences*, 10(B), 1658–1662. <https://doi.org/10.3889/oamjms.2022.9844>
- Pikiran-rakyat.com. (2020). UI Research Results Reveal Citizens' Beliefs Related to Covid-19 Global Elite Conspiracy (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.pikiran-rakyat.com/pendidikan/pr-01932654/hasil-penelitian-ui-kuak-adanya-keyakinan-warga-terkait-covid-19-konspirasi-elite-global> (accessed on 22 June 2023).
- Rottweiler, B., & Gil, P. (2022). Conspiracy Beliefs and Violent Extremist Intentions: The Contingent Effects of Self-efficacy, Self-control and Law-related Morality. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 34(7).
- Salman, H., Mallhi, T. S., Tanveer, N., et al. (2022). Evaluation of Conspiracy Beliefs, Vaccine Hesitancy, and Willingness to Pay towards Covid-19 Vaccines in Six Countries from Asian and African Regions: A Large Multinational Analysis. *Vaccines*, 10(11),17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/vaccines10111866>
- Suara.com. (2020). Minister Airlangga's Joke: Convoluting License, Corona Virus Not Entered (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.suara.com/news/2020/02/15/141802/kelakar-menteri-airlangga-izinnnya-berbelit-belit-virus-corona-tak-masuk?page=all> (accessed on 5 June 2023).
- Suara.com. (2021). A Year of Covid-19, Here are 4 Controversial Statements from Terawan at the Start of the Pandemic (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.suara.com/health/2021/03/02/124820/setahun-covid-19-ini-4-pernyataan-kontroversial-terawan-di-awal-pandemi> (accessed on 4 June 2023).
- Suwarno, P. (2022). Science, Religion, and Politics: Issues and Challenges in Dealing with the Covid-19 Pandemic in the US and Indonesia. In: *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Democracy and Social Transformation, ICON-DEMOST 2021*. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.15-9-2021.2315593>
- Tanjung, A. (2022). Interview. *Pflegezeitschrift*, 75(5), 14–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41906-022-1260-6>
- Taufik, A. (2021). Indonesian Muslim Community Response to Covid-19 Outbreak (Indonesian). *Jurnal Bimas Islam* 14(2), 290. <https://jurnalbimasislam.kemenag.go.id/jbi/article/view/367>
- Tempo.com. (2020). Kaleidoscope 2020: 7 Ma'ruf Amin Moments, From Qunut Prayer to Taking Care of Vaccinations (Indonesian). Available online: <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1417039/kaleidoskop-2020-7-momen-maruf-amin-dari-doa-qunut-hingga-mengurus-vaksinasi> (accessed on 2 June 2023).
- Theconversation. (2020). Covid-19 is fueling conspiracy theories. This is a serious issue that could put lives at risk (Indonesian). Available online: <https://theconversation.com/covid-19-memicu-teori-teori-konspirasi-ini-masalah-serius-yang-bisa-bahayakan-nyawa-134451> (accessed on 2 June 2023).
- Thejakartapost.com. (2021). As Covid-19 engulfs the country, conspiracy theorists' rail against the 'globalist agenda'. Available online: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2021/07/09/as-covid-19-engulfs-the-country-conspiracy-theorists-rail-against-globalist-agenda.html> (accessed on 2 June 2023).
- Upeks.co.id. (2020). Corona is a Sign of God's Greatness. 5 Signs the End of Time is Near. Upeks (Indonesian). Available online: <https://upeks.co.id/2020/04/corona-tanda-kebesaran-allah5-tanda-akhir-zaman-sudah-dekat/> (accessed on 2 June 2023).
- Yustitia, S., & Asharianto, P. D. (2020). Misinformation and Disinformation of Covid-19 on social media in Indonesia. In: *Proceeding of LPPM UPN "VETERAN" Yogyakarta Conference Series 2020—Political and Social Science Series*. <https://doi.org/10.31098/pss.v1i1.180>