

SOCIAL CONFLICT IN INDONESIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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I. INTRODUCTION

Data collected by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict shows a marked increase in social conflict in Indonesia during the pandemic. The government was largely successful in preventing violent conflict over distribution of aid, and public resistance to Covid-19 containment measures remained relatively muted. But as the broader economic and social impact of the pandemic began to take its toll, it resulted in rising levels of collective violence and widespread public protests between 2020 and 2021. Addressing these long-term vulnerabilities created by the pandemic requires effective resource redistribution policies and a more prudent governance strategy.

The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis triggered devastating communal conflicts across Indonesia that led to more than 23,000 deaths and displaced hundreds of thousands of people. Successive democratically elected governments contained these conflicts with a combination of peace agreements, security sector reform, and economic relief. Despite these improvements, however, various forms of localised conflicts have continued unabated over the past decade, most notably vigilante attacks against religious minorities, urban youth clashes and land conflicts.

Given this history, fears of social unrest loomed large in April 2020, when Indonesia finally began formulating its Covid-19 response after initially downplaying the global health crisis. Policymakers were concerned that enforcement of severe mobility restrictions and health measures could spark violent backlash from distressed citizens, while stretching thin the country's law-enforcement capacity. Governance disruptions during the pandemic also had the potential to reignite ethnic tensions in hot spots and create new conflict fault-lines in other parts of the country. President Jokowi's plan to push ahead with sweeping economic reforms, through the Omnibus Law on Jobs Creation, in a time of great uncertainty also carried the risk of triggering mass agitation.

IPAC compiled data to track systematically the impact of the pandemic on social conflict in Indonesia. The data, collected from 103 national and regional online news sources, recorded a total of 3,488 incidents of social conflict between January 2020 and December 2021, across all 34 provinces. Recorded incidents comprise of 1,462 mass protests and 2,026 acts of collective violence, including riots, group clashes and mob attacks that resulted in 471 deaths.

The data, which provide an estimate of conflict trends, rather than a definitive count, show that overall, Indonesia avoided the large-scale social unrest that policymakers had feared at the beginning of the pandemic. Violent disputes over government aid were rare due to timely and efficient distribution of economic assistance to low-income groups. Public demonstrations against lockdowns and mobility restrictions were also relatively muted. In contrast to Western countries, where public opposition to mask mandates and vaccines was widespread, incidents of resistance to public health measures in Indonesia were few and far between.

Despite this success in managing the short-term effects of the pandemic, the data show a three-fold increase in the incidence of social conflict due to prolonged economic and social

disruptions. This upward trend is most pronounced in urban areas, which experienced a surge in vigilantism (*main hakim sendiri*) against rising levels of street crime; clashes between members of mass organizations (*ormas*) over control of resources in the informal sector; and deadly youth brawls (*tawuran*).

Widespread demonstrations against the government's economic policies also highlight the risks associated with Jokowi's strategy of governing by *fait accompli* during the pandemic. The rushed passage of the Omnibus Law in 2020 without adequate public consultation galvanized strong opposition from labour groups and student organizations, who defied Covid-19 restrictions to hold massive protests. These protests were notable both for how widespread they were (held across major urban centres as well as small cities) and for the extraordinary level of force the police used to disperse them. Mass agitation continued when the government issued new minimum wage regulations based on the controversial law and only subsided after the Constitutional Court ordered its temporary suspension in November 2021.

Increasing violent mobilisation observed in urban areas is a cause for concern, especially in view of the upcoming elections in 2024. Elections in Indonesia are generally peaceful. However, a high stakes race in a time of economic uncertainty can fuel political unrest. Managing these risks requires carefully calibrated redistribution policies that can overcome income disparities exacerbated by the pandemic instead of reinforcing them. Effective and timely delivery of social assistance will be key in containing the social fallout from the government's recent decision to pull fuel subsidies at a time when low-income households are already reeling from soaring food prices and falling wages.

Maintaining political stability in times of economic uncertainty also necessitates a more prudent governance strategy. As the government deliberates several key pieces of legislation, including a controversial overhaul of the Indonesian criminal code (*Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana, KUHP*), the fate of the Omnibus Law should serve as a warning against forcing unpopular bills through parliament without building a broad political consensus first. Finally, law-enforcement in Indonesia urgently needs to end its current focus on suppressing dissent against government policies and prioritise management of local conflicts that have surged during the pandemic. In the absence of effective policing, these can escalate into community-wide clashes.

II. CONFLICT TRENDS IN INDONESIA: 2020-2021

Obtaining timely and reliable data on social conflict in Indonesia has historically been a challenge. Annual crime statistics released by the Indonesian National Police do not contain details about individual incidents, making it difficult to distinguish between acts of interpersonal crime and social conflict. The Village Potential Survey (PODES) run by the National Statistics Centre (*Badan Pusat Statistik, BPS*) includes conflict indicators, but this data is only collected once every three years.

Academics and policymakers have collaborated to overcome these gaps in official statistics by using national and local newspapers to collect conflict data in Indonesia. The methodology was pioneered by researchers affiliated with the United Nations Support for

Indonesian Recovery (UNSFIR) to compile conflict data in Indonesia between 1990 and 2003.¹ The National Violence Monitoring System (NVMS) project run jointly by the World Bank, Indonesia's Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Culture and the Habibie Centre, expanded the newspaper monitoring methodology developed by UNSFIR and compiled comprehensive data on social conflict in Indonesia between 1998 and 2014.² Results from these past efforts show that while far from perfect, local news sources in Indonesia can serve as a reliable source for collecting timely estimates of conflict trends in the country.³

IPAC used a simplified version of UNSFIR and NVMS monitoring methodology to track the impact of Covid-19 on social conflict in Indonesia.⁴ 3,488 incidents of social conflicts were recorded from all 34 provinces between January 2020 and December 2021, using 103 local and national newspapers linked to six different media networks. The data include 1,462 incidents of public protests as well as 2,026 incidents of collective violence, such as riots, group clashes and mob attacks.⁵ Cumulatively, these conflicts resulted in 471 deaths, 2,663 people gravely injured and 636 destroyed buildings.⁶ Data collected by IPAC does not include incidents of inter-personal crime or acts of domestic violence.⁷

IPAC DATA ON SOCIAL CONFLICT IN INDONESIA

Time-period: January 2020-December 2021

Geographical Coverage: 34 Provinces

Sources: 103 local and national newspapers linked to six different media networks.

Included: Incidents of social conflict:

- public protests
- collective violence (riots, group clashes, mob attacks, ambushes, bombings).

Excluded: Incidents of inter-personal crime and domestic violence.

Main Indicators: frequency of incidents, deaths, wounded, buildings damaged

Main Variables: Date, location, triggering dispute, actors involved, weapons used.

Gender dimensions: Women's participation in incidents, women victims (deaths and wounded).

¹ See Ashutosh Varshney, Mohammad Zulfan Tadjoeidin, and Rizal Panggabean, "Creating Datasets in Information-Poor Environments: Patterns of Collective Violence in Indonesia, 1990-2003." *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 8, no. 3 (September 2008): 361-94.

² Patrick Barron, Sana Jaffrey, and Ashutosh Varshney, "When Large Conflicts Subside: The Ebbs and Flows of Violence in Post-Suharto Indonesia." *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 16, no. 2 (July 2016): 191-217.

³ Of late, the newspaper monitoring methodology has been replicated by several organizations but the limited analytical and temporal scope and of these projects does not allow for a comprehensive analysis of social conflict trends in Indonesia during the pandemic. For example, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) dataset contains data from Indonesia but does not include localized conflicts that constitute a major source of conflict in the country. Newly released conflict data by the Jakarta-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is currently only available for one year in 2021. See: Centre for Strategic Studies, "The Collective Violence Early Warning Dataset: A snapshot of violence and intervention in Indonesia in 2021," July 2022.

⁴ News articles about each unique incident of social conflict were read by a trained team of coders, who filled in a standardized coding template. The compiled data was subject to multiple layers of quality control measures, including spot-checking and inter-coder reliability.

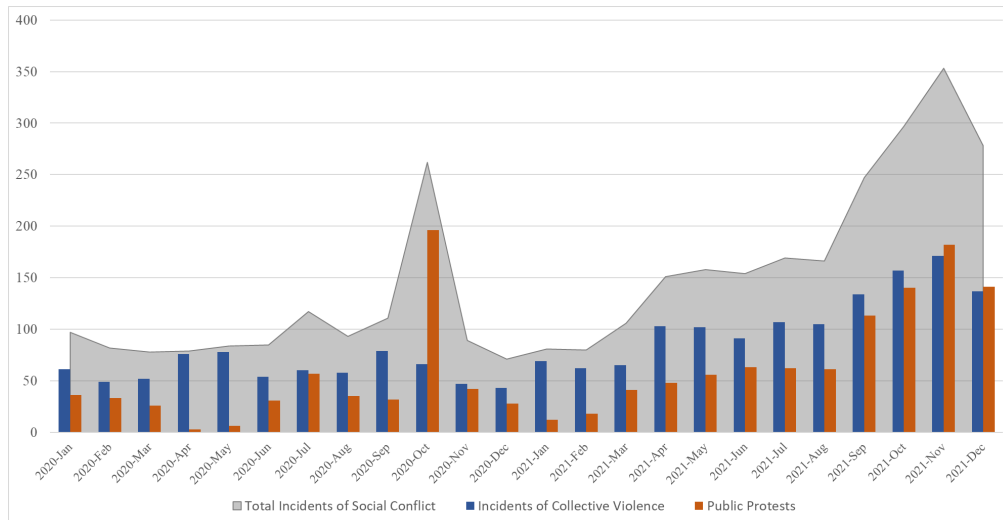
⁵ Women's participation was recorded in 8 per cent of mass protests and 4 per cent incidents of collective violence.

⁶ Women comprised less than 3 per cent of the total number of fatalities and injuries recorded in the dataset.

⁷ Domestic violence is an important category of violence that other research shows has risen significantly during the pandemic. See "Kasus KDRT Meningkat Selama Pandemi Covid-19", tempo.co, 20 August 2021.

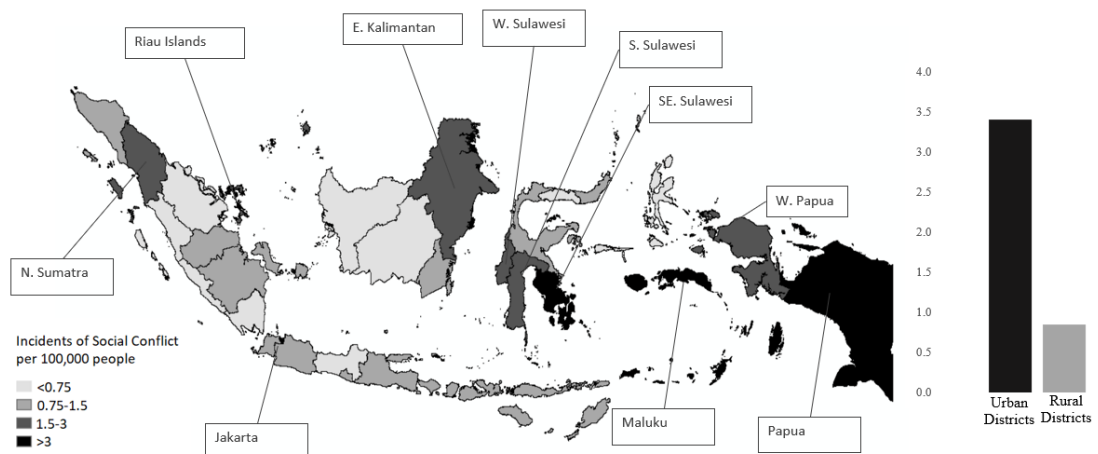
The data shows a gradual but significant rise in incidence of social conflict in Indonesia during the pandemic (Figure 1). In the first quarter of 2020, before the first official case of Covid-19 was reported in Indonesia, the data recorded an average of 86 conflict incidents a month. For the rest of 2020, conflict levels remained relatively stable, except for a spike in protests against the passage of the Omnibus Law in October. As the pandemic entered its second year, however, prolonged economic and social disruptions led to a sharp rise in social conflict. In the last quarter of 2021, the monthly average of conflict incidents rose to 309 incidents, three times higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 1: Incidence of Social Conflict in Indonesia During the Covid-19 Pandemic (2020-2021)



Indonesia’s urban centres, hit hardest by the pandemic, also experienced more social conflict. The per capita levels of social conflict recorded in cities was nearly four times higher than in rural areas (Figure 2). In terms of provincial distribution, the highest per capita levels of conflict were recorded in provinces outside of Java, especially in eastern Indonesia. Papua remained the country’s most violent province due to a dramatic escalation of armed insurgency, which has been analysed in a previous IPAC report.⁸ Within Java, the highest levels of social conflict were recorded in Jakarta and parts of West Java.

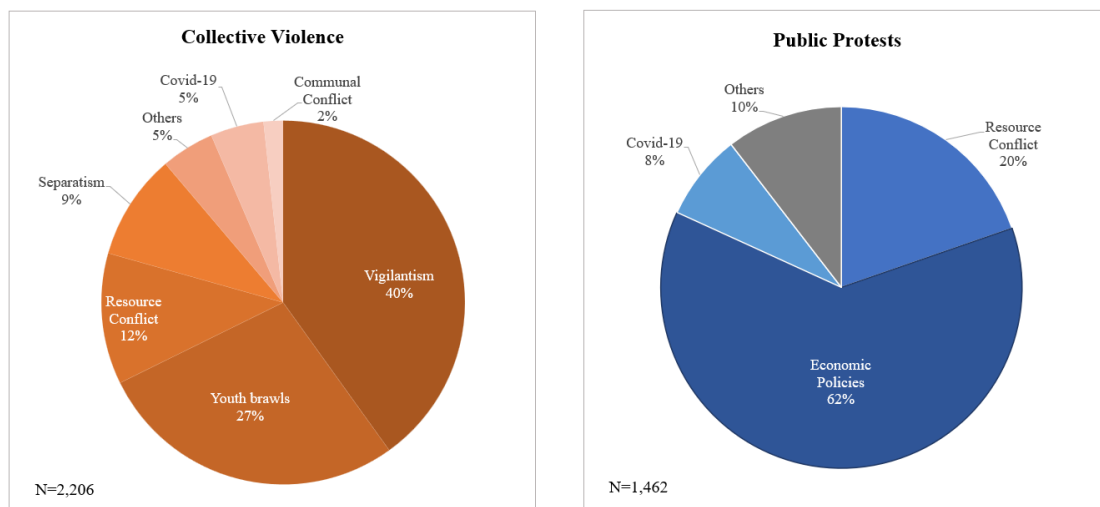
Figure 2: Distribution of Social Conflict in Indonesia (2020-2021)



⁸ IPAC, “Escalating Armed Conflict and a New Security Approach in Papua,” Report No.77, 13 July 2022

IPAC data also tracked the types of issues that triggered social conflict during the pandemic (Figure 3). Resistance to the government's Covid-19 management policies, including distribution of aid, mobility restrictions and public health measures comprised a relatively small proportion of incidents. Large-scale communal violence that had been feared at the beginning of the pandemic was also rare. Instead, the data show that social conflict was largely shaped by the longer-term impact of economic and social disruptions caused by the pandemic. Localized conflicts, including vigilantism against petty theft, clashes between mass organisations over collection of parking fees; and youth brawls dominated incidents of collective violence. Public protests were largely driven by opposition to the government's economic policies, mainly the Omnibus Law, as well as layoffs and wage cuts by private companies.

Figure 3: Composition of Social Conflict in Indonesia (2020-2021)



III. MUTED PUBLIC RESISTANCE TO COVID-19 MEASURES

Fears of social unrest played an important role in shaping the government's response to the pandemic. While the Covid-19 death toll rose across Europe and North America, foreshadowing an impending health emergency, Indonesian policy makers drew their lessons from India, where the abrupt imposition of a nationwide lockdown had caused widespread chaos. Determined to avoid this outcome, President Joko Widodo repeatedly ruled out similar lockdowns claiming that Indonesia could not afford them.⁹

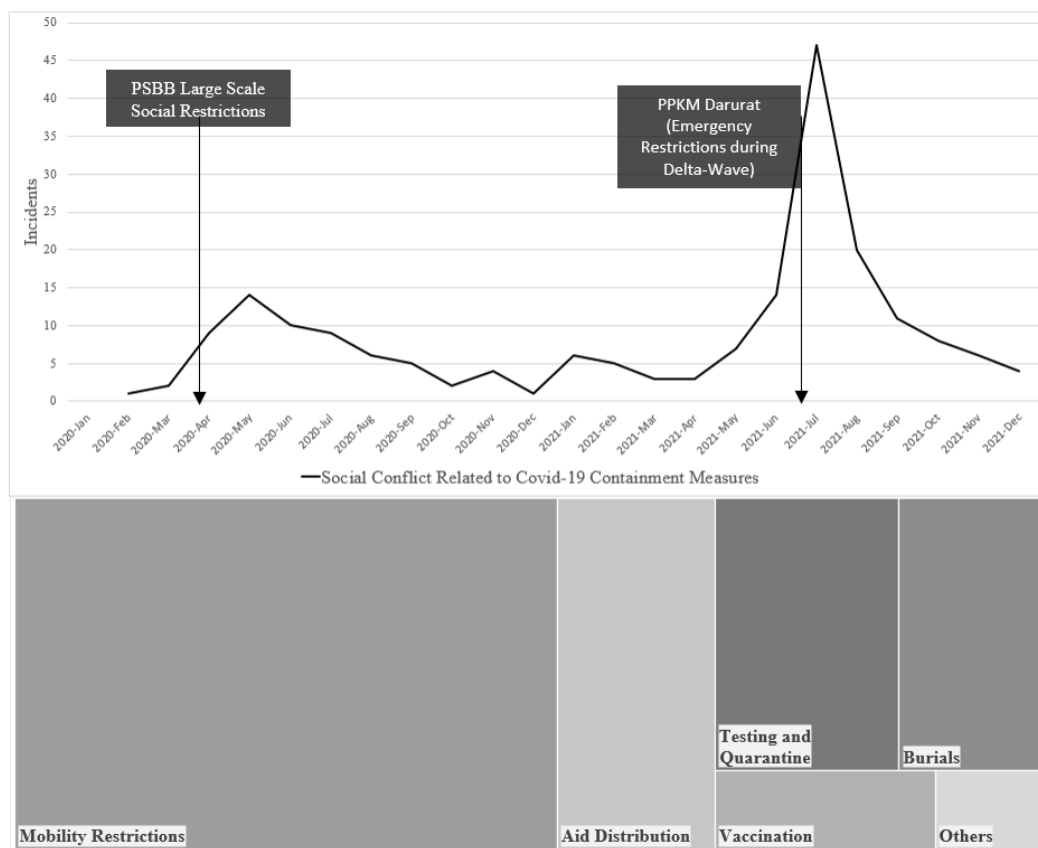
One concern was the political fallout from imposing restrictions that would put millions out of work. This risk was exacerbated by the fact that Jokowi's re-election in May 2019 was marred by violent protests orchestrated by his opponents, followed by mass demonstrations by civil society groups in September 2019 against weakening of the highly popular Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, KPK). Another reason for reluctance to implement a lockdown was that the government would have to offset its impact with swift distribution of social assistance to millions of people who were not part of its regular social protection programs.

⁹ "Ini Perkiraan Biaya Lockdown yang Pernah Diungkap Jokowi," KOMPAS.com, 24 June 2021.

These economic and political considerations overrode health concerns in Indonesia's handling of the pandemic.¹⁰ But soaring Covid-19 cases forced the government to impose two rounds of large-scale mobility restrictions, first in April 2020 and then again at the peak of the much more deadly Delta wave, in July 2021. Both rounds of restrictions were relatively relaxed compared to measures taken by other countries in the region and were mostly implemented in Java and Bali for a few weeks before being phased out in favour of more lenient micro-restrictions, managed by local authorities.

The government's reluctance to enforce mobility restrictions aggravated the health crisis, as evidenced by a high Covid-19 death toll.¹¹ But it managed to curb the public unrest that policymakers had feared. The data recorded 209 incidents of social conflicts related to Covid-19 management measures between 2020 and 2021, which constitute less than 6 per cent of total incidents recorded during that time. About half of these incidents were mass demonstrations against two rounds of lockdowns in Java and Bali (Figure 4). The remaining incidents of conflict related to Covid-19 measures were smaller protests and violent clashes, caused by disputes over distribution of social assistance and resistance to public health measures, which resulted in four deaths.

Figure 4: Incidence of Social Conflict Related to Covid-19 Containment Measures (2020-2021)



¹⁰ "How Anti-Lockdown Business Elites Swayed Jokowi, Fueling Indonesia Crisis," bloomberg.com, 21 July 2021

¹¹ "Indonesia: As Delta Variant of Coronavirus Spreads, Official Data Can't Keep Up." foreignpolicy.com, 25 August, 2021.

The largest demonstrations were recorded in Jakarta and Bandung in July 2021, at the peak of the Delta-wave. These were led by labour groups, small traders, and gig workers, especially online motorbike drivers (*ojek*), whose livelihoods were most affected by the pandemic.¹² Protests subsided quickly, however, following a police crackdown on participants, whom the government accused of instigating a conspiracy to overthrow Jokowi.¹³ The pretext for these charges came from mysterious messages circulating on social media that urged people to mobilise for a movement, provocatively termed “Jokowi Endgame.”¹⁴ To date, there is no concrete proof that these anti-Jokowi messages were spread by organizers of the protests. Yet, the police used force to disperse protestors and arrested hundreds on charges of provoking public unrest.¹⁵ A few weeks later, restrictions were relaxed again.

Despite discrediting the protests, the government was wary of the deepening economic impact of the pandemic and prudently expanded its social protection programs to mitigate its effect on low-income households. In 2020, Rp 230 trillion were set aside for social protection programs and another Rp 186 trillion were allocated in 2021.¹⁶ Aid was given in the form of conditional and unconditional cash transfers, food vouchers and direct distribution of basic foods (*sembako*).

A key factor in enabling increased government spending on social assistance during the pandemic was the revenue windfall from soaring global commodities prices. But the main challenge in distributing aid was to balance the speed of delivery with accurate identification of eligible recipients. Before the pandemic, the bulk of social protection programs targeted those who were already enrolled in the government’s poverty database. But rapidly shrinking incomes during the pandemic threatened to push millions more into poverty: those who were previously well-off, suddenly found themselves in need of government assistance.

Disbursement of aid to new, unverified beneficiaries created a lack of transparency and made the process highly contentious in the early days of the pandemic. In May 2020, protestors in Merangin district of Jambi burned government buildings after accusing village officials of withholding cash assistance from the poorest residents and distributing it instead to those they claimed were relatively well off.¹⁷ Over the next few weeks, similar violent protests were reported across other parts of the country, most notably in East Nusa Tenggara,¹⁸ Papua¹⁹

¹² Gig workers are people employed as freelance contractors by large corporations for low-earning activities and are not entitled to legal protections that generally apply to workers engaged through traditional employment contracts. For more, see Rachmawati, Riani, Luthfianti Zakia, Ayu Lupita, and Alex De Ruyter, “Urban Gig Workers in Indonesia during COVID-19: The Experience of Online ‘Ojek’ Drivers.” *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation*, 15, no. 1 (2021): 31–45.

¹³ “Mahfud MD: Ada Kelompok Tertentu Manfaatkan Situasi, Apapun yang Diputuskan Pemerintah Itu Diserang” *Tribunnews.com*, 25 July, 2021.

¹⁴ “Demo Jokowi End Game Batal, Polisi Akan Cari Penyebar Poster” *Tempo.co*, 24 July 2021.

¹⁵ “Ratusan Orang Ditangkap Saat Demo Tolak PPKM Darurat di Bandung”, *liputan6.com*, 21 July 2021.

¹⁶ Asep Suryahadi, Ridho Al Izzati, and Athia Yumna. “The Impact of Covid-19 and Social Protection Programs on Poverty in Indonesia.” *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, 57, no. 3 (September 2, 2021): 267–96.

¹⁷ “Ricuh Pembagian BLT, Massa Bakar Posko Covid-19 dan Rusak Kantor Desa”, *Kompas.com*, 23 May 2020.

¹⁸ “Tak Tepat Sasaran, Pembagian Bansos Tunai di Flores Timur Ricuh”, *kumparan.com*, 17 May 2020.

¹⁹ “Terjadi Keributan Pembagian Bansos Tidak Adil, Warga Bakar Posko Covid-19, Ini Videonya”, *Tribun Manado News*, 21 May 2020.

and North Sumatera.²⁰ While residents contested the distribution of aid, local officials complained that they were powerless to help because they were being given lists of recipients by national and regional governments. Reports about rampant corruption of Covid-19 assistance funds added to public dissatisfaction with the process.²¹

Responding to these problems, the government adopted a unique community-based delivery system that involved neighbourhood leaders in identifying and disbursing aid. These leaders are highly popular in the communities that elect them and are in a better position to assess their neighbours' economic conditions and thus their eligibility to receive aid.²² They also live in the areas they serve, making them more accountable and more apt at finding strategies for resolving disputes. Tasked with disbursing a fixed allocation of government aid in their areas, many local leaders chose to expand the list of recipients by reducing the amount received by each beneficiary, often dividing the funds evenly among residents.²³ This flexibility allowed more than 8 million new recipients to get assistance, including 2.5 million women heads of household.²⁴ It also made the distribution process more inclusive in the eyes of local communities, and reduced the potential for violent conflict.

The data recorded 32 incidents of violent conflict related to the distribution of Covid-19 social assistance. This number, while still significant, is relatively small considering at least half of all Indonesian households reported receiving some form of government assistance during the pandemic.²⁵ A vast majority of these conflicts (70 per cent) occurred outside Java and Bali. Women were identified as main actors in 20 per cent of aid-related conflicts, indicative of the burden they face in managing shocks to the household budget.

Unlike Western countries that have seen mass protests against masking mandates and vaccines, public resistance to enforcement of health measures in Indonesia was relatively muted. The data recorded 35 incidents of violent conflicts in which health workers were attacked by communities who refused to be tested, quarantined or treated for Covid-19. There were also several cases in which poor public understanding of the disease created panic and led to attacks on patients. In one particularly tragic incident, a man in Toba, North Sumatera was killed by his neighbours after he tested positive and returned home from the hospital to isolate at home, as advised by his doctors.²⁶

Despite significant levels of Covid-19 vaccine hesitance reported in Indonesia, collective resistance to immunisation remained low. Ten incidents of conflict related to the vaccination program were recorded, which ranged from protests over confusing requirements for travel, as well as dissatisfaction with the paperwork needed to get vaccines. Violent demonstrations

²⁰ "Pembagian Bansos di Medan Ricuh", *Metronews.com*, 20 May 2020.

²¹ Hendi Yogi Prabowo, "The Crisis Within a Crisis: Covid-19 and Corruption", *The Jakarta Post*, 28 December 2020.

²² Sana Jaffrey, "The Role of Neighborhood Leaders in Indonesia's Covid-19 Response", *New Mandala*, 17 November 2020.

²³ "Pemkab Banyumas Bagi Rata Bansos Tunai Dampak Covid-19", *Republika*, 23 April 2020.

²⁴ Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), "Community-based Targeting to Combat Covid-19 Induced Poverty", *povertyactionlab.org*, February 2021.

²⁵ Asep Suryahadi, et al, *op.cit.*

²⁶ "Viral Video Warga Positif Covid-19 Diikat Diseret dan Dipukul dengan Balok di Jalan Bak Binatang", *Tribun News Banten*, 24 July 2021.

against the vaccination program were mainly recorded in regions where levels of public trust in government tend to be low. On 7 December 2021, hundreds of protestors attacked the local hospital and a health post in Kaimana, West Papua when a local man died shortly after receiving a vaccine shot.²⁷ Nine days later, death of another vaccine recipient in South Manokwari triggered a similar incident in which the office of the district head and a local hospital were attacked by protestors.²⁸

IV. GROWING ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND A RISE IN LOCALIZED CONFLICTS

Government policies cushioned the short-term impact of the crisis, but as the pandemic entered its second year, protracted economic and social disruptions began to take a toll. Unemployment levels jumped from 5 to 7 per cent, mostly due to loss of manufacturing jobs. This forced millions of workers into the informal sector, where wages fell by 15 per cent.²⁹ The impact of these macro changes on people's livelihoods was immense. By 2021, 70 per cent households in Indonesia were reporting a decline in income and nearly 30 per cent were experiencing extreme economic hardship, causing them to cut food portions, sell possessions and take out short-term loans to survive.³⁰

A. Vigilantism

The data shows that growing economic uncertainty following each successive round of mobility restrictions is associated with a marked increase in incidence of vigilantism (Figure 5). This violent form of popular justice, in which an alleged offender is apprehended and punished by a citizen mob, has been on the rise in Indonesia for the past two decades, due to poor policing and low levels of public trust in law enforcement. The pandemic accelerated this trend.

In total, 824 incidents of vigilantism were recorded during 2020 and 2021, which resulted in 154 deaths, making vigilantism the largest category of collective violence during the pandemic. In the past, Islamist vigilante organisations made headlines for punishing religious and moral offenses including derogatory remarks against religious leaders, sexual indiscretion, homosexuality, and religious heterodoxy.³¹ During the pandemic, however, violent punishment of suspected thieves by ordinary residents dominated recorded incidents of vigilantism.

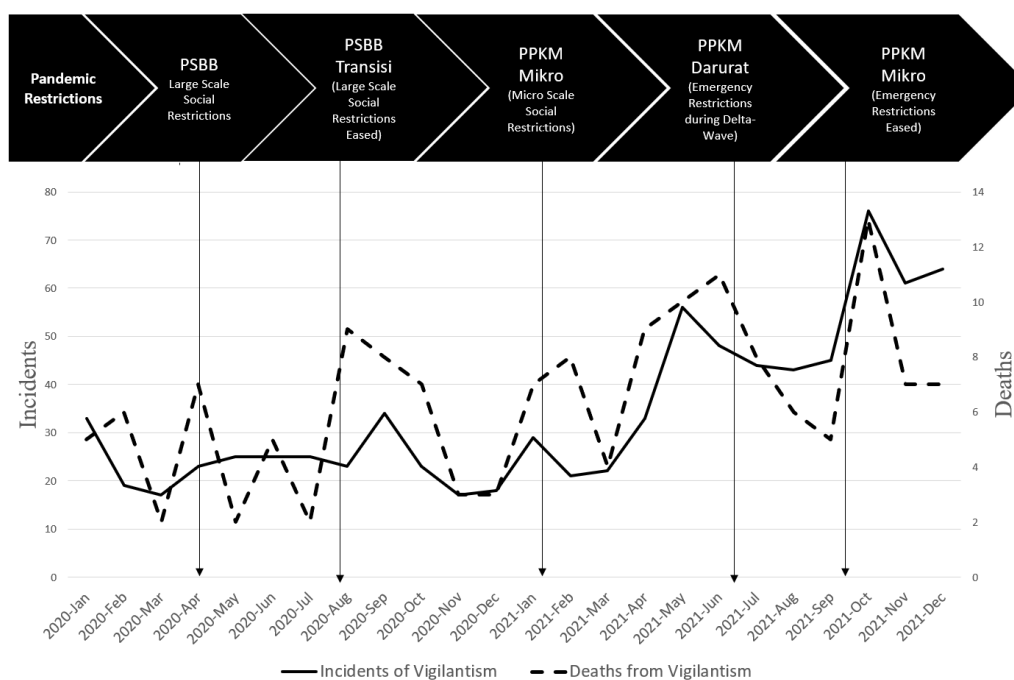
²⁷ "Ricuh, Massa Lempari RSUD Kaimana dengan Batu dan Kayu", Kompas.com, 9 December 2021.

²⁸ "Ricuh, Massa Rusak Kantor Bupati dan Rumah Sakit di Manokwari Selatan", Kompas.com, 16 December 2021.

²⁹ Asep Suryahadi, et al, op.cit.

³⁰ UNICEF, "Socio-economic Impact of Covid-19 on Households in Indonesia", February 2022.

³¹ Sana Jaffrey, "In the State's Stead? Vigilantism and the Policing of Religious Offense in Indonesia." In *Democracy in Indonesia: From Stagnation to Regression?*, edited by Eve Warburton and Thomas Power, 303–25. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020.

Figure 5: Patterns of Vigilantism in Indonesia during the Covid-19 Pandemic (2020-2021)

A key factor motivating vigilantism was heightened levels of public insecurity due to rising levels of economically-motivated street crime during the pandemic.³² In April 2020, for instance, a suspected thief was lynched by residents of Taman, Sidoarjo after three previous robberies were reported in the same neighbourhood.³³ In another incident, residents of Susukan, Cirebon lynched two recently released prisoners after they were accused of trying to steal a motorbike outside a mosque during Friday prayers.³⁴

It is important to note that vigilantes seldom confirm their suspect's guilt, and false accusations of theft often lead to wrongful targeting. This was the case in a June 2021 incident that took place in Segalaheerang, Subang, during which a debt collector was lynched when he came to confiscate a motorbike from a resident. The owner, who had stopped making payments on the bike, accused two officials from the leasing company of theft, which led to a chase by local residents. One person managed to escape the mob but the other was apprehended and beaten to death in a nearby field.³⁵

Incidents of popular justice in Indonesia tend to be localized but can quickly escalate into large-scale unrest in cases where perpetrators and victims are from rival ethnic groups, especially when the police fail to arrest the vigilantes. These spirals of deadly violence, triggered by vigilantism and police inaction, are common in Lampung that has a long history of conflict between indigenous communities and transmigrants from Java and Bali.

³² "Kriminalitas Jalanan Picu Ketakutan Masyarakat", *sindonews.com*, 2 October 2021.

³³ "Kepergok Mencuri di Sidoarjo, Warga Putat Jaya Surabaya Tewas Dikeroyok Warga", *Sidoarjo News*, 2 April 2020.

³⁴ "Begini Nasib 2 Pelaku Curanmor yang Dikejar Jemaah Jumatan, di Depan Diadang Warga Hajatan", *jppn.com*, 1 June 2021.

³⁵ "Debt Collector Tewas Usai Tarik Motor Warga Ujung Berung, Dikeroyok Warga di Pasar Salahaerang", *Tribun News Jabar*, 8 June 2021.

In 2012, alleged sexual harassment of Lampungese women by Balinese youth in South Lampung triggered communal clashes that resulted in 14 deaths and displacement of hundreds of people.³⁶ In 2015, lynching of two Lampungese men, accused of theft, in a Javanese majority village in South Lampung escalated when the police rebuffed demands from the victims' families to apprehend the vigilantes and insisted on mediating a truce. A peace party, led by the local police chief along with Javanese village officials was ambushed by the Lampungese. One Javanese official was killed, and others, including several police officers, were held hostage. Hundreds of police reinforcements and military troops had to be sent to evacuate the hostages and prevent revenge attacks from neighbouring Javanese villages.³⁷

During the pandemic, the risk of communal conflict emerged again in November 2021. A Lampungese teenager, also accused of theft, was lynched by residents of another Javanese village in South Lampung. Residents from the victim's village rejected Javanese claims that he was a thief and began mobilizing other Lampungese to avenge the killing. This time the police was able to diffuse the situation by conducting a swift investigation of the lynching and arresting some of the accused vigilantes.³⁸ But given that communal tensions in the area remain high, another incident of vigilantism amid rising levels of petty crime, can trigger more community-wide conflict unless a broader law-enforcement effort is made to deter residents from taking the law into their own hands.

B. Resource Conflict Between *Ormas*

Deteriorating economic conditions also exacerbated resource conflict between various mass organisations (*ormas*) that compete over control of the informal sector in major urban centres. The data recorded 103 violent clashes between *ormas* members, triggered by disputes over rent extraction from small vendors, parking spots and land clearing. These incidents were concentrated in Jakarta, Medan and Surabaya that were hit hardest by the pandemic and resulted in ten deaths. Most of these conflicts involved two large rival organisations, Pemuda Pancasila (PP) and Forum Betawi Rempung (FBR), but clashes were also recorded between several smaller groups, including some affiliated with traditional martial arts clubs, whose members often serve as informal security providers in commercial areas.

Unlike Islamist *ormas* that have openly campaigned against Jokowi in the past few years, both PP and FBR have historically maintained a pro-government stance, regardless of who is in power. While PP is a nationalist youth organisation, known for its pivotal role in the 1965 anti-communist killings, FBR was founded after the post-Soeharto reform era (*Reformasi*) as an ethnic militia to defend the interests of Betawi communities, who were losing their traditional dominance in Jakarta.

³⁶ "Kerusuhan Lampung 2012: Latar Belakang, Kronologi dan Dampak", Kompas.com, 30 July 2021.

³⁷ "Begal Tewas Dihakimi Massa, 2 Warga Desa di Lampung Bersitegang", merdeka.com, 29 July 2015.

³⁸ "Pengeroyokan hingga Tewaskan Warga Gunung Sugih Besar Lampung Timur, Satu Ditetapkan Tersangka, Tiga Buron", Lampungpro.co, 2 December 2021.

Despite this difference in orientation, PP and FBR share several similarities. Their members, who they claim are in the hundreds of thousands, are mostly disenfranchised young men with little prospect for social advancement. Both organisations draw on patronage from powerful political elites in the form of government projects, social aid and distribution of racketeering turfs to provide their members with economic opportunities and social mobility.³⁹ In return for patronage, these organisations support politicians by mobilising their members for election campaigns and counter-protests against opponents. This give-and-take relationship with highly placed officials, including the police and the military, ensures that recurrent conflicts between these groups do not result in any significant sanctions.

The sharp rise in conflicts between PP and FBR during the pandemic led to a rare incident of public censure that illustrates the political influence wielded by these groups and its limits. On 19 November 2021 a clash between the two groups in Tangerang, on the outskirts of Jakarta, left five people gravely injured and several public facilities damaged. The incident was triggered by a dispute over control of parking spots in a local market, even though the police had previously brokered an agreement between the two groups that let them manage the parking business on alternative days.⁴⁰ Five people, two from PP and three from FBR were arrested and charged by the police.⁴¹ But it was clear that this case-by-case response was not working. The data shows that this was the tenth clash between *ormas* members reported that month. In the previous month of October, 15 such incidents had been recorded, up from an average of three incidents a month before the pandemic.

Junimart Girsang, a PDI-P lawmaker and the deputy chief of the parliamentary committee for home affairs and regional autonomy, urged the Ministry of Home Affairs to revoke the operational permits of PP and FBR.⁴² He argued that banning violent organisations was a reasonable response, as such measures had been used to successfully disband the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI), an Islamist *ormas*. PP leaders, who have long milked their nationalist credentials as proof of their patriotism, expressed outrage at being compared to FPI and FBR, whom they called ‘primordial’ organisations due to their ethnic and religious bent.⁴³

PP organised nationwide demonstrations to demand an apology from Junimart, and threatened him with dire consequences for failing to comply.⁴⁴ When Junimart issued an apology, PP leaders rejected it and organised a large demonstration outside the parliament, calling for his expulsion.⁴⁵ During this protest, PP members clashed with the police while

³⁹ Ian Douglas Wilson, *The Politics of Protection Rackets in Post-New Order Indonesia: Coercive Capital, Authority and Street Politics*. Routledge, 2015.

⁴⁰ “Polisi: Bentrokan Ormas PP-FBR Dipicu Perebutan Lahan”, *Republika*, 24 November 2021.

⁴¹ “Polisi Ungkap Tersangka Bentrokan FBR vs Pemuda Pancasila Bisa Bertambah”, 22 November 2021.

⁴² “Anggota DPR Minta Pemerintah Tegas Ke Pemuda Pancasila-FBR seperti ke FPI”, *detik.com*, 21 November 2021.

⁴³ “Pemuda Pancasila Tersinggung Disamakan dengan Ormas Primordial: Kami Terdepan Membela NKRI”, *Kabar Besuki-Pikiran Rakyat*, 4 December 2021.

⁴⁴ “Ancam Tuntut Junimart, Razman: Pemuda Pancasila Bukan Ormas yang Sama dengan FPI”, *tempo.co*, 23 November 2021.

⁴⁵ “Pemuda Pancasila Demo di DPR Tuntut Politikus PDIP Junimart Girsang Keluar”, *tempo.co*, 25 November 2021.

trying to push through a barricade and gravely injured an on-duty officer.⁴⁶ A video of the scuffle went viral on social media and caused embarrassment to the police, who have maintained a close relationship with the group and had granted official permission for the protest. Within a few hours, 20 PP members were arrested and charged with illegal possession of weapons.⁴⁷

PP leadership swiftly issued an apology, but public pressure was mounting on the government to do more to end impunity for violent *ormas*. In December 2021, Jokowi publicly chastised the police and the military for showing undue deference to these groups.⁴⁸ A few days later, the police sealed regional offices of both PP and FBR in Central Jakarta claiming they were built on illegally occupied land.⁴⁹ But their high-level political connections once again shielded these organisations from a legal ban. Earlier this year, PP opened a new office in a posh location of Central Jakarta. The ceremony was attended by several high-level officials, including the national police chief, speaker of the parliament, Minister for Sports and Youth as well as the former Jakarta governor and 2024 presidential candidate, Anies Baswedan.⁵⁰

C. Youth Brawls

Another form of localized violence that surged during the pandemic was youth brawls (*tawuran*). The data recorded 599 incidents of collective violence involving rival student groups, motorbike gangs and neighbourhood youth groups, which led to 101 deaths. 60 per cent of these incidents and 80 per cent deaths were concentrated in Jakarta and West Java. Outside of these usual hotspots, recurrent youth clashes were also recorded in Makassar.

Youth brawls have been common across Indonesian cities for the past two decades. During the pandemic, these incidents largely followed the timeline of school closures (Figure 6). As part of the Covid-19 mobility restrictions, in-person schooling was suspended throughout the country in 2020. The prospect of millions of teenagers stuck at home with little to do raised fears about a hike in violence.⁵¹ However the data shows a slight decline in incidents until April 2021, when the number of clashes doubled from an average of 18 to 40 incidents a month. This peak in youth brawls occurred just as restrictions on in-person learning were gradually being eased in Jakarta and surrounding suburbs. Incidents dropped again during the Delta-wave when mobility restrictions were reinstated but rose dramatically in September 2021 when schools in Jakarta and West Java were re-opened for in-person learning.

⁴⁶ “Kronologi Perwira Polisi Dikeroyok Anggota Pemuda Pancasila di DPR”, CNN Indonesia, 27 November 2021.

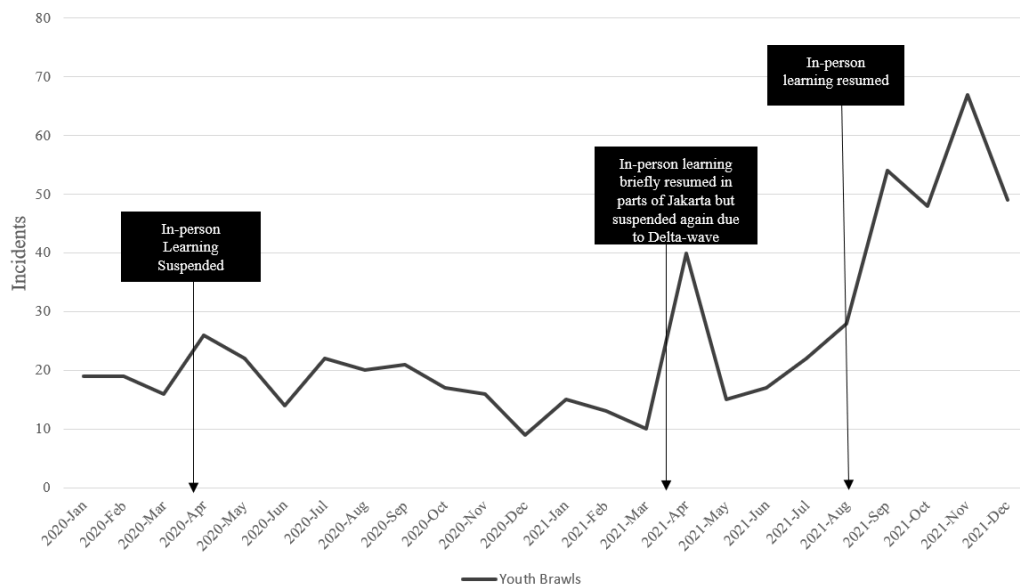
⁴⁷ “Polisi Tangkap 20 Orang Usai Demo Ricuh Ormas PP di DPR, 9 Tersangka”, kumparan.com, 25 November 2021.

⁴⁸ “Pemuda Pancasila Respons Jokowi Soal Polisi Sowan ke Ormas Bermasalah”, CNN Indonesia, 5 December 2021.

⁴⁹ “Polisi Segel Kantor Ormas PP dan FBR di Jakarta”, satuharapan.com, 14 December 2021.

⁵⁰ “Anies Baswedan hingga Kapolri Hadiri Peresmian Kantor Sekretariat Pemuda Pancasila di Menteng”. Liputan6.com, 1 October 2022.

⁵¹ “Polisi Antisipasi Tawuran Malam Hari selama Pandemi”, Republika, 29 September 2020.

Figure 6: Patterns of Youth Brawls in Indonesia during the Covid-19 Pandemic (2020-2021)

Youth conflicts in Indonesia usually take three forms. First, there are deadly brawls between students, mostly from rival high schools. But there are growing reports of incidents involving middle and even primary school children. Triggers for these conflicts are usually petty, such as disputes over the outcome of a sports event or an exchange of insults on social media. However, students who take part in these fights describe feeling intense peer pressure to defend the honour of their school and to prove their courage by attacking rivals with lethal weapons, including knives and samurai swords.⁵² Many of these clashes are planned in advance by fixing a time and place to meet, usually afterschool or on the weekends.

A high-profile fight between two schools in an area can quickly prompt students from other schools to prove their capacity for violence, resulting in waves of clashes. The data recorded such a deadly wave in Sukabumi, West Java, where four students were killed in multiple clashes within a span of four months between August and November 2021, during the initial phase of school re-opening.⁵³

A second form of commonly observed youth violence involves rival motorbike gangs. These groups, largely composed of teenagers from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are notorious in many Indonesian cities for committing wanton acts of violence while roving from one location to another. Most of their victims are members of rival gangs but ordinary residents are also frequently attacked with sharp weapons and airguns. Many of these gangs have elaborate symbols and violent initiation rituals for members, whose numbers can vary between few dozen and hundreds. Some are known for their involvement in crime, especially motorbike theft. Police usually respond to these incidents by arresting alleged members or shooting them during a chase. But this approach has done little to curb the violence, and in some cases, gang members have attacked police officials for revenge.

⁵² "Jakarta School Brawl", Al Jazeera, 23 March 2017.

⁵³ "Miris, 4 Pelajar di Sukabumi Tewas Sia-sia Akibat Tawuran", Inews Jabar, 20 November 2021.

One area that is particularly vulnerable to this kind of violence is Bekasi, located just east of Jakarta, where clashes between rival motor-bike gangs resulted in six deaths during the pandemic. In one incident a neighbourhood leader was stabbed while trying to intervene in a clash.⁵⁴ Before the pandemic, prevalence of gang violence in Bekasi, especially indiscriminate attacks on residents and shops located on the main road that connects the area with Jakarta, had led to a violent response from local communities.⁵⁵

A third form of youth brawls takes a more territorial form and involves neighbourhood groups. As with student clashes and gang violence, conflicts between neighbourhood youth are also triggered by small disputes but violence can usually be contained with effective policing and intervention from local leaders. In some cases, however, recurrent disputes can generate deadly cycles of revenge that can go on for years.

In Makassar, South Sulawesi, clashes between teenagers from several neighbourhoods that have a long history of conflict intensified during the pandemic, resulting in 47 incidents and five deaths. In one of these conflicts, youth groups from Bunga Ejaya Beru and Baraya neighbourhoods launched a series of deadly raids against each other between August and October 2020. Several of these incidents took the form of, riots when mobs attacked residents from rival areas with swords, crossbows and Molotov bombs, while the police fired tear gas to disperse them. Two peace agreements brokered by the local police and military in October 2020 and May 2021 led to a pause in violence.⁵⁶ But in August 2021, the two sides resumed rioting, during which several police officers were severely injured. Similar mediation attempts by local officials also failed to resolve the long-standing conflict between youth groups from Cambayya and Barukang neighbourhoods in Makassar, which resulted in seven deadly riots.⁵⁷

V. MASS PROTESTS AGAINST THE OMNIBUS LAW

Amid growing economic uncertainty and social disruptions, the government's decision to push ahead with a sweeping deregulation drive through the Omnibus Law led to widespread mass agitation during the pandemic.

The controversy surrounding the law, which the government claims is meant to improve the ease of doing business in Indonesia and attract foreign investment, predates the pandemic.

⁵⁴ "Seorang Ketua RW Terluka Dibacok Gangster ketika Melerai Tawuran Pemuda di Bekasi", *Tribun News*, 24 August 2021.

⁵⁵ In 2017, several residents of Jatiwaringin in Bekasi were injured in a series of attacks from a motorbike gang based in a neighbouring hamlet in East Jakarta. With help from police and government officials, residents decided to take matters into their own hands. Arming themselves with clubs and sticks, they attacked a convoy of gang members, who had crossed the bridge from Jakarta. The local police, waiting at the scene, arrested dozens of gang members and dispersed the rest. During the clash, a few Jatiwaringin teenagers lynched a boy, whom they accused of being a gang member. But the victims' parents claimed that the teenagers were themselves members of a local gang in Bekasi and had challenged their son along with his friends to meet them for a fight. These accusations and counteraccusations intensified the rivalry between youth gangs from the two areas and led to further clashes.

⁵⁶ "Kapolsek Bontoala dan Kapolsek Tallo Kembali Kumpulkan Tokoh Pemuda Baraya dan Bunga Ejaya Beru", *Polrestabes Makassar*, 18 May 2021.

⁵⁷ "Kerap Dimediasi, Tawuran 'Cambayya-Barukang' Kembali Pecah, 1 Polisi Terkena Busur", *Lintas Terkini*, 14 February 2021.

The first version of the bill was submitted to the parliament for deliberation in December 2019. The Coordinating Minister for the Economy and Golkar Party Chairman, Airlangga Hartarto headed the drafting team that sought inputs from prominent business tycoons, but skipped consultations with social groups that would be most affected by the wide-ranging changes it proposed.⁵⁸

Labour unions immediately rejected deep cuts to existing worker protections stipulated in the bill, which reduced severance pay, removed restrictions on outsourcing and revised procedures for determining the minimum wage. Green groups and human rights activists also blasted provisions for dismantling environmental safeguards and expediting forcible land acquisition by the government for strategic projects. Finally, legal experts warned that the bundling mechanism used to draft the bill, which amended 79 laws and regulations, was not allowed under existing rules for formulating new legislation.

In February 2020, Jokowi offered assurances that the deliberation process in the parliament would seek inputs from the public.⁵⁹ Unconvinced, labour unions announced plans to hold massive demonstrations on May Day, in defiance of the Covid-19 mobility restrictions that were already in place. Around the same time, workers in industrial areas began protesting layoffs and non-payment of wages due to the pandemic. Fearing mounting labour unrest, Jokowi announced in April 2020 that the bill was shelved indefinitely.⁶⁰

But the government reversed course after the first round of Covid-19 restrictions were eased. In August 2020, Airlangga announced to business lobby groups that the draft law was nearly complete. He also thanked the business community for their inputs and assured them that a “marathon” process was underway in the parliament that would pass the draft directly on to a working committee for finalisation, skipping a critical stage of public deliberations.⁶¹

On 5 October 2020, less than six weeks after Airlangga’s announcement, the parliament passed the Omnibus Law in a virtual session, with support from all parties except two.⁶² The final draft of the law was not released to the public and even lawmakers claimed not to have received a copy during the voting session.⁶³ The situation was made worse when leaked versions of the law began circulating on social media, which indicated missing passages, skipped page numbers and the addition of a new section on major tax reform that was added at the last minute.⁶⁴

Shut out of the legislative process and outraged by its complete lack of transparency, labour unions, environmental activists and student groups staged massive protests across the

⁵⁸ Marcus Mietzner, “Indonesia in 2020: COVID-19 and Jokowi’s Neo-Liberal Turn”, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2021, no. 1 (2021): p. 115.

⁵⁹ “Press Release: Presiden Jokowi Tegaskan Pemerintah dan DPR Terbuka Terima Masukan terkait RUU Cipta Kerja”, presidenri.go.id, 20 February 2020.

⁶⁰ “Pembahasan RUU Cipta Kerja Ditunda, Buruh Batal Demo Pada 30 April 2020”, Kontan.co.id, 25 April 2020.

⁶¹ “Menko Airlangga Klaim RUU Cipta Kerja Selesai 75 Persen”, *CNN Indonesia*, 12 August 2020.

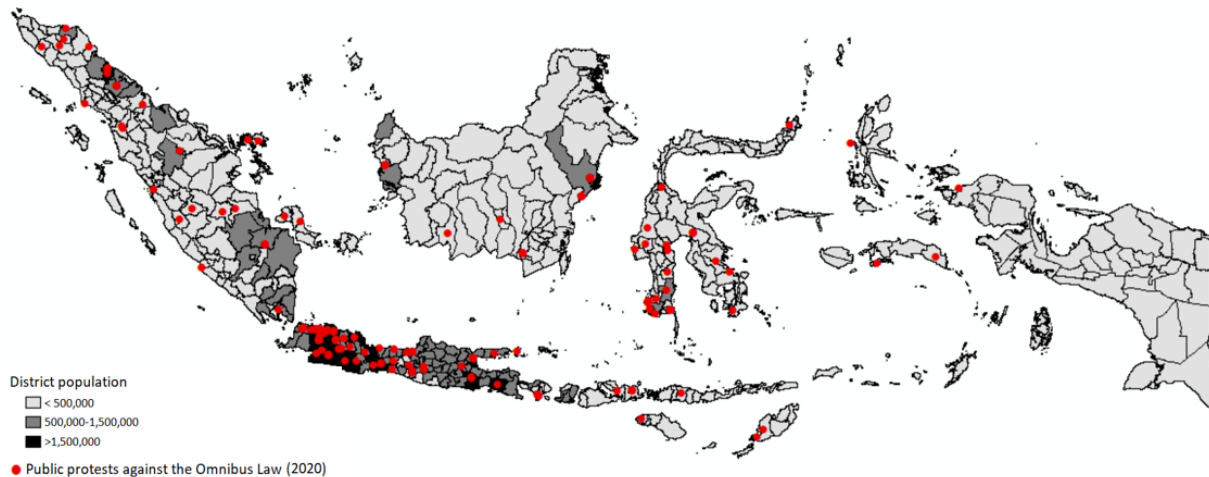
⁶² The two parties that voted against the Omnibus Law are those that are not part of the governing coalition, the Islamist Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) and former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s Partai Demokrat.

⁶³ “Anggota DPR Tak Diberi Salinan Fisik RUU Cipta Kerja saat Paripurna”, tempo.co, 5 October 2020.

⁶⁴ Rizky Argama, “Major Procedural Flaws Mar The Omnibus Law”, *Indonesia at Melbourne*, 9 October 2020.

country.⁶⁵ The data recorded 240 demonstrations demanding a repeal of the Omnibus Law between September and November 2020. Broad public opposition to the law is indicated by the widespread nature of these protests, which were held across 103 locations, including major urban centres but also less populated towns that are usually not as affected by national politics (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Distribution of Omnibus Law Protests across Indonesia (2020)



The government responded to these protests with a combination of denial, discrediting and repression that has become a troublingly familiar mode of managing political opposition during Jokowi's second term. Unwilling to release an official version of the law, senior officials claimed that the leaked drafts were hoaxes, being spread by Jokowi's opponents to create public panic. The police issued a directive to its cyber division to track and counter criticism of the law on social media platforms.⁶⁶ The Coordinating Minister for Politics Law and Security, Mahfud MD, also derided groups opposing the law by claiming that the protests were being orchestrated by criminal elements and threatened stern action against anyone violating a ban on public gatherings during the pandemic.⁶⁷

A police crackdown on the protests followed.⁶⁸ The data shows that security officials used force to disperse protestors in nearly 20 per cent of the incidents, using tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets. Hundreds of protestors were injured during the violence and thousands were arrested in its aftermath.⁶⁹ Lawyers and human rights organisations raised

⁶⁵ Aisyah Llewellyn and Tonggo Simangunsong, "Demonstrations Sweep Indonesia Over Controversial Labour Law", Al Jazeera, 9 October 2020.

⁶⁶ "Perintah Kapolri Cegah Demo Omnibus Law: Cyber Patrol-Kontra Narasi Isu", Detik.com, 5 October 2020.

⁶⁷ "Demonstrasi Tolak UU Cipta Kerja, Mahfud: Pemerintah Akan Proses Hukum Penunggang Aksi Anarkistis", Kompas.com, 8 October 2020.

⁶⁸ Amnesty International, "Indonesia: Investigate Verified Evidence of Police Violence during Omnibus Law Protests", 2 December 2020.

⁶⁹ "5 Ribu Lebih Pendemo UU Cipta Kerja Ditangkap, 240 Orang Diproses Pidana", tempo.co, 10 October 2020.

alarm at police repression and complained that those detained were being denied access to legal counsel.⁷⁰

With no legislative recourse, labour groups and students petitioned the Constitutional Court for a judicial review of the law in November 2020. But nationwide protests erupted once again in October 2021, after the Ministry for Manpower issued a new decree for minimum wage calculation based on the Omnibus Law.⁷¹ The data recorded 390 protests against the new minimum wage regulation, which stipulated an increase of only 1.09 percent from the previous year.

Protests subsided after the Constitutional Court ordered a temporary ban on the implementation of the Omnibus Law in November 2021. In a 5-4 split decision, it ruled that the Omnibus Law was conditionally unconstitutional due to procedural flaws, as the process of bundling revisions to multiple laws violated existing regulations on legislative drafting and did not allow for adequate public review.⁷² The Court ordered the government to rectify the law within a period of two years, after which it would become permanently unconstitutional.

Jokowi has vowed to comply with the Court's ruling but his allies in parliament are pressing ahead with implementation of the Omnibus Law with minimal substantive changes. Instead of undertaking a public review of the most contentious provisions in the Omnibus Law, the parliament revised the law on legislative drafting in May 2021, which effectively allows it to pass multi-sectoral legislation without due public consultation.

Efforts are also underway to undermine judicial oversight of the legislative process to forestall future challenges. In September 2020, the parliament voted to extend the tenure of Constitutional Court judges from 5 to 15 years, which was criticised by legal experts as a bid to incentivise a favourable ruling on the judicial review of the Omnibus Law.⁷³ Following the Court's conditional annulment of the law, however, the government is now mounting a more direct attack on judicial independence.⁷⁴ In October 2021, lawmakers announced plans to remove Justice Aswanto from the Constitutional Court for voting to strike down the Omnibus Law, and replace him with a new judge who would defend the parliament's interests.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ "Police Used 'Excessive Force' During Omnibus Jobs Law Protests: Activists", *The Jakarta Post*, 10 October 2020.

⁷¹ Yuli Yanna Fauzie, "Upah Minimum 2022 Naik Cuma 1,09 Persen, Apakah Artinya?", *CNN Indonesia*, 16 November 2021.

⁷² Stanley Widiyanto, "Indonesia Court Orders Government to Revise Controversial Labour Law", *Reuters*, 25 November 2021.

⁷³ "Perpanjangan Masa Jabatan Hakim direvisi UU MK, Ahli Hukum: Konflik Kepentingan", *tempo.co*, 19 November 2021.

⁷⁴ Jimly Asshidique, "The DPR Attacks the Constitutional Court – and Judicial Independence", *Indonesia at Melbourne*, 10 October 2022.

⁷⁵ "In People's Power We Trust", *The Jakarta Post*, 19 October 2022.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECCOMENDATIONS

The pandemic came as a stress test for two decades of development and peacebuilding in Indonesia. Timely delivery of short-term assistance and lax enforcement of mobility restrictions cushioned the immediate impact of the crisis, but growing economic hardship is associated with rising levels of social conflict. Upcoming elections in 2024 and a widely anticipated economic downturn can exacerbate this upward trend unless effective policies are put in place to address the long-term social vulnerabilities created by the pandemic.

First, managing the risk of social conflict requires continual provision of economic relief to low-income households through equitable distribution of aid. As the government charts a course for recovery while responding to pressures from a global economic slowdown, fewer resources may be available to repeat the pandemic strategy of expanding the social safety net to reach a growing number of beneficiaries. Involving communities in the design and implementation of social assistance programs can help improve perceptions of fairness and reduce the potential for violent disputes.

Second, effective policing is essential for preventing localised conflicts from spiralling into community-wide clashes. Since the separation of the Indonesian national police from the military in 1999, massive state resources have been allocated to build its capacity as a community-oriented force. But rampant corruption and increased use of repressive tactics to quash political dissent has led to one scandal after another, damaging the police's credibility with the public and undermining its role as a neutral enforcer of the law. Urgent reform is needed in police training, supervision, and accountability to improve its approach to managing public order.

Finally, in view of current conditions, Jokowi and his allies in the parliament need to reassess their plans of charging ahead with highly unpopular economic reforms to attract foreign investment. Shutting democratic channels for public participation by blocking access to the legislative process and undermining judicial independence runs the risk of dissent spilling into the streets, which can turn away potential investors.

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