

A So-Called Viral Sovereignty: Global Health, International Law, and Figures of Speech

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Infectious disease surveillance and management have long necessitated international cooperation and negotiations over national sovereignty; indeed the specter of contagion stands alongside trade at the base of a history of internationalism. An outbreak of avian influenza in 2005 spiraled quickly into a diplomatic standoff between World Health Organization officials and the former Indonesian minister of health, who pushed back against the mandate to hand over live virus samples without compensation. This paper examines the legal and political bases for the Indonesian claim to sovereign rights over viral materials collected within its borders, and explores the narrative and philosophical implications of the term “viral sovereignty,” coined by American commentators to describe it.