

The worth of Javanese conservative leadership in coping with COVID-19

Pentingnya kepemimpinan konservatif Jawa dalam menghadapi COVID-19

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Abstract

Current studies discover the difference of response of conservatism to the COVID-19 pandemic situation with, at least, six stigmas, namely practicing conservative politics, high risk public health behavior, lack of trust in science, neglecting mainstream media reports, less support for vaccination, and tendency to stockpile. This fieldwork-based qualitative study aims to explore the conservative political leadership of a village head in dealing with the pandemic situation. Unlike the previous studies, it reveals the village head's conservative leadership which plays a vital role in coping with the outbreak. Under the influence of Javanese culture and tradition, the practices of leadership have positive impacts on controlling the situation, that are responsiveness, willingness to hear input, empathy, direct engagement, non-discrimination, ability to mobilize village apparatuses and to encourage participation of villagers, and consistent reminders to villagers to adhere to health protocols. The village head operationally practices the values of *ngancani* (accompanying) and *njagongi* (hanging out) in his leadership. The findings challenge previous academic works as the leadership adjusts to dominant Javanese conservatism in handling the pandemic. It negates the view of difference of conservatism's response to the outbreak. Conservatism, particularly Javanese cultural and traditional values, actually minimizes the differences of social identity among villagers.

Keywords: conservative political leadership; COVID-19 pandemic; Javanese culture

Abstrak

Studi-studi terbaru menemukan perbedaan respons konservatisme terhadap situasi pandemi COVID-19 dengan setidaknya enam stigma, yaitu mempraktikkan politik konservatif, perilaku kesehatan masyarakat yang berisiko tinggi, kurangnya kepercayaan pada sains, mengabaikan laporan media arus utama, kurang mendukung vaksinasi, dan kecenderungan menimbun. Studi kualitatif berbasis kerja lapangan ini bertujuan untuk menggali kepemimpinan politik konservatif seorang kepala desa dalam menghadapi situasi pandemi. Berbeda dengan penelitian-penelitian sebelumnya, riset ini mengungkap kepemimpinan konservatif kepala desa yang memainkan peran penting dalam mengatasi wabah. Di bawah pengaruh budaya dan tradisi Jawa, praktik kepemimpinan berdampak positif dalam mengendalikan situasi pandemi, yaitu responsif, mau mendengar masukan, empati, keterlibatan langsung, non-diskriminasi, kemampuan menggerakkan perangkat desa dan mendorong partisipasi warga, serta mengingatkan secara konsisten kepada warga desa untuk mematuhi protokol kesehatan. Kepala desa mengamalkan nilai-nilai ngancani (menemani) dan njagongi (nongkrong/bercengkrama) dalam kepemimpinannya. Hasil studi ini berbeda dengan karya akademis sebelumnya yang menstigma konservatisme. Kepemimpinan konservatif ternyata mampu menyesuaikan diri dan menghadapi pandemi. Hasil studi ini menegaskan pandangan perbedaan respon konservatisme terhadap wabah. Konservatisme, khususnya nilai-nilai budaya dan tradisi Jawa, justru meminimalisasi perbedaan identitas sosial antarwarga desa.

Kata Kunci: kepemimpinan politik konservatif; pandemi COVID-19; budaya Jawa

Introduction

Conservatism has been seen with disdain, believed to inappropriately respond to the coronavirus disease 2019 (hereinafter COVID-19). This study departs from current studies highlighting the stigma of conservatism in terms of giving response to COVID-19. This research is also aimed at seeking to the conservative practices and values at grass-roots level in Javanese village in the Regency of Malang, East Java, Indonesia. Finding out the conservative leadership of a village head is intended to gain a close look at the reality that is going on in the conservative stigma.

In this study, conservatism carries two meanings. First, it refers to self-conscious conservatism as introduced by Edmund Burke. Conservatism highly respects pre-existing traditions and social issues rooted in the society, without failing to gradually respond to changes (Kurian cited in Fuller 2011). Second, conservatism is conservative leadership of a political leader and it implements the self-conscious logic of conservatism. Political leader refers to the village head given access to policy space in village government in responding to the pandemic.

Studies on conservatism and COVID-19 published in 2020 and 2021 mostly stigmatize poor responses of conservatism to the pandemic. First, the stigma is usually linked with conservative politics. The conservative political phenomenon is regarded as a conservative shift. Conservative political attitude (political conservatism) and conservative leadership are the intention of an escape due to concern about the pandemic (Fischer et al. 2020, Karwowski et al. 2020, Lee 2020, Rosenfeld 2020, Kniffin et al. 2021).

Another conservative political phenomenon also emerges as an ideology with its own perspective about the pandemic. This conservative political ideology is predicted to seemingly allow people to avert stay-at-home order (Rosenfeld 2020, Rothgerber et al. 2020), or political reasons have eroded attention and care of conservative group to COVID-19 (Conway III et al. 2020). The more conservative an individual is, the more likely the support to the conspiracy theory of COVID-19 will be (van der Kroef 1957, Lobato et al. 2020).

First, conservative politics as political partisanship (conservative party) consistently downplay the danger of the pandemic (Conway III et al. 2020, Samore et al. 2021) and conservative group has less social trust than progressive group in government responses to pandemic handling (Kye and Hwang 2020). Political partisanship in conservatism also has an influence on the responses of behavior that reacts to the recommendation of the governor to avert COVID-19 (Grossman et al. 2020). The pandemic also contributes to the electoral success in conservative group (Adam-Troian et al. 2020). Political party's followers have their trust in the conspiracy of COVID-19 suggested by the president. Furthermore, political conservatism is also apparent in the policy of the leader currently responding to the pandemic. The populist government enforces a small proportion of health policy and curb in the pandemic mitigation during early phases of the pandemic in February and March 2020 (Kavakli 2020). It has given counter-responses to the message about prevention (Grossman et al. 2020).

Second, the conservatism is deemed to be weak and to show less responsibility in enforcing COVID-19 preventive measures. Conservatism has less obedience to COVID-19 spread prevention (Conway III et al. 2020, DeFranza et al. 2020, Everett et al. 2020, Rothgerber et al. 2020, Van Holm et al. 2020, Plohl & Musil 2021). The support given by the conservative group to lockdown policy is minimum (Sjåstad & Van Bavel 2020). Conservatism also displays lower personal vulnerability to the pandemic. The virus is regarded as less threatening (Calvillo et al. 2020, Pennycook et al. 2020). Moreover, conservatism serves as a distinguishing tool in the prevalence of the pathogen at regional level (Golec de Zavala et al. 2020). Religious conservatism gives a sense that a mass of worshippers in a house of worship will even make the virus spread worse (Quadri 2020). Conservative group travels more than liberal and moderate groups (Van Holm et al. 2020). Health campaign has even made the conservative group reluctant to put their mask on and tend to see no benefit of the mask (Ackerman et al. 2020, Utych 2020).

Third, conservatism demonstrates low trust in scientific explanation about COVID-19. Individuals tending to position themselves in a political conservatism, orthodox and religious principles and to believe conspiracy even put a little trust in science. More religious or conservative groups are likely to distrust scientific sources and media (Perry et al. 2020). Ideology (conservatism) also affects the trust in agents or organizations of science during the pandemic (Hamilton & Safford 2020, Qian & Yahara 2020). Fourth, conservatism overlooks mainstream reports about COVID-19. The pandemic politicization has even triggered conservative group to overlook news disseminating information on the virus severity (Corpuz et al. 2020, Rothgerber et al. 2020). The conservative group believes that media and social media have too much coverage about COVID-19 and it stimulates exaggerated public reaction and supports the conspiracy allegation (Christensen et al. 2020). Fifth, political conservatism shows low

support toward COVID-19 vaccine. Those who are highly conservative are seen less supportive to the vaccine program and precautions (Callaghan et al. 2020, Rothgerber et al. 2020). Sixth, conservative stockpiling is mounting. Worry about pandemic increases the stockpiling in conservative group. This group mainly lives in the regions with limited access to foods and other needs (Micalizzi 2020).

All those negative conservatism characteristics are the main indicators highlighting differences and weakness of conservative group in responding to the pandemic. Among those stigmas, political conservatism is prominent and the most stigmatized. Two questions are raised regarding this issue: Do the orders which the conservatism holds on to contravene the program or policy set to tackle the pandemic? Is there any new view out of the perspective about 'difference' to help elaborate the response of conservatism to pandemic?

In order to answer these questions, studies on conservative leadership in responses to the pandemic deserve academic attention. Conservatism is believed to house relevant wisdom in elaborating the leadership that is given to face the pandemic at grassroots level, such as the leadership in village government. Indonesian conservatism, mainly Javanese as dominant ethnic and tradition, is believed to be able to provide distinctive explanations concerning conservatives' responses to the pandemic. Javanese conservatism with long record of civilization has practices and values to respond to the pandemic situation and potentially provides distinctive explanations about its response to the outbreak. Thus, the main objective of this research is to profoundly investigate Javanese conservative political leadership of a village head in dealing with COVID-19 and its impact on the region under his authority

Research Method

This study focuses on Javanese conservative leadership's practices and values run by a village head in a rural Javanese village in Malang Regency Indonesia. According to a recent literature, studies on political leadership have varied options of methodologies based on the objectives and the matters investigated. Among varied perspectives of analyses and methodologies, observational analysis is the most relevant method employed in this research (Gains cited in Uhr 2014). Observational analysis is a part of qualitative methodology that involves inductive reasoning. These preferred methodology and research method is appropriate with the purpose of the study in "revealing the realm of leadership, trust, and its practices" (Gains cited in Uhr 2014). To gather the data, this study conducted observation and interviews that involve conversation (Foster 1996 cited in Harrison 2001).

To select informants, the study applied purposive procedure of selection. It means all informants interviewed are persons who have firsthand knowledge and experience about the village head and the village government's activities to tackle the pandemic challenges. The interviewees are the village head, the head of BPD (village consultative body), members of COVID-19 village task force, village midwife, head of RT (Neighborhood Association) and RW (Community Association), head of hamlet (*kamituwo*), religious leader, member of COVID-19 sub-district task force, village community radio management, and residents or beneficiaries. In its implementation, this study specifically utilized semi-structured interview. To undertake the interview, the study employed an interview guide relating to the research questions. The guide is not intended to restrict and interrupt the interview. It is just a tool to keep the interview remaining on track.

Interview guide requests information from informants about village government's program and activities in handling the pandemic and village head leadership. During the interview, it utilized recorder device (MP3-audio) as comfortable (of the informants) as possible. Following the interview, some observations in the village were undertaken. The researcher observed and took pictures of some of the facilities provided for residents to prevent COVID-19 contagion as well as ceremonies conducted during the pandemic. Observations helped researcher to understand the programs and achievements of village government to deal with the pandemic situation.

The study also performed document analysis. An advantage of using documents analysis as data collection method is documents can minimize interview pitfalls due to informants' forgetfulness and other interview weaknesses. It analysed some documents pertained to research questions, namely village

budget, village government's data about programs, activities, and villagers who are infected by the virus. This study obtained these documents from village government office. These triangulations of sources and methods are efforts to minimize bias of the practice and values of village head's conservative political leadership. All information from the village head is compared with other informants and data sources.

This research employed grounded theory method (GTM) to analyze research data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In the first stage, all data collected from the field were processed carefully through transcribing and typing interview results and notes and document content analysis. Then, the transcript was sorted and arranged into some data categories based on information sources. Next, the study read all transcribed data to find a general sense of categorized data. In this process, it took some grasps about general ideas delivered by participants and documents referring to research questions and sub-research questions. At the next stage, it practiced three coding process to organize transcribed data, namely open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This research was conducted in Gondowangi village, District of Wagir, the Regency of Malang, taking place in three months from July to September 2020. Gondowangi is purposively selected as it is one of the villages in the regency that is under the domination of Javanese culture (apparent in the people's day-to-day activities). The village maintains Javanese cultural practices both in values and rituals.

The village consists of five hamlets, five *Rukun Warga* (RW) (Community Association), and 31 *Rukun Tetangga* (RT) (Neighborhood Association). It sits on 418.16 Ha, where paddy fields take 44.9 Ha, farming 67.20 Ha, dwelling 68.80 Ha, plantation 232.04 Ha, and public facilities 6 (six) Ha. The religious life of the village is in harmony. Referring to official data of Gondowangi village (2016), out of the total population of 8,202, Muslims account for 95.2%, followed by Hindu and Christian accounting for 2.8% and 2%, respectively. Most locals did not finish their primary education (42.9%). Those completing their primary school account for 29.4%, followed by the number completing secondary school and higher education representing 25.7% and 2%, respectively.

Results and Discussion

Programs, accomplishment, and networking

In reference to the official data of Gondowangi village, there are two categories of program aimed to deal with COVID-19 in the village, involving COVID-19 handling and food security. Five out of seven activities had been conducted from March 2020 to September 2020 categorized as the prevention of COVID-19 infection that involves provision of disinfectant and personal protective equipment (APD), disinfectant spray all over the village, provision of washbasin in public facilities, pandemic prevention campaign on banners, establishment of COVID-19 crisis center in village office, and maximizing village granary to anticipate the impacts of large-scale social restriction (PSBB) policy. Moreover, the village listed people at risk (ODR), people on watch (ODP), patients under medical surveillance (PDP) or those confirmed positive for COVID-19. When the fieldwork ended (September 2020), COVID-19 handling was still in progress in the village

All those measures are confirmed by some locals and an RT 09 head. SUS, RT 16 resident, shared: "The program involves spraying (disinfectant) conducted once a week all over dwellings and houses. Staples are distributed to all locals by the village." Other interviews confirmed the same issue as told by SUP, RT 09 head; ADI, RT 16 resident, a bread vendor; LUK, RT 09 resident, working for a private company; WID, RT 11 resident, working in a development project. OKA, the head of RT 16, assured that the same programs were also conducted in his neighborhood. He mentioned: "Patrolling in the neighborhood is running well, and security guard stays vigil at the neighborhood. Health guidelines remain in force and wearing mask and regular hand washing are encouraged."

The second program is aimed to deal with those infected with COVID-19, where isolation area is independently set in the village office (second floor) and *polindes* (village birth clinic), but those reactive to the virus and tested positive for the virus prefer having their quarantine period at home. SIN, the task force member of COVID-19 in the village said: "Those confirmed positive for Covid are immediately isolated, and we do tracing and spraying to hamper the virus from spreading."

Sobari: "The worth of Javanese conservative leadership in coping with COVID-19"

DEN, Chief of COVID-19 Task Force, District of Wagir and WAY, a village midwife, confirmed the handling of those confirmed COVID-19 positive is supported by self-isolation. Interview with SIN and JAT member of COVID-19 Task Force in Gondowangi village mentioned that COVID-19 handling is also apparent in burial process of those dead of COVID-19. COVID-19 task force in Gondowangi village has performed burial process twice in compliance with COVID-19 burial protocol. Data on COVID-19 patients in Gondowangi village showed the same figures till September 15, 2020.

Moreover, the village government deals with economic impacts due to the pandemic. Restriction in Greater Malang (including Malang Regency) was enforced from 17 to 30 of May 2020. It was mandatory for both village government and villagers to comply with the social-restriction policy.

The village head was fully aware of plummeting economy and food security during restriction since access to earning money was hampered. Thus, the village government took measures to deal with the impacts on the economy to protect the susceptible people. Staple foods were distributed to those at risk of food insecurity due to the pandemic. The village government (to 15 September 2020) allocated IDR 113,866,000 (approximately USD 7,799) to handle pandemic effect on economy. JAY, one of the residents in RT 16, confirmed the distribution of staple foods: "Staple foods are provided in the village and distributed to all. The package included rice 25 kg and eggs one kg (1 kg)."

SUN, RT 16 resident; SUS, RT 09 resident; SUP, Head of RT 09; WID, RT 11 resident, confirmed distribution of staple foods to COVID-19 affected residents.

The success of COVID-19 handling in Gondowangi village is indicated in tangible and measurable output. Furthermore, the performance is apparent in the outcome or the capability of resolving pandemic-related issues faced by the locals in the village. LUK, the resident of RT 09 asserted: "Yes, I think it is working since wearing mask is mandatory, and hand washing, healthy eating, and consuming vitamin are encouraged. Staying healthy and complying with the regulations from the village head are paramount."

SUS, RT 09 residents also had the same perspective; SUN, RT16 residents told the same thing. In addition to the compliance with the health guidelines, participation of the residents to maintain the security of their neighborhood has also contributed to the success of handling COVID-19 cases. SEC remarked that patrolling done by the locals is aimed to anticipate people coming from outside the village. The patrol starts at 22.00 to 03.00.

All activities intended to tackle the pandemic-related issues have triggered people to obey the rules and participate more in pandemic handling. The low cases of infected people and death indicate the people's obedience and awareness of the threat of the pandemic as remarked by WAY, the village midwife.

To run the program and activities to handle COVID-19, the village head and government utilize network and voluntarism from the people in the neighborhood and village's apparatuses. COVID-19 Fighter, a WhatsApp group facilitating chats and connecting village head, village apparatuses, community members, and the chief of neighbors (RT, RW, hamlet) in Gondowangi, has served as a network handling COVID-19 in the village.

The village government also established COVID-19 task force intended to carry out the burial of those dead of COVID-19, sprayed the neighborhood with disinfectant, and took other relevant measures. SEC informed:

"All village apparatuses involved in handling the pandemic, including BPD (village consultative body), RT-RW and village midwife, security and public order, 'babinsa' (Local supervisory non-commissioned officers) from 'koramil' (Sub-district military command), 'babinkamtibmas' (Police officers assigned to villages as security and public order advisors ,and members of AMPAS (The Youth Environmental Association in Gondowangi Village), community of RAPI (The Indonesian Community Radio Networks), and community of RPU (retransmission radio)." (Informant SEC).

LUH, Head of BPD in Gondowangi, added about the role of media: “Information about Covid handling is aired on amateur local radio the Gondowangi FM and handy talky (HT).”

Such a network not only serves as a communication media connecting the government, village, and the people, but it also facilitates some activities to handle the pandemic. The task force in the village plays a vital role in taking all measures to tackle and prevent the virus as initiated by the village head and community.

Interestingly, this network involves Gondowangi FM 105.9 MHz. This local radio is believed to help with the dissemination of information on infectious disease handling. The following is narration read on air on the local radio regarding COVID-19 infection:

“Do not make a crowd, avoid crowded places, do not shake hands, and no handshaking is a new habit now, but it does not mean impoliteness, unfamiliarity, or *satru* (Javanese means stopping talking to each other due to dispute, no handshaking is aimed to stop the spread of the virus, and hand washing is always encouraged. Please wash your hands and feet before entering the house, also wash your hands before and after meals, avoid crowd, put on your mask, maintain social distancing, and stay healthy.”

This message is repeatedly stated every day. SUG, a founder, a manager, and the main announcer of the radio, remarked that Gondowangi FM has played an essential role in penetrating the barriers to the culture in terms of adapting to a new habit. He also added how the village government and the radio worked together to arrange the contents brought to the broadcast for the people. The socialization of health guidelines and the adaptation to the new habit are what comes from the discussion with the village head.

In the network aimed to cut the spread of COVID-19, the radio plays important role in disseminating messages to all people in the village. WID, the resident of RT 11, stated, “The radio is quite good, as it reminds us of COVID-19 and social distancing and mask.” JAY, RT 16 resident, and LUK, RT 09 resident expressed the same opinion. OK, the head of RT 16, agrees that radio is an easy access for people in the whole village to understand the prevention of COVID-19.

Radio serves as the solution to maintain the village culture and values during pandemic. *Bersih desa* ceremony (literally: “the cleansing of the village”— i.e., of evil spirits, Geertz, 1976) (observation on September 4, 2020) and *ruwatan* (observation on September 5, 2020) are performed without forming a crowd because they were broadcast on air via Gondowangi FM. Residents of each RT stayed tuned on the Radio Gondowangi FM to join the ceremonies. *Ruwatan* is part of the *bersih desa* ceremony aim to clean the village from bad luck, such as disaster, pandemic.

Handy talky (HT) is also made available by the village head to allow easier communication during the emergency of the pandemic. Samiran, a businessman and the *Kamituwo* (head of hamlet) of Gedangan said that the village head bought and distributed HT to every patrol post for communicating with each other (LUH, SEC, and SUG confirmed the importance of HT).

Other networks also playing a vital role in measures aimed for COVID-19 handling are religious figures (especially Muslims) and mosques. Moreover, spiritual support is also given to the people during the pandemic. The religious figures serve as an example in complying with health guidelines implemented in mosques where worshippers usually make a crowd to pray together. AGU, an Islamic figure living in the neighborhood of RT 15 said:

“Since the outbreak, takmir (mosque management) has been aware to spray disinfectant in the houses of worship and to provide wash basin and hand sanitizers. During *tarawih* prayer (A special voluntary prayer performed only in Ramadan and commonly performed in congregation in the mosques), body temperature is checked with thermo-gun for a month and social distancing remains in place. *Idul Fitri* (Eid Al-Fitr) prayer was also performed with health guidelines under the supervision of village apparatuses. At night spraying was applied before the prayer, and all worshippers with no masks were provided with masks by the village.” (Informant AGU).

Sobari: "The worth of Javanese conservative leadership in coping with COVID-19"

Not only implementing the health guidelines in mosques, but AGU also feeds people with 'spiritual supplement' to strengthen the confidence of facing this pandemic through prayer like *sholawat* (a religious chant praising the Prophet Muhammad), *istigfar* (Ask for God's mercy), and *Yasin* recital (Reciting the *Yasin* epistle in the Koran in group) after *Shubuh* (dawn prayer) and *Maghrib* (sunset prayer) prayer. Religious activities like *istigoshah* (praying in groups) are held based on health guidelines.

RT head is another important network. As the smallest unit in the village, the RT head plays an essential role in transmitting messages from the government to the residents. SUS highlighted: "Socialization is given by the village to RT, and the RT head passes the information to the residents. The bottom line is that people should be aware of their health." SUN, RT 16 resident, remarked the same opinion. Moreover, RT head also serves as a connector and is responsible of programs aimed for prevention, especially spraying disinfectant in all houses in the neighborhood.

All these networks aimed for COVID-19 handling in the village indicate the importance of teamwork. More importantly, the working networks also shows the practices and the leadership role of village head in involving all elements to cope with COVID-19.

Conservative leadership practices

Although COVID-19 handling is a part of national policy, practices and attainment are inextricable from the local context of village. That is, political leadership of a village head can serve as one of the distinguishing factors in the approach required to deal with the pandemic.

DAN is the 11th village head responsible for supervising measures taken to deal with the pandemic in the village, and has been in office for two terms (2013-2019 and 2019-2025). DAN holds a bachelor degree from English Language Teaching of Malang State University (UM). Before he took office, he once worked in an international tourism agency in Sukabumi, West Java.

LUH remarked, a village head formally is a COVID-19 task force in Gondowangi village. Operationally, village head serves as a commander in responsiveness to the emergency of COVID-19.

One of the essential policy roles in dealing with COVID-19 is providing fund. The village head has submitted two amendments in funding and village budget to fund COVID-19 handling and impacts. SAM, the *Kamituwo* of Gedangan elaborated the behavior of the village head in decision-making: "Controlling the disease is paramount although it is decided in a discussion. Everything works well with the existence of the leader, and ideas are passed to others."

In a nutshell, a village head plays an important role in directing the village policy. Dialogue is still performed, involving village elites including the *kamituwo*.

Out of the context of policy making, the village head leadership is identical to the performance of the village head in dealing with COVID-19. All village elite informants and the locals interviewed refer to the leadership performance of handling COVID-19, not only making formal decisions. Elites and the village residents responded more to the attitude of the village head when dealing with the pandemic. The midwife WAY shared her experience:

"It is fast response. Information on person's death of COVID-19 is passed well and the team (task force) was ready to do so. Different from what happens in another village, where people are debating on WhatsApp, but not in our village. (Like) Yesterday, burial was performed at 16.30 for a patient dead of COVID-19, its fast response here, and the village head was present in the burial." (Informant WAY).

WAY also added that the village head came along to the hospital to help with the discharging of the dead patient. He also explained to the bereaved family that burial following strict COVID -19 health guidelines was mandatory.

Moreover, the head of BPD asserted that the village head performs a good leadership. He understands what to do amidst the pandemic, is directly involved in COVID-19 handling, cares about the ordeal the people are facing, and is willing to listen to and to mingle with the residents. SAM added: "Village head holds nationalism (principles). He doesn't prioritize certain group's interest. People respects togetherness here and the village head treats people equally."

This statement also indicates that the village head is not discriminative. In handling the pandemic and its impacts, he treats people equally no matter what their social status and religions are. People also have similar opinions to the elites regarding the performance of village head's leadership in dealing with the pandemic. SUS stated: "I respect the village head since he is quite responsive to situations, not like in other villages." SUN, RT 16 resident, showed the same perspective implying that the village head is willing to directly get involved. JAY and ADI, RT 16 residents, and WID, RT 11 resident, testified that the village head was seen to get involved in society and keep reminding his people of putting their mask on. SUP, the Head of RT 09, added about responsive policy of the village head to protect the people's food security. The village head initiates to stockpile rice in village granary.

Another opinion regarding the leadership is also given by LAS, the Head of RW 03: "It is crucial to keep all sectors under control, so not only in the leadership among apparatuses. (Village head) can encourage all sectors, including volunteers (to participate)." The RT and RW heads see the village head capable of bringing participation of all people in the village, not only does he encourage the village apparatuses.

As told by village elites and confirmed true by the villagers, the village head has the leadership quality in which he responds to the pandemic, listen to the problems, has empathy, get directly involved, is not discriminative, is capable of involving and encouraging the participation of the people, and is consistent in reminding the people of complying with COVID-19 health guidelines.

Conservative leadership values

The first statement heard from DAN aimed to answer the question regarding programs initiated to deal with the pandemic in the village refers to Javanese values. He remarked:

"DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) of Javanese characteristic are accustomed to (something) which is invisible, such as occultism, ancestors, *barang alus* (invisible spirit). The meaning for the residents of Gondowangi Village, COVID-19 is like *barang alus*. So, every villager who holds the values of Javanese Culture and Tradition is always *eling lan waspodo* (aware and stays alert)." (Informant DAN).

DAN performs his leadership based on Javanese cultural values simply because "Javanese leadership values are dynamic. It meets (with villagers' need) when the value is equal." This leadership refers to his "father and grandfather". This reference is vital during the pandemic. DAN explained about this importance by linking it to gamelan music performance, saying:

"My grandfather used to be an artist. He lived a harmonious life in a fun way since he played gamelan. He could stand strong whatever the 'rhythm' was. He believed that issues could not be taken seriously so all the solutions can be found in less stressful way." (Informant DAN).

This way will ease communication (about the pandemic) with the villagers. In terms of the values and principles of leadership held by the village head in COVID-19 handling, this study directly raised questions to village elites that were knowledgeable and have direct experience meeting and working with him. SEC informed:

"With togetherness and '*gotong royong*' (mutual cooperation), the village head can embrace people of different status, and it is satisfactory to see this. When you find him chew the rag here with us, and he can be found there in another corner of the village. He is very active." (Informant SEC).

Sobari: "The worth of Javanese conservative leadership in coping with COVID-19"

Together with mutual cooperation are what the village head has clung on to, and this value has made him an individual that easily mingles with other people of different walk of life, responsive, and get involved in the society.

Javanese cultural values are the unseen legacy serving as reference for the village head. LUH shared his knowledge and experience interacting with the village head as a partner of village government:

"What was passed from our ancestors serves as the culture that has been maintained to date, 'slametan' and 'barikan' in the hamlet have also been maintained. He mingles well with people. He also gives attention to Christian, Hindu, and Muslim people and the attention is quite intense. This is the Javanese values or culture in the village. So, Javanese people can keep the promise (ngugemi). He is competent and can adjust to every situation." (Informant LUH).

Slametan is a term that refers to a Javanese ritual to express gratitude and seek divine blessing (see thejakartapost.com). Geertz (1960) reveals the goal of slametan in Javanese tradition: "The wished-for state is slamet, which the Javanese defines with the phrase "gak ana apa-apa"—"there isn't anything," or, more aptly, "nothing is going to happen (to anyone)." *Barikan* is an annual *slametan* conducted in the eve of Independence day or every 16 August evening. In *barikan*, villagers pray to thank God as well as praying for the Independence fighters.

This statement confirms what the village head has stated regarding values in Javanese cultures that serve as a reference for the village head to perform his government leadership during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, SIN, the member of COVID-19 Task Force confirmed the analogy of *barang alus* in Javanese belief to be equal to *pagebluk* (pandemic) or COVID-19. Javanese culture is the value of the village head always refers to in terms of COVID-19 handling. Javanese people believe in *barang alus*, and the village head tends to encourage villagers to be more careful to live along with them. The most relevant reference concerning belief in 'ghosts' is given by Geertz (1960) in the term '*bangsa alus*' including *memedi* (literally, frighteners), *gendruwo* (male *memedi*), *lelembut* (literally, ethereal ones), *setan* (devil), *djim* (*jinn* or genie), *tujul* (*tuyul*) (children spirits unseen creature), *demit* (place spirits unseen creature), *danjang* (*danyang*) (guardian spirit unseen creature).

In interview with DAN, a question about Javanese cultural operational values he holds to deal with pandemic was raised. The response was brief, "I have to *ngancani* (accompany) them." Furthermore, the village head explains the term *ngancani* in interaction with others, or called as *melek'an* or staying awake. The village head admitted that since March 2020 he always goes to bed after 3 a.m. *Melek'an* is described as accompanying others taking their turn in night patrolling in the pandemic. DAN further linked it with conversation, accompany, and snack.

The term *ngancani* is described as *jagongan* or gathering or having conversation. LUK, the resident of RT 09, explained more about *jagongan* by the village head: "He is attentive; he is not solely at home. He is a good leader, caring and protective. He always spends his time at night outside. I see him riding his motorcycle with his cigarette. All youths know him."

Ngancani, indeed, has broader meaning. The village head is seen to get involved directly in emergency situations regarding those confirmed positive for COVID-19, those dead, those discharged from the hospital, those in need of assistance due to financial hurdles, and in other activities. His presence and companion during the pandemic are proof of leadership through *ngancani* and *njagongi*. They are perceived as the importance of the village head's leadership in dealing with the pandemic.

Dismantling the politics of conservatism

The findings in this study indicate that the stigma against conservatism in the response to the pandemic is trapped within the political logic of conservatism. When the face of conservatism exists in the form of political polarization (ideology), political and policy partisanship, and electoral interest, aspect of difference is apparent in public discourse. In other words, differences of responses are intentionally

constructed by political elites in top-down pattern to achieve the pragmatic political goal of conservatism, such as partisanship loyalty of electoral politics.

This argument is based on several findings in this research. First, conservatism is deemed to be weak and less responsible in dealing with COVID-19 (Conway III et al. 2020, Everett et al. 2020, Rothgerber et al. 2020, Samore et al. 2021). On the other hand, villagers strictly clinging on to the Javanese tradition and cultures still comply with COVID-19 health protocols. The locals also welcome the adaptation to new normal in cultural and traditional events that have been passed through generations. To accelerate the socialization of new normal, voluntary involvement of the community-based radio is able to reduce the resistance to the new adaptation and penetrate through the old habits represented by annual ceremonies.

Second, religious activities in the crowd (mass worship) are resistant to the measures taken to tackle the infectious COVID-19 (Quadri 2020, Zavala et al. 2020). The responses at bottom level show otherwise. This study reveals some religious supports, especially from Muslims, to implement health guidelines during the worship at mosques. Religious leaders in the village are willing to comply with the health guidelines in the houses of worship. Religious figures implement conservative way along with the locals based on spiritual measures in some religious rituals.

Third, conservatism has a little trust in scientific explanation of COVID-19 (Hamilton & Safford 2020, Perry et al. 2020, Qian & Yahara 2020). This study reveals that the village head and his staff simplify this scientific explanation for easier understanding among people. The village head is aware that information on COVID-19 and its risk is given by adjusting to local wisdom such as belief in astral creatures in Javanese belief that encourages villagers to stay aware and stay alert (*eling lan waspodo*) to the virus.

Fourth, conservatism is likely to avoid media coverage concerning the pandemic (Corpuz et al. 2020, Havey 2020, Rothgerber et al. 2020). At the bottom level, media close to the locals has been one of the measures to raise awareness of the locals. This study has found that the local radio has helped with the measures in virus prevention through its conservative language used to send the messages concerning COVID-19 prevention. Messages about adaptation to new normal are different from conservative tradition such as habit to shake hand or to gather that is frequently communicated.

Fifth, this study also has found out that the village head prepares stockpiles to guarantee food security during social restriction (Micalizzi et al. 2020). Conservative perspective of the village head regarding the togetherness is intended to guarantee food availability through stockpiling for all. The value of *ngancani* that the village head has clung on to in dealing with the pandemic is implemented by guaranteeing food security. Stockpiling is not for personal interest, but it is aimed to ensure that all people are well provided with food during the containment.

Sixth, this study has not found the village head's and people's opinion about vaccine. When the fieldwork took place, the policy concerning vaccine program had not been made, but radio broadcast once communicated that vaccine would be one of the solutions to escape from the pandemic.

Finally, this research highlights the effectiveness of Javanese conservative leadership in dealing with the outbreak. Cultural and traditional Javanese values have motivated the village head's leadership. Moreover, Javanese conservatism has helped the village head to put perspectives and interest of both village government and the people equal in pandemic handling. Not only does it boost people's compliance, but the implementation of *ngancani* and *njagongi* values are also effective in encouraging people's participation in measures taken to handle the pandemic.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that Javanese conservatism has been the reference for the people, and village head does not contravene the program or policy regarding pandemic handling. Cultural and traditional Javanese values bring further to equal perspectives about COVID-19 risk. Javanese conservatism put in practice by both village head and villagers serves as a solution amidst the social diversity growing in the village.

This study offers alternative perspective as well as challenges previous studies indicating difference of responses in conservatism to the pandemic. Javanese conservatism has become a factor that is able to facilitate sameness of responses to the pandemic. It serves as the stepping stone for both the villagers and the village head to unite measures to cope with the pandemic. Moreover, the study reveals that the values of '*ngancani*' and '*njagongi*' operate to achieve the effectiveness of Javanese conservative leadership responses to the pandemic.

Finally, the study implies an academic view to dismantle the political logics beyond the responses of conservatism to the pandemic situation as explained in the previous recent studies. This article proposes a bottom-up explanation by considering interactive practices and values between leader and villagers in coping with the COVID-19 which cannot be disconnected from the local cultural context of conservatism.

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Sobari: "The worth of Javanese conservative leadership in coping with COVID-19"

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