

Pandemic Democracy: Impact Regional Elections Held During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article describes the impact of regional head elections held during the COVID-19 pandemic. It starts with an explanation of why elections are essential in a democracy. The approach used in this research is a literature study used primarily to explain the country's ability to hold elections, about how the risks to democracy are in the presence of external threats such as that experienced by the world with the spread of COVID-19. This study states that the pandemic is one factor that puts pressure on the global democracy index, Including Indonesia, in 2020. The incumbent's abuse of power in favoring himself as a candidate who will participate in the contestation includes the politicization of the Covid-19 social assistance incumbent candidate. Election organizers should ensure that strict health screening, including looking for risk factors, must be carried out on election implementing officers—those who will be in direct contact with the community and are not expected to become victims. Safe society, safe political life.

Keywords

covid-19; democracy; elections; impact covid-19

Introduction

Quite a number of academics who support a strong state role argue that developing freedom and democracy will only result in conflict and corruption. Thus, the development of democracy presupposes a firm rule of law and a strong state capacity supported by enlightened dominant rulers. Larry Diamond, for example, appreciates the ability of democratic regimes to properly cope with various political ripples amid pressure and believes that these conditions provide a decent opportunity for this country to maintain the sustainability of nascent democratic institutions in the process of slowly reforming (Diamond, 1999). Amy Freedman and Robert Tiburzi also emphasized that democracy has taken root in society, even though Indonesia's economic growth achievements are not as advanced as other countries and traditional values still have a place (Freedman & Tiburzi, 2012).

However, not a few are also hesitant to see the development of Indonesian democracy. Marcus Mietzner, for example, mentions that Indonesian democracy is at a standstill. There have been severe attempts to halt the pace of reform, although not consistently successful, so Indonesian democracy seemed to "frozen" in the mid-2000s. The conservative elite also tried to reclaim their old "privilege" and prevent reform, especially in elections, eradication of corruption, and protection of minority rights, during continued public support for democracy, although somewhat disappointed to see the lack of effective governance (Mietzner, 2012). Other studies also see that Indonesian democracy is increasingly intertwined with patronage (Aspinall & Klinken van, 2011), characterized by solid political cartels (Slater, 2004), which were even dominated by oligarchs (Robison & Hadiz, 2004).

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed unprecedented pressure on contemporary democracies in countries and regions around the world. In 2020, Indonesia will indeed hold a democratic party, namely regional head elections in 270 regions. However, with the current outbreak and with the increasing number of

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COVID-19 cases in Indonesia, it is very influential on the political sector in particular. The Government has issued a policy regarding the postponement of the simultaneous regional elections (Indonesian: Pemilihan Umum Kepala Daerah, abbreviated as Pilkada) in 2020. This delay is due to the increasing number of COVID-19 cases in the world, including Indonesia. The current COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a severe threat to the organizers of democracy. This is because the process of leadership succession in a country or the process of filling in parliamentary institutions in elections has the potential to be hampered by a pandemic.

According to data collected by International IDEA, as can be found on its website entitled "Global Overview of COVID-19: Impact on Elections", it shows that, at least 50 countries and territories – confronted by the possibility of spreading the virus by holding elections during a pandemic– have decided to postpone their election (IDEA, 2020). However, some countries and territories have made tough decisions and opted to take the perhaps more dangerous path of keeping their elections on schedule.

There are approximately 60 (sixty) countries that have decided to postpone their democratic events. However, some countries are adamant about holding elections, such as Burundi, France, and North Korea. America is currently preparing to hold presidential elections in November 2020. However, many are concerned that holding elections will potentially increase the number of COVID-19 sufferers. The Republic of Korea is one of those countries that dared to take the risk of holding elections under the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic (James & Alihodzic, 2020). The election, which was held on April 15, 2020, to elect 300 members of the 21st National Assembly (parliament), represented two sides of a crucial test of public trust. However, as a result, confirmed cases of COVID-19 were above 10,000 cases on election day, with a death rate of 200 cases (Kim, Kim, Lee, & Park, 2020).

We must think about the implementation of democracy. It is about prioritizing the right to life and the right to health, which are also guaranteed by the constitution, especially Articles 28I and 28H of the 1945 Constitution. At this point, the implementation of democracy is Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which has not subsided. It must be a common concern and need to be considered proportionally by looking at the latest developments.

Methods

The approach used in this research is a literature study that is used mainly to explain the ability of the state to hold elections, about how the risks to democracy are with external threats such as that experienced by the world with the spread of COVID-19, Text studies can provide clues to see the challenges faced by Indonesia looks like the impact on the quality of democracy and looks at how voter participation with the emergence of COVID-19, constructs what is called the meaning of being elected, as well as to examine what ideas work behind it, as well as the theoretical preferences they use. The data was then analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Literature data in the form of reports, journals, news, and books were collected, after which the authors examined the existing data. The next stage is to classify the various problems between the holding of elections and the COVID-19 pandemic. The author found indicators that can be used to measure the impact of the pandemic on the implementation of elections in Indonesia, namely; first, the author discusses the implementation of elections in various countries and looks at the challenges faced; second, look at how the pressure caused by the pandemic on the democracy index in Indonesia; third, look at the behavior of the incumbent regional head candidate; fourth, analyzing the budget requirements used in the implementation of the Pilkada during the pandemic.

Result and Discussion

Democracy and Elections during a Pandemic

Elections are one of the main pillars of accumulating people's will and the 'basic predicate' of democracy (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018). Through direct elections, the people can determine public policies through support for contestants who have aspirational programs (Dahl, 1971; Lijphart, 1999; Lindberg,

2006; Przeworski, 2019; Webler & Tuler, 2021). The ability of countries to hold elections must also be supported for the fulfillment of human rights (HAM) in the framework of press freedom, freedom of expression and opinion, freedom of association and assembly, and the right to obtain information that still needs complete and comprehensive fulfillment and protection. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights/UDHR has stated that everyone has the right to participate in the affairs of his Government, either by being elected or by electing representatives, through honest and fair general elections (Dahl, 1971; Landman, 2000).

Elections are a means of legitimizing power and mediating their relationship with the Government on several different dimensions: (1) levels of Government (national, regional, and local), and (2) branches of government (executive and legislative, which can be unicameral, bicameral and tricameral). Increasing numbers of democracies, despite their recent setbacks (Chu, Huang, Lagos, & Mattes, 2020), during the 'third' and 'fourth' democratic waves since the 1970s (Doorenspleet, 2005; Huntington, 1991; Landman, 2000) mean that in any given year, there has been a massive number of electoral processes on all continents of the world, and as the pandemic progresses, political leaders need to focus on measures that mitigate the worst and most likely risks facing this process.

Table 1. Parliamentary, Presidential, and Regional Elections Held During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Election level	Election date	Polity
Parliamentary elections	March 02, 2020	Israel
	March 02, 2020	Guyana
	March 19, 2020	Vanuatu
	April 14, 2020	Kiribati
	April 15, 2020	South Korea
	May 25, 2020	Suriname
	June 05, 2020	Saint Kitts & Nevis
	June 21, 2020	Serbia
	June 24, 2020	Mongolia
	July 05, 2020	Croatia
	July 05, 2020	Dominican Republic
	July 15, 2020	North Macedonia
	August 5, 2020	Sri Lanka
	August 10, 2020	Trinidad and Tobago
	August 30, 2020	Montenegro
	September 03, 2020	Jamaica
Presidential elections	May 25, 2020	Iceland
	June 22, 2020	Kiribati
	June 23, 2020	Malawi
	June 28, 2020	Poland
Regional elections	June 29, 2020	Anguilla (United Kingdom)
	July 12, 2020	Basque Country (Spain)
	July 12, 2020	Galicia (Spain)
	August 22, 2020	Northern Territory (Australia)
	September 14, 2020	New Brunswick (Canada)
	September 20, 2020	Aosta Valley (Italy)
	September 20, 2020	Apulia (Italy)
	September 20, 2020	Campania (Italy)
	September 20, 2020	Liguria (Italy)
	September 20, 2020	Marche (Italy)
	September 20, 2020	Tuscany (Italy)
	September 20, 2020	Veneto (Italy)
	September 26, 2020	Sabah (Malaysia)
	December 9, 2020	270 Regionals in Indonesia*

Notes: The period under study goes from March 01 to September 30, 2020. To distinguish between Kiribati's parliamentary (April 14) and presidential (June 22) elections, we use the KIR(PA) and KIR(PR) slightly modified versions of its KIR ISO-3 polity code. The only polity we could not include in our analyses has been Bougainville (Papua Guinea's autonomous region), as turnout data for the 2020 regional elections were not available.

Source: [Santana et al., \(2020\)](#)

Figure 1. Regional Election in Indonesia 2020



Likewise, the recognition of the Mayor of Surakarta (Solo) who stated that the City Government's financial condition did not allow it to finance the mayoral election because the Rp15 billion that was initially budgeted for the mayoral election was used up to finance the needs of handling and the impact of COVID-19 in the city of Solo. His party has openly proposed that the Solo City regional head election be postponed to 2021; many regions have no different problems regarding the budget if they also have a regional head election agenda (Farisa, 2020).

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Agreement (Indonesian: Naskah Perjanjian Hibah Daerah, abbreviated as NPHD), there are still problems faced by Regency/City Bawaslu; it can be said that there are 6 (six) regions whose regional grants for the supervision of the 2020 Election are rationalized/cut by the Regional People's Representative Assembly (Indonesian: Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah, abbreviated as DPRD) so that it does not match the value of the regional grant listed in the NPHD between the Regional Government and Regency/City Bawaslu (see Table 2).

Table 2. Data on Rationalization/Cutting of the 2020 Election Grant Fund Budget by Regency/City Legislative

No	Regions Holding Elections in 2020	Regional Grant Value (Rp)		Difference (Rp)
		Beginning (On Budget)	Becomes	
1.	Bawaslu Kabupaten Ogan Ilir	19.350.000.000	15.350.000.000	- 4.000.000.000
2.	Bawaslu Kabupaten OKU Timur	16.500.000.000	15.000.000.000	- 1.500.000.000
3.	Bawaslu Kabupaten Muko-Muko	7.000.000.000	4.000.000.000	- 3.000.000.000
4.	Bawaslu Kabupaten Rejang Lebong	9.500.000.000	5.500.000.000	- 4.000.000.000
5.	Bawaslu Kabupaten Purworejo	15.607.227.500	14.900.000.000	- 707.227.500
6.	Bawaslu Kabupaten Kotabaru	15.100.000.000	13.200.000.000	- 1.900.000.000

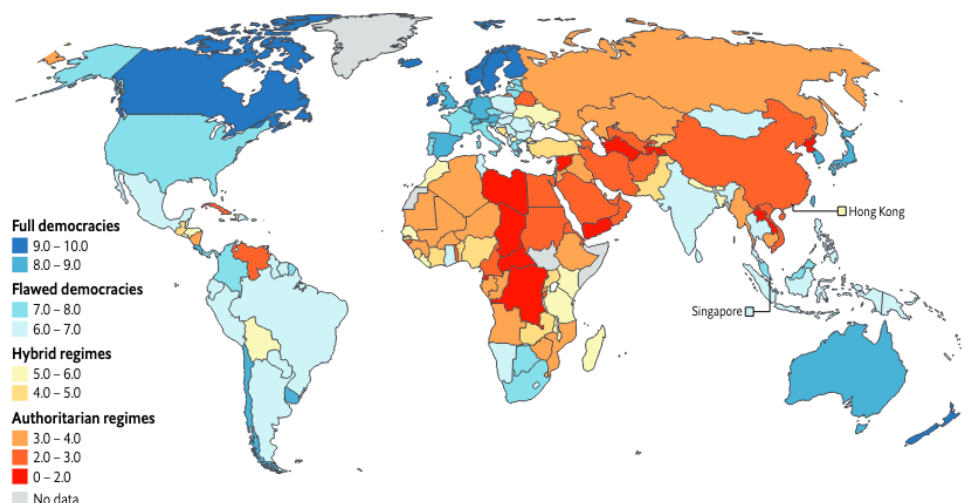
Source: Manuscript of Bawaslu Hearing Meeting with DPR

Regarding these problems, Bawaslu has coordinated with the Ministry of Home Affairs through the Secretary-General of Bawaslu Letter Number: 0303/Bawaslu/SJ/PR.04.02/XII/2019 dated December 13, 2019, to facilitate the resolution of budgeting problems in these areas, at least, on the deadline of June 15 as a sign of the continuation of the regionals election stages which had been postponed due to COVID-19.

Indonesian Democracy Index Pressure

The pandemic is one factor that put pressure on the global democracy index, including Indonesia, in 2020. However, several notes must also concern policymakers because even in a pandemic condition, some countries in the Asian region can record an improved democracy index. Indonesia especially has to work hard to lift the political culture index, which has fallen sharply.

Figure 2. Democracy Index 2020, Global Map by Regime Type



Source: [The Economist Intelligence Unit \(2021\)](#)

From the democracy index released by The Economist Intelligent Unit (EIU), in 2020, Indonesia's score (6.30) is still behind Malaysia (7.19) and Timor Leste (7.06). Malaysia is ranked 39th, while Timor Leste is ranked 44th out of 167 countries and autonomous regions reviewed by the EIU. Indonesia's score is

down compared to 2019 (6.48) and 2017 and 2018 (6.39) ([The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021](#)). With an average score of 6.30, Indonesian democracy is still classified as a flawed democracy. Indonesia ranks 64th in the global ranking (see Figure 2.)

There are five indicators measured by the EIU: the electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. Indonesia experienced a sharp decline in the political culture indicator, which only got 4.38 points. This score is far lower than the achievements of 2019, 2018, and 2017 which were stagnant at 5.63. As for political participation (6.11), the electoral process and pluralism (7.92), and civil liberties (5.59), stagnant or equal to the previous year's score (2019). The only indicator that improved was the functioning of the Government, which was 7.50, an increase from the 2019 2018 and 2017 scores (7.14).

In general, the EIU noted that the pandemic had an unfavorable impact on the index and the quality of global democracy, especially in Indonesia. In hybrid systems with multiple electoral processes ([Levitsky & Lucan, 2010](#)), delays can increase political uncertainty and undermine the rule of law. In elected authoritarian regimes ([Levitsky & Lucan, 2010](#); [Schedler, 2006](#)), procrastination can create a power vacuum, abuse of power, and abuse of the state of emergency, which further consolidates authoritarian rule, undermines the rule of law and further threatens the protection of human rights e.g.g, as happened in Hungary, where a series of authoritarian measures have been legalized under the leadership of prime minister Victor Orbán) ([Landman & Splendore, 2020](#)). The average democracy index of countries in the world fell. The pandemic has triggered restrictions on civil liberties on a massive scale and has led to rampant intolerance and censorship of different opinions.

Abuse of Power Incumbent

According to records, of the 270 regions that will hold the 2020 simultaneous regional elections, there are 224 regions whose regional heads serve the first period and will participate in the 2020 regional elections simultaneously for the second period. Regional heads in power (currently serving) in their political field are called incumbents ([Dahlberg & Johansson, 2002](#); [Habibi & Suswanta, 2019](#)).

In the perspective of holding a fair election, of course, all pairs of candidates must have legal and political standing and equal treatment regardless of whether the candidate is an incumbent or a challenger in the electoral democracy. Therefore, incumbents are given regulatory signs so that when carrying out their functions and powers as regional heads who are currently serving as well as those who will fight again in the next election cannot be categorized as abuse of power ([Dahlberg & Johansson, 2002](#); [Habibi & Suswanta, 2019](#); [Paskarina, 2017](#)). Regional heads are prohibited from using the authority, programs, and activities that benefit or harm one pair of candidates. Both the region itself and in other regions within six months before determining the pair of candidates.

The potential incumbent can do something that can be categorized as abuse of power that can benefit him as a candidate who will participate in the contest, including the politicization of COVID-19 social assistance by incumbent candidates. Various kinds and ways can be done by incumbent candidates to "strengthen" the trust and support of prospective voters in their capacity as regional heads who are currently serving and incumbent candidates ([Habibi, 2020](#)). Because of that, people find it difficult to tell the difference. Even though the social assistance provided was using state money and facilities and/or other donors to aid the handling of COVID-19 and its impact on people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, they are not intended to benefit from winning one candidate in the election. If the assistance is intended to nominate someone, including the incumbent candidate, it uses its mechanism and regulations.

Moreover, the central Government's policy is that it expects the effectiveness of coordinating the handling of the COVID-19 in the form of assignments to regional heads as the chairman of the COVID-19 Task Force in their regions which includes three areas that can be of "strategic" value in "touching" people who are struggling to deal with the COVID-19 and its impacts, namely in the health, economic and social sectors ([Astuti, 2020](#)). Incumbent candidates can take advantage of the program and various assistance by "inserting" something related to their candidacy in the election contestation, from placing their name and/or photo, prioritizing assistance to their team of supporters, and even restricting

competitors' movements by limiting their access to the people under the pretext of permission or must be known by the COVID-19 Task Force in its territory, which incidentally is the incumbent candidate (Prabowo, 2020). Article 71 of the Pilkada Law has anticipated the possibility of abuse of power by incumbent candidates by giving severe threats in the form of punishment and disqualification of the incumbent candidate who is proven to have violated the politicization of the COVID-19 social assistance by the incumbent candidate.

Bawaslu found two models in the politicization of social assistance carried out by incumbent candidates. First, social assistance is given the label of assistance to certain political parties. Social assistance is sourced from the APBD but is given on behalf of the regional head or political party. While the last is the misuse of the budget for handling COVID-19 (Rezakisari, 2020). Through General Election Commission Regulation (Indonesian: Peraturan Komisi Pemilihan Umum, abbreviated as PKPU) 1 of 2020, the KPU seeks to prevent abuse of authority by providing many limitations, among which incumbent candidates can be judged not to meet the requirements to take part in the elections if replacing ASN officials six months before the determination of the candidate pair until the end of the term of office unless there is an approval from the Minister of Home Affairs Republik Indonesia.

In addition, incumbent candidates must also maintain the State Civil Apparatus (Indonesian: Aparatur Sipil Negara, abbreviated as ASN) neutrality in the 2020 Pilkada. During the campaign period (71 days), incumbent candidates must also take leave from participating in the campaign. This is intended to avoid state power and facilities during the campaign period by the incumbent candidate concerned.

Like crimes in general, abuse of power can occur because of the character (intentions) of evil and opportunity. This space of opportunity must be maintained, narrowed, and even eliminated as well as possible by state institutions, both as election organizers and other state institutions such as the KPK, PPATK, Law Enforcement Officials, KASN, and all competent parties to create and build quality Pilkada, clean and fair.

Impact of Budget and Health Risks Pilkada Carried out During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The death of 722 election officers in 2019, although the death of election officers has occurred since the 1955 election, namely 67 officers died (Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia, 2019). Minimizing the death of election officers can be seen in two aspects: the officers' condition and the heavy workload. Election officers die not only in old but also in officers aged around 20-30 years. In order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, restrictions on campaign activities were in place. In-person events were allowed but limited to 50 participants, which were required to wear face masks and adhere to the social distancing of one meter. In addition, campaign teams needed to provide disinfectants and/or facilities where participants could wash their hands.

The General Elections Commission introduced several measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 on Election Day. These were installed in close cooperation with the Indonesian Government and Task Force for COVID-19. The Government pledged about 5,2 trillion Rupiah (approximately 305 million euros) to implement the health protocols. The measures for staff and voters included mandatory face masks, the use of single-use gloves, staggered voting, and keeping a social distance (see Table 3.).

Table 3. COVID-19 Personal Protective Equipment Budget Needs

No	Types of Personal Protective Equipment	Number of Needs	Total (Rp.)	Delegation	Estimated Unit Price
1.	Face Masks	900.051 box	145.154.362.444	National Coordination	Rp. 349.546.031.994
2.	Thermo Gun	300.017 units	144.625.496.542	National Coordination	
3.	Hazmat	300.017 set	30.206.826.203	National Coordination	

4.	Single-use Gloves	300.017 box	29.559.346.805	National Coordination	
5.	Hand Sanitizer	600.034 bottle	13.153.302.602	Provincial Coordination	Rp. 175.510.646.141
6.	Disinfectant	600.034 bottle	41.527.926.017	Provincial Coordination	
7.	Liquid soap	600.034 bottle	10.847.665.812	Provincial Coordination	
8.	Face Shield	2.700.153 units	25.836.067.083	Provincial Coordination	
9.	Sprayer	300.017 units	25.911.697.407	Provincial Coordination	
10.	Handwashing facilities	600.034 units	58.233.987.220	Provincial Coordination	
11.	Plastic gloves	3.000.170 box	41.765.153.009	Regency/City Coordination	Rp. 61.514.640.566
12.	Plastic bags	300.017 sheet	4.176.515.301	Regency/City Coordination	
13.	Tissue	900.051 box	15.572.972.256	Regency/City Coordination	
TOTAL			586.571.318.701		Rp. 586.571.318.701

Source: Manuscript of KPU Hearing Meeting with DPR

The maximum number of voters per polling station has been reduced from the 800 allowed by law to 500, and voters could only vote during a designated time slot. The voter's body temperature was measured when entering the polling station. Those whose body temperature was above 37.3 degrees Celsius needed to cast their vote in a separate booth to avoid interaction with other voters. Polling staff was provided with protective equipment, including gloves, face shields, and masks, and they were to clean the polling stations periodically. Poll workers drip indelible ink onto the fingers of each person who has cast a vote instead of voters dipping a finger into the ink, as was done in previous elections. Voters with visual, physical, and other disabilities had the right to be assisted when casting their votes. They could either bring a person of their choice or request a poll worker's assistance.

The 2020 Pilkada health protocol is regulated in the PKPU Number 10 of 2020, which includes the obligation to carry out Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests for candidate pairs, restrictions on participants attending face-to-face meetings with 50 people with a minimum distance of 1 meter between participants, restrictions on the number of invitees. And/or supporters to 50 people for candidate pairs, and provision of personal protection. The PKPU also allows the holding of general meetings, art performances, music concerts, sports activities, competitions, and bazaars, although restrictions on the number of participants attending a maximum of 100 people and health protocols.

Although the health protocol during the 2020 Pilkada has been regulated in the PKPU, several reports of violations of the health protocol during that event registration period have been reported. Bawaslu recorded 243 alleged violations related to the COVID-19 prevention health protocol during the registration period for the Pilkada, September 4-6, 2020 (Bawaslu RI, 2020). There was the appearance of a mass crowd during the registration of a potential partner. Even there was a procession or convoy. Previously, the Minister of Home Affairs had given warnings to 51 regional heads regarding the registration of Pilkada candidates who did not comply with health protocols.

This mass crowd is something that should be mitigated because it always happens from year to year. Crowds and mass processions in typical situations can also cause problems, mainly if they are carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic. This shows the inability to ensure that health protocols are strictly complied with. Violations of health protocols that occur at the registration stage indicate an enormous potential for violations of health protocols during the determination of candidates, followed by the declaration of Pilkada candidates and the candidates' campaign.

Figure 3. Daily Progress of Positive Confirmed Cases of COVID-19



Source: [Satuan Tugas Penanganan COVID-19 \(2021\)](#)

According to government officials, the voter turnout was higher during the 2020 regional election than the 2015 regional election. World Health Organization (WHO) said the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Indonesia on Election Day, December 09, 2020, were 586,842 and 18,000 deaths. After 14 days, the number of cases on December 23 was 678,125 and 20,257 deaths. However, this increase is not directly attributable to elections, and numerous intervening factors account for the spread of COVID-19. The data presented on the [Satuan Tugas Penanganan COVID-19 \(2021\)](#) page also strengthens the report from the WHO that there was a very significant increase after the December 09, 2020, election, which was also affected by the extended Christmas and New Year holidays (see Figure 3.).

Conclusion

Democracy has a long history; peaceful transfer of power between political leaders and strong protection of human rights will maximize public participation in the political system. The risks posed by the COVID-19 pandemic have an unfavorable impact on the quality of global democracy, especially in Indonesia. The 2020 Pilkada provides an increase in the budget of Rp.586,571,318,701, which is used for officers' completeness. Some regions are known to have difficulty funding to hold Pilkada. The incumbent candidate did something that could be categorized as an abuse of power that benefited him as a candidate participating in the contest, including the incumbent candidate's politicization of COVID-19 social assistance. Incumbent candidates can do various kinds and ways to "strengthen" people's trust and support. Bawaslu found two models in the politicization of social assistance carried out by incumbent candidates; first, social assistance labeled as assistance to certain political parties, social assistance from the APBD but is given on behalf of the regional head or political party. While the second is the misuse of the budget for handling COVID-19. Election organizers should ensure that strict health screening, including looking for risk factors, must be carried out on election implementing officers because those who will be in direct contact with the community and are not expected to become victims. Safe society, safe political life.

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