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COVID-19 Anxiety as a Moderator of the Relationship between Organizational Change and Perception of Organizational Politics in Forestry Public Sector

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Abstract: In addition to an outstanding commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDG) agenda to good governance (goal no. 16), there is an argument that the SDGs can only be achieved through good governance with strong political institutions and processes. In Indonesia, a new era in politics has been marked with the new leadership of Joko Widodo (the current Indonesian President) who has a vision to reform the Indonesian bureaucracy. One of the bureaucratic reform implementations is the merging of the Ministry of Forestry and the Ministry of Environment into the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MoE). In this kind of organizational change, employees may have increased perceptions of organizational politics and feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. This effect is suspected to be exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This article, therefore, aims to investigate the effects of organizational change in the public sector. Based on a survey of 112 state civil apparatuses in the forestry sector in Indonesia, we found that organizational change is positively related to employees' perception of organizational politics. Nevertheless, our most intriguing finding is that the COVID pandemic situation has decreased employees' perception of organizational politics. This is because political behaviors are difficult to perform in virtual working settings due to reduced face-to-face interaction and limited non-verbal cues.

Keywords: impression management; COVID-19 pandemic; organizational politics; political behaviors; bureaucratic reform



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1. Introduction

At the beginning of the world's third millennium, the United Nations (UN) launched eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be met by 2015. However, many reported that some targets were actually missed, such as on gender equity [1] as well as water and sanitation [2]. Despite many success stories, the progress has been uneven across countries. Critiques mentioned that the MDGs left behind millions of people, especially the poorest and those disadvantaged because of their sex, age, disability, ethnicity, or geographic location [3].

Following the MDG's missing targets, the UN members have adopted a shared blueprint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to achieve 17 major targets, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addition to an outstanding commitment of the SDG's agenda to good governance (goal no. 16), there is an argument that the SDGs can

only be achieved through good governance with strong political institutions and processes, e.g., [4].

In Indonesia, a new era in politics has been marked with the new leadership of Joko Widodo (the current Indonesian President), who is frequently praised for his down-to-earth style [5]. The image of Joko Widodo as a humble public servant, pictured by doing *blusukan* (A Javanese noun for an impromptu/inspection visit.) to crowded public places such as traditional markets, has rocketed his popularity. The *blusukan* activities refer to an interpersonal communication pattern, Joko Widodo's preferred method of overseeing developments and communicating with people, mostly associated with middle class to lower class citizens.

Based on his political style, Joko Widodo has a vision to reform the Indonesian bureaucracy to be simpler and faster. Following the vision, the Government of Indonesia has launched the Bureaucratic Reform movement by issuing the Presidential Regulation No. 81 of 2010 about the Grand Design of Bureaucratic Reform 2010–2025. This reform aims to create a professional, clean, accountable, neutral, and effective bureaucracy for providing excellent public services and responding to the global challenges of the twenty-first century.

Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg [6] argued that public management reform should be jointly adopted with New Public Management (NPM), supported by a view that “a particular public bureaucracy or administrative structure is embedded within a particular socioeconomic system” [7] (p. 201). NPM is based on the managerialism principle of separation between politics and management [8]. Rather than being involved in day-to-day operational issues, politicians should play strategic roles such as setting targets for managers [9].

The implementations of bureaucratic reform are not only in the central government (e.g., ministries) but also within local governments, both at provincial and district levels. One of the most noted changes is the merging of the Ministry of Forestry and the Ministry of Environment into the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MoE), with a new nomenclature. This merge has also been implemented by local governments. On top of these changes, based on the newest forestry authority regulation (Law No. 23 of 2014 on Local Government), forestry services at district levels have been withdrawn to provincial levels. As a result, many forestry State Civil Apparatuses at district levels lost their career position and were forced to be “out of their comfort zone”.

In these kinds of organizational changes, the State Civil Apparatus as organizational employees may have increased perceptions of organizational politics [10] and feelings of uncertainty and anxiety [11]. This effect is suspected to be exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as declining levels of physical and socio-economic health [12]. Based on these arguments, this article aims to investigate the effects of organizational change in the public sector, with the forestry sector in Indonesia as the locus.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

As a social influence behavior strategically designed to achieve and maximize self-interest, advantages, and benefits [13], organizational politics are viewed to be contradicted in the collective organizational goals [14]. The behavior can be associated with manipulation and illegitimate ways of misusing power [14]. Therefore, most organization members perceive organizational politics negatively. To be able to understand organizational politics, perception of organizational politics (POP) has been long suggested as a good measurement [13,15].

POP is defined as the subjective degree of employee experiences or feelings of politics in their organizational environment [16]. The model is developed based on Lewin's [17] statement that behavior is based on individual's subjective perceptions rather than on objective reality, and Gandz and Murray's [18] arguments on individual's reactions to others' self-serving behavior. It is believed that an individual's interpretation of others' acts become more important than their actual acts [17]. For example, some political acts can be misconstrued as helpful, while some helpful acts can be misconstrued as self-interest [19].

As a construct, POP is sparked from decades of systematic research and is solidified as one with significant impact on organizational behavior [20,21].

This research focuses on organizational change issues in the public sector. Compared to private or semi-public systems, the patterns of employment, occupation, and service in public organizations are substantially different [14,22]. Public organizations are perceived as offering a stable work environment and higher job security [14]. However, compared to the private sector, there is a challenge of serving a large and heterogeneous population with lower wages and slower career promotion, and its rewards system is, most of the time, not related to work outcomes [23].

In public sector settings, organizational change can be defined as gradual improvement and/or development of the existing services [24]. The change aims to increase flexibility, smoother communication, and faster decision making [25,26]. However, although the goal of organizational change is to have better performance, it also leads to opposite employee reactions. On the bright side, employees experience exciting and challenging work which can increase their personal development, employability, and pay rate [27].

On the other hand, changes that entail adverse outcomes (e.g., more significant workload, increased job complexity, loss of job control) can cause employees more tremendous stress and psychological withdrawal [28,29]. As a result, the employees may be less open to accept changes [30], exhibit lower levels of job satisfaction and involvement [31], and have lower levels of perceived person-job fit [32].

The employees' reaction to organizational change can be explained by uncertainty management theory. Uncertainty itself is defined as ambiguity about the action outcomes in unpredictable situations with inconsistent, or even unavailable, information [33]. This theory believes that people are uncomfortable with uncertainty due to their needs for predictability [34]. The feeling of uncertainty affects people's perceptions and emotions as well as threatens their sense of self [35].

When there are organizational changes in the workplace, employees will experience uncertainty [36]. The ambiguity of uncertainty is a work environment characteristic that critically provides an opportunity for detrimental types of politics [15]. Moreover, political environments in the workplace promote favoritism and nepotism for career promotions, opportunity access, monetary benefits, and other rewards [20]. People become worried about control or power shifting in their lives and its potential outcomes, such as the continuation of their job [37]. There is also a tendency to perceive the change efforts including downsizing, delayering, and redundancy as threatening [28,38].

Due to increased ambiguity and conflict, the uncertainty management theory suggests that employees' political behavior and, therefore, their perceptions of organizational politics, would increase at higher levels [13].

Hypothesis 1. *Organizational change is positively related to employee's perception of organizational politics.*

Since the novel coronavirus COVID-19 was declared as a global pandemic crisis on 11 March 2020, there have been more than five million associated deaths globally [39]. Even as this article is being written, the pandemic is still ongoing, with new virus variants emerging over time, e.g., [40]. The high mortality rates spread fear, anxiety, threat, and stress. It forces employees to pay more attention to their health issues than their work [41].

To slow the spread of contagious diseases, the governments around the world have issued movement restrictions and implemented lockdowns to reduce human physical contact [42,43]. The physical restrictions have presented a number of tangible challenges on various work-related processes [44]. Working has been shifted online, and employees are forced to do mandatory work from home with less social interaction [45]. This sudden massive change and various new external demands results in increased uncertainty, particularly around job security and financial difficulties [44]. Employees have to maintain boundaries

between their work and non-work life [46], even when they do not have (private) space in their homes to work [47].

While mandatory work and school from home allow family members to spend time with each other, build genuine relationships, and develop gratitude among their loved ones [48], it also creates various challenges, including elevated levels of work–family conflict. Many individuals do their traditional “work hours” on paid work while simultaneously caring for others (e.g., children and/or elderly). With many schools, childcare, and elderly facilities closed, parents are faced with additional responsibilities caring for and/or homeschooling children during their work hours [44]. Therefore, a lot of people with families are experiencing a blurred distinction between work and family demands, as they must re-balance their multiple adult roles [44].

Face-to-face meetings that promptly shifted to virtual meetings [49] have separated employees and leaders in a physical sense [50]. Because virtual meetings result in reduced face-to-face interaction and limited non-verbal cues, it may be more difficult for employees to engage in political behaviors [51,52]. It is also more difficult for leaders to be influenced by their employees’ political behaviors. Therefore, organizational politics are suspected as being not clearly visible. Based on those studies, we propose:

Hypothesis 2. *The relationship between organizational change and perception of organizational politics is negatively moderated by COVID-19 anxiety.*

3. Methods

3.1. Study Participants and Procedures

To assure that the content validity of each statement is relevant to Indonesians, the questionnaire was back translated by an official language institution of Malang State University (Indonesia). The results were then double-checked by experts in Brawijaya University (Indonesia) on human resource research.

Data were collected in Kalimantan, one of the major islands with the second largest forest area in Indonesia [53]. Firstly, we contacted the head or leaders of the forestry public organizations, both in central and local (provincial) governments, and informed them about the research purpose, scope, and collected information. After they permitted us to conduct research in their organizations, we disseminated the questionnaire to all managers in the organization who were willing to participate in the survey. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents answered the survey in two formats: (1) a pen and paper format on a structured questionnaire or (2) an online version using Qualtrics. The validity of data collection is maintained through these two formats.

The average time to complete the survey questionnaires was 15 min. Respondents completed the self-administered questionnaires for measuring multiple variables such as organizational change, perception of organizational politics, and COVID-19 anxiety.

In total, questionnaires were distributed to 185 respondents. We obtained 112 usable questionnaire responses after excluding 73 incomplete questionnaires. Respondents’ gender is slightly dominated by women (55.11%). The average age of respondents is 32 years old (SD 8.68), ranging from 22 to 54 years. The average tenure in current position is 5.3 years (SD 8), ranging from 5 to 10 years.

3.2. Measures

Organizational Change was measured by 18 items that were developed by Caldwell, Herold, and Fedor [32]. The sample items of this scale are: “This specific change involved changes in the work unit’s process and procedures” and “The change created problems for my work unit” as a reverse question. This scale was rated on a six-point scale (1 = I strongly disagree to 7 = I strongly agree). In this study, the coefficient Omega of this variable is 0.71.

Perception of Organizational Politics was assessed using 12 items of instruments developed by Kacmar and Ferris [54]. Example items include “Favoritism rather than merit determines who gets ahead around here” and “In my organization, pay and promotion

policies are not politically applied” as a reverse question. This scale was rated on a five-point scale (1 = never to 5 = always). The coefficient Omega of this variable is 0.72.

COVID-19 Anxiety was measured by the COVID-19 Anxiety Syndrome Scale (C-19ASS) developed by Nikčević and Spada [55]. Example items include “I have avoided using public transport because of the fear of contracting coronavirus (COVID-19)” and “I have been paying close attention to others displaying possible symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19)”. This scale was rated on a five-point scale (1 = not at all to 5 = nearly every day). The coefficient Omega of this variable is 0.75.

Control variables to avoid any potential confounding effects on the dependent variables, this study uses demographic variables such as age, gender, and job tenure in current position as control variables. These three are considered as the most significant demographic variables that affect the outcomes of organizational politics. For example, Treadway et al. [56] found that increases in politics perceptions are associated with decreases in job performance for older employees, but not for younger ones. Doldor et al. [57] stated that female managers, compared to their male colleagues, expressed the most extreme negative attitudes along the functional, ethical, and emotional dimensions of managerial politics, while Hochwarter et al. [58] argued that political actions are perceived as more threatening to newer employees than their colleagues with higher job tenure, due to a more limited understanding of the workplace environment [59] and less accumulated necessary social capital to defend themselves against competitors [60].

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through three steps. First, we used factor analysis to test the factor structures that were significantly loaded on each construct. Second, we performed hierarchical linear regression analyses to test the linear relationship between organization change (X) and perception of organizational politics (Y) and to test the interaction effect of the COVID-19 anxiety as a moderator variable. Lastly, we utilized an analytical approach using the PROCESS macro model 1 [61] in SPSS version 26.

3.4. Validity Test

We performed a series of principal component analyses, all with substantive variables. The aim is to test discriminant validity of substantive variables. Firstly, we used principal component analysis with varimax rotation. Items loaded lower than 0.6 on their general factors were omitted from further analysis. This is based on Hair et al.’s [62] statement, emphasizing 0.5 or higher as a rule of thumb for the minimum loading of an item with no cross-loadings. For organizational change, these scales ranged from 0.31 to 0.89. For perception of organizational politics, these scales ranged from 0.50 to 0.88. For the last variable, the COVID-19 anxiety scale ranged from 0.52 to 0.86.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistic

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of our data, including means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of all measures. All the zero-order bivariate correlations are in the expected direction. As shown, organizational change is positively correlated with perception of organizational politics ($r = 0.22, p < 0.05$), inviting further investigation.

Table 1. Description and correlation of variables.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Age	31.96	8.54	1					
Gender	1.55	0.49	−0.08	1				
Work tenure	1.93	1.11	0.79 **	−0.04	1			
Organizational change	3.06	0.54	−0.03	−0.05	0.09	1		
COVID-19 anxiety	3.12	0.77	0.060	0.012	0.050	−0.04	1	
Perception of organizational politics	2.94	0.53	0.082	0.169	0.057	0.22 *	135	1

** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

4.2. Model

Hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to test hypothesis 1 (Table 2). Results show that control variables had no variance in perception of organizational politics. As expected, organizational change was a significant predictor of employee's perception of organizational politics ($b = 0.65$, $p < 0.1$). The positive coefficient of organizational change on employees' perception of organizational politics showed that hypothesis 1 is supported.

The next step was to enter the COVID-19 anxiety variable ($b = -0.91$, $p = 0.05$). It turns out that this variable accounted for a negative and significant amount of additional variance in employees' perception of organizational politics.

Table 2. Regression analysis of the relationships between organizational change, COVID-19 anxiety, and perception of organizational politics.

	B	SE
Step 1: Control variables		
Constant	0.27	1.11
Age	0.00	0.00
Gender	0.14	0.09
Work Tenure	0.02	0.07
Step 2: Predictors		
Organizational change	0.65 *	0.34
COVID-19 anxiety	−0.91 **	0.32
Step 3: Interaction		
Organizational change * COVID-19 Anxiety	−0.27 **	0.10
Model Fit		
F	3.15 ***	
ΔF	6.76 **	
R^2	0.15	
ΔR^2	0.05	

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Multicollinearity diagnostics were assessed, resulting in an acceptable range (i.e., 0.88 to 0.91). Variables that were predicted to have a problematically high multicollinearity, such as organizational change and perception of organizational politics, were centered. Then, an interaction term was created between perception of organizational politics and COVID-19 anxiety [63,64]. The interaction term was added to test the moderation effect between organizational change and perception of organizational politics. The interaction accounted for a significant amount of variance in employees' perception of politics $\Delta R^2 = 0.05$, $\Delta F(1, 105) = 6.76$, $p = 0.05$, $b = -0.27$, $t = -2.6$, $p = 0.05$. These findings support hypothesis 2: COVID-19 anxiety negatively moderates the effect of organizational change on perception of organizational politics.

The significant interactions for high and low (−1 SD and +1 SD) values of the moderator were also calculated. It was found that the low values of COVID-19 anxiety do not have a significant effect on the main relationship. However, the moderate and high values of COVID-19 anxiety significantly decrease the relationship of organizational change and POP.

Figure 1 presents the form of the interacting relationship between organizational change and COVID-19 anxiety on perceived organizational politics.

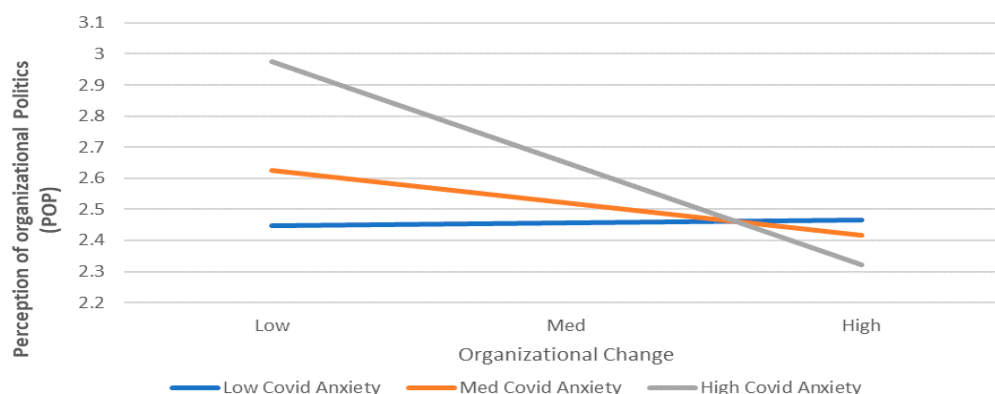


Figure 1. Moderating effects of COVID-19 anxiety on the relationship between organizational change and perception of organizational politics.

5. Discussions and Conclusions

The results confirmed both hypotheses. The data analysis showed that organizational change is positively related to employees' perception of organizational politics (hypothesis 1). As explained by the uncertainty management theory, a higher degree of changes in the workplace will increase employee's political behavior and, thus, their perception of organizational politics [13].

Our findings confirm previous studies, e.g., [65]. As a power struggle where both individuals and groups seek legitimacy to gain power [66,67], organizational change is perceived to reinforce or redistribute power. Therefore, during changes when ambivalence and uncertainty are at their peak, organizational politics will be especially apparent [65].

The impact of politics on organizational change and effectiveness appears to either block or drive initiatives [65]. It also can handle resistance to change and disrupt or contribute to effectiveness. As change outcomes are mostly determined by the interpretations of the change actors [68], most workers believe that change agents (refer to the state civil apparatus for the bureaucracy reformation) should be politically skilled [65].

The data analysis also confirmed hypothesis 2, showing that the relationship between organizational change and perception of organizational politics is negatively moderated by the COVID-19 anxiety. This finding reinforces the literature on organizational politics, especially related to the COVID-19 situation.

A study by Muafi [69] found that public servants in Yogyakarta, Indonesia are aware of the need to engage in political efforts in their organizations to gain the first opportunity to be promoted. The political efforts can be carried out openly but also can be hidden. Theoretically, this cultural workplace phenomenon can be explained based on the concept of power distance [70]. Power distance is defined as the extent to which less powerful members accept an unequal distribution of power in their organization [70]. The inequality (more versus less) is defined from below, not from above, which means it is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders [71]. Furthermore, although power and inequality are fundamental facts, some societies are more unequal than others [71].

The concept suggests that individuals in organizations with a high power distance, such as Indonesia [72], consider impressing their superiors as a legitimate behavior [73]. Furthermore, it is stated that in high power distance countries, an unequal distribution of power discourages subordinates from questioning authority [74]. Therefore, these countries are argued to be less likely to implement NPM successfully [74].

Nevertheless, our most intriguing finding is that the COVID-19 pandemic situation has decreased employees' perception of organizational politics. In unstable pandemic times, circumstances and information are rapidly changing. The high rates of infection and significant mortality of COVID-19 have forced employees to pay more attention to

their health issues than their work [41]. All their communication channels may have been occupied with the proper and effective risk communication of COVID-19 [75].

Moreover, political behaviors are difficult to undertake in virtual working settings due to reduced face-to-face interaction and limited non-verbal cues [51,52]. Superiors are also more likely not to be influenced by their employees' political behaviors. This has happened during massive public activity restrictions in Indonesia. Many jobs (especially those that are categorized as nonessential) have been shifted online, and employees are forced to do mandatory work from home (WFH) with less social interaction. Depending on their area level, the Indonesian state civil apparatus can do WFH from 25% to 100% of their working days.

5.1. Study Limitations

We acknowledge several limitations to this study. First, while the survey approach has a number of advantages, it represents a methodological compromise. The method is perceived as a struggle to capture the dynamics of politics and can only provide the big picture, revealing broad patterns and trends [65,76].

Second, the sample is nonrandom and purposive, which may imply a bias towards the public sector and employees (state civil apparatus) with experience of organizational change. Statistical generalizations to a wider population cannot be confidently provided. Despite the flaws, it is reasonable to consider the transferability [77] of this study's findings to the broader management population [65]. The transferability confidence is strengthened by the consistency of the survey response patterns as well as by the extent to which the results of previous studies are supported.

Third, there is a common method variance issue associated with self-reported measures in a cross-sectional study. To mitigate the potential problems, anonymity for each respondent is ensured throughout the research design. Additionally, all variables were interspersed in the questionnaire so that respondents were unable to recognize any direct relationship between three measured variables.

5.2. Future Research

While politics is traditionally seen as self-serving and organizational politics are viewed to contradict with the collective organizational goals [14], political behavior is not necessarily seen as damaging [65] and may be triggered by selfless motivation and actions [78]. In addition to the ongoing pandemic, with new virus variants emerging over time, e.g., [40], future research can be directed towards studying the roles of organizational change in organizational politics, especially in the public sector. Will remote working, forced by the pandemic, change the political variables (e.g., strategy or behavior) in workplace settings?

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