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Competing Populisms, Digital Technologies and the 2024 Elections in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in Indonesia on 14 February 2024 are poised to involve over 200 million citizens out of a total population of 285 million. Among these eligible voters, approximately 115 million belong to the millennial or Gen Z demographic. Within this electoral landscape, the presidential race features a diverse array of candidates, where populism plays a significant, albeit not the dominant, role in shaping the campaigns and agendas of three key contenders. This study aims to explore the relationship between various forms of competing populisms and their utilization of digital technologies. It examines how these dynamics intersect with the digital divide, democracy, pluralism, and social cohesion within Indonesia's electoral framework. Additionally, the paper outlines potential areas for further research in this domain.

INTRODUCTION

When Indonesia goes to the ballot box for the parliamentary and presidential elections on February 14, 2024, more than 200 million of Indonesia's 285 million citizens will be eligible to vote, and more than half (~115 million) will be millennial or Gen Z voters. The forthcoming presidential race in Indonesia presents a diverse array of candidates (Prabowo Subianto, Ganjar Pranowo and Anies Baswedan), each embodying distinct and evolving political personas. Within this context, populism emerges as a pivotal, albeit not dominant, element shaping the campaigns and platforms of these three presidential candidates.

Furthermore, the landscape of Indonesian leadership stands redefined, characterized by nuanced shifts and strategic recalibrations among key contenders. Analyses focusing on the manifestations and impact of competing populisms in the political landscape, specifically within the realm of digital campaigning, technological utilization, the digital divide, and the dissemination of disinformation are urgently needed.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the interplay between diverse forms of competing populisms and their engagement with digital technologies, the digital divide, democracy, pluralism, and social cohesion within the Indonesian electoral context with a focus on the presidential candidates. It also suggests some avenues for further research.

The Presidential Candidates



Ganjar Pranowo, as Central Java Governor, at a cultural festival in Batang / Central Java Regency, Indonesia on October 2, 2018. Photo: Shutterstock.

Anies Baswedan, once identified with Islamist populism, now takes center stage with a recalibrated persona, shedding overt affiliations while gathering support from influential right-wing religious factions (Bachtiar, 2023). This transformation marks a departure from his previous political maneuvers during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial race, presenting Anies as a potential unifying force for Indonesia's diverse populace.

On the other hand, Prabowo Subianto's trajectory since his last electoral defeat in 2019 has been a paradigm shift, pivoting towards a role within Jokowi's cabinet as Minister of Defense. Prabowo first contested the presidential elections in 2014 as a classical 'man on horseback' strongman populist. He literally rode a chestnut stallion in military uniform whilst inspecting his 'troops' at a key campaign event in the National Stadium, where he also addressed his supporters dressed to imitate Sukarno, Indonesia's first president. Formerly associated with cultural nativism and a stance against foreign influence, Prabowo has rebranded himself as a stalwart advocate for the people, navigating the choppy waters of geopolitical upheavals and external pressures. This transformation aims to project resilience and solidarity amid the evolving global landscape.

The third candidate, Ganjar Pranowo, following in the footsteps of his mentor President Joko Widodo, affectionately known as Jokowi, has embarked on a metamorphosis from a popular leader to a technocrat deeply engaged in bolstering public services and fostering developmental initiatives (Bachtiar, 2023). Paralleling Jokowi's trajectory, Ganjar's evolution underscores a shift towards a more technocratic approach centered on tangible progress and societal welfare.

Remarkably absent from the direct electoral fray is Jokowi himself, particularly following the setback of his proposal to extend the presidential term limit. His endorsement of Prabowo, coupled with the astute political calculus surrounding his son Gibran Rakabuming's vice-presidential candidacy within Suharto's son-in-law's camp, delineates a nuanced political landscape, painting a mosaic of calculated realignments and strategic choices.

Jokowi has navigated a distinctive trajectory throughout his ten-year tenure as the incumbent president. Emerging from entirely outside the realm of Jakarta's political elite, Jokowi initially embodied the quintessential underdog, advocating for the interests of the common populace upon entering national politics. His ascent was marked by a palpable sense of grassroots support, culminating in a commendable approval rating that continues to soar, defying global standards at around 70% to 80%.

However, the landscape of his leadership has undergone a discernible evolution. While initially associated with a strain of populism, Jokowi has transformed into a bastion of development-focused governance, aligning himself closely with Indonesia's preeminent political entity, the PDI-P. This shift has effectively overwritten earlier populist tendencies, reshaping him into an influential figure within the Jakarta establishment.

Yet, this metamorphosis has not occurred without repercussions. The paradigm shift towards a development-oriented presidency has coincided with a subtle erosion of accountability and scrutiny. Within this context, Indonesia has witnessed a nuanced regression in democratic tenets under Jokowi's stewardship. The narrative of authoritarian developmentalism, often veiled in the rhetoric of populism, has become the reflexive justification for this incremental decline in democratic checks and balances.

Ganjar Pranowo, the nominee representing the PDI-P party and currently serving as the governor of Central Java, diverges notably from traditional populism in his approach. His candidacy is characterized by a departure from populist rhetoric, signaling a potential shift towards a more nuanced and pragmatic governance style.

Contrastingly, retired general Prabowo Subianto, making his third bid for the presidency, has surged ahead in social polling since March 2023. Prabowo has long cultivated an image as a stalwart strongman and populist advocate for the people. His political trajectory has been marked by a consistent portrayal of himself as a champion of the masses, embodying the tenets of populist leadership.

Occupying a steadfast position in the social polling rankings, former Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan represents a distinct faction within the electoral landscape. Baswedan garners support from the forces aligned with Islamist "civilizational populism" (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2022a; 2022b), constituting a third but significant bloc within the upcoming presidential election. His candidacy embodies the fusion of religious identity with populist ideals, marking a distinctive presence in the political spectrum.

The diverse range of candidates vying for Indonesia's presidency underscores the multifaceted nature of the electorate, with each contender offering a distinct and changing ideological and governance framework to the voters.



Prabowo Subianto gives a speech about the vision and mission of the 2019 Indonesian presidential candidate in front of a crowd of supporters on the campaign in Yogyakarta, Indonesia on April 8, 2019. Photo: Aidil Akbar.

The evolution of Indonesia's political landscape since the conservative shift, highlighted by scholars like Bruinessen (2013), Assyaukanie (2013), and later examined by Sebastian et al. (2021), manifested prominently in the 2016 Islamist civilizational populist demonstrations in Jakarta. These events notably contributed to Anies Baswedan's victory in the gubernatorial race, marking a pivotal moment in the country's political trajectory.

This shift towards conservatism and the subsequent rise of Islamist civilizational populism coincided with an overarching trend towards authoritarian inclinations within the governance framework of Indonesia. Scholarly works by Power (2018), Diprose et al. (2019), and Mietzner (2018; 2020) have extensively documented this progression, highlighting the observable authoritarian undertones within the political landscape.

Simultaneously, the response from the established government to curb Islamist civilizational populist movements, exemplified by the banning of entities like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), indicated a proactive stance against such groups. However, the manner in which these actions were executed, often without due process, raised concerns among scholars, signaling a potential deconsolidation of democratic norms and practices within the country.

Scholars and analysts have echoed apprehensions about the state of Indonesian democracy, painting a picture of a system under duress and potentially in regression. Works by Warburton &

Aspinall (2019), Schäfer (2019), Power & Warburton, and Aspinall et al. (2020) collectively underscore the prevailing sentiment that Indonesia's democratic foundations face formidable challenges, with some even suggesting a retreat from the established democratic principles. This confluence of events and scholarly observations emphasizes the complexities and potential threats facing Indonesia's democratic fabric.

In the field of populism studies, the concept of 'competing populisms' elucidates the simultaneous existence of multiple populist ideologies within a singular political milieu, i.e. the nation-state. Scholars such as Mietzner (2020), Hadiz and Robinson (2017), and Vampa (2020) have showcased the relevance of competing populisms in understanding the complexities of political dynamics. Hadiz and Robinson's analysis in 2017 sheds light on the landscape of populisms in Indonesia, identifying two prominent and competing strands: secular-nationalist populism and Islamist populism. Their argument posits that the rise of these rival populisms is deeply rooted in societal and ideological divides prevalent within the country. However, crucially, they attribute the ascendance of these populist movements primarily to the perception of enduring 'systemic injustices' that have persisted in the wake of a two-decade-long democratic era following three decades of authoritarian rule.

This perspective offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the genesis and proliferation of competing populist ideologies in Indonesia. The legacy of authoritarianism and the subsequent transition to democracy created a breeding ground for societal and ideological rifts, laying the groundwork for the emergence of rival populisms. The societal and ideological divides, amplified by historical and contemporary grievances, have given impetus to these divergent forms of populism.

The divisions delineate the contours of competing chauvinist, Islamist, and technocratic populisms (Mietzner, 2018; 2020), where distinct factions vie for ideological dominance. The chauvinists, Islamists, and technocrats represent divergent populist visions for the nation's political and socio-religious landscape. The clash between these populisms manifests as a multifaceted struggle, with each faction endeavoring to shape the narrative and direction of Indonesia's political trajectory. It must be noted that the mere existence of these divisions within society is not adequate; instead, their active politicization by a populist leader becomes imperative (Mietzner, 2020). This process involves the strategic engagement with discourse surrounding socio-economic disparities, often framed within overarching primordial and ideological divisions. This viewpoint resonates with a broader body of literature that examines the relationship between populism and societal dynamics. It emphasizes that populism does not emerge in a vacuum but rather thrives within the fertile grounds of existing societal, economic, and ideological rifts and emotive polarizations.



DKI Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan with residents of Kampung Akuarium in Jakarta, Indonesia on April 14 2018. Photo: Shutterstock.

In a comprehensive literature review focusing on emotions, religion, and populism (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2021), it was shown that populists frequently utilize emotions as a potent tool to garner support, establish connections with their audience, and influence public opinion. Their rhetoric is crafted to either create new or capitalize on existing collective grievances or aspirations, evoking intense emotions like fear, anger, hope, nostalgia, resentment, or vindictiveness, which deeply resonate with their followers. Through these emotional appeals, populists construct a narrative that pits 'the people' against 'the elite,' often portraying the elite as collaborating with or serving the interests of 'dangerous others,' typically marginalized groups and minorities. Consequently, this emotionally charged dichotomy reinforces a sense of victimhood, identity, and belonging among theirsupporters, simultaneously portraying their opponents as outsiders or adversaries. In Indonesia's context, this becomes particularly evident as various populist movements tap into and amplify these divisions and emotive polarizations, thereby fueling their own narratives and agendas.

Populism often capitalizes on pre-existing fault lines within society, exploiting them to mobilize support and consolidate power. This dynamic interaction between populism and existing societal fissures perpetuates a cyclical relationship where populism both exacerbates and is influenced by these underlying divisions. By framing socio-economic inequalities within broader primordial and ideological contexts, populist leaders resonate with specific segments of the population, further deepening

the societal fault lines they seek to exploit. This interplay underscores the complex and symbiotic relationship between populism and the existing socio-political landscape.

The notion of 'systemic injustices' serves as a catalyst for the traction gained by these populist movements. The perceived inadequacies and persisting inequalities within the democratic system have become fertile ground for the mobilization of support behind secular-nationalist and Islamist populist narratives. These narratives often capitalize on the grievances stemming from economic disparities, political marginalization, and cultural divisions, resonating with segments of the populace disenchanted with the post-authoritarian democratic order (Barton et al., 2021a; Barton et al., 2021b; Yilmaz et al., 2022; Yilmaz and Morieson, 2023).

The evolution of technology, particularly the advent of the internet and digital media, has dynamically reshaped the landscape of political engagement. This transformation has not only ushered in new avenues for communication but has also catalyzed the surge of divergent populist movements.

In contrast to traditional media outlets like newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, which were often beholden to the interests of media magnates, new media platforms operate on a different paradigm. The internet, especially when access is widespread and unrestricted, empowers citizens to freely engage with political messages disseminated by various populist figures. This direct interaction allows for real-time responses and active participation in shaping the discourse

Media anthropologists underline the transformative potential of new media, emphasizing how these platforms revolutionize individual thought processes and communication patterns (Anderson, 2003; Eickelman and Anderson, 2003;Hirschkind, 2017). These digital landscapes present novel opportunities for fostering digital egalitarianism, enabling diverse voices to be heard and empowering individuals to actively engage with populist narratives. In essence, new media stands as a powerful intermediary, fostering direct and unfiltered communication between populist leaders and the populace. Through digital platforms, these leaders can directly connect with and mobilize their supporters, shaping and amplifying their messages in real-time, creating a dynamic and interactive political sphere.

The concept of digital equality as a catalyst for democratization is a compelling notion. However, the realization of this potential largely hinges upon the actions and intentions of the media users themselves. In the realm of political competition, the digital sphere becomes a battleground where self-image can be meticulously crafted to present an idealized and flawless persona. Conversely, it becomes a tool to fabricate negative narratives about political adversaries.

This phenomenon has contributed not only to the proliferation of misinformation but also the deliberate dissemination of disinformation. While misinformation refers to the misuse of accurate information in an inappropriate context, disinformation entails the deliberate spread of false or misleading information with the explicit aim of undermining

political opponents, particularly those seen as opposition figures. Consequently, the aspiration to expedite the evolution of benevolent democratic practices through digital media confronts the harsh reality of its manipulation by entities that disregard fundamental values such as truth, integrity, equality, fairness, and civil liberties. This challenge poses a significant impediment to the genuine realization of digital platforms as drivers of democratic progress, highlighting the urgent need to address the ethical and moral dimensions of digital engagement in the political sphere.

The landscape of digital media in Indonesia has evolved into a key domain for political mobilization, offering an avenue for ordinary citizens to engage in the political discourse. This evolution, however, is marred by the proliferation of fake news, hoaxes, hate speech, and other divisive behaviors that run counter to democratic values (Lim, 2017). The online rivalry of competing populisms has notably exacerbated societal and political divisions, amplifying the polarization within Indonesian society.

This amplification of societal cleavages through the mediation of digital media in populist politics has significantly impacted Indonesia's socio-political history over the past two decades. The period following the democratic transition that commenced in 1998 has been marked by intricate complexities stemming from the lingering effects of collective trauma, widening socio-economic disparities, and the exacerbation of public grievances fueled by competing populist groups. Consequently, this dynamic has posed formidable challenges to Indonesia's pursuit of democratic consolidation in this era.

On the other hand, the control wielded by the governments and capital owners over key infrastructures presents a clear demonstration of their capacity to impact political contestation through means like access restrictions, hacking, surveillance, and even total control cut-offs. In instances where a ruling government maintains complete dominance over a country's digital operations, political contestation tends to be severely lopsided, with one side significantly advantaged due to excessive control over technology. Consequently, this imbalance fosters an environment conducive to digital authoritarianism (Yilmaz, 2023).

Importing advanced digital technologies entails not just acquiring access but also welcoming a certain degree of influence from the exporting entities. This influence can extend politically, leading to interference between the technology's owner/exporter and the user/importer, potentially empowering specific political entities, like the establishment, to monitor and manipulate their adversaries. This dynamic doesn't just create opportunities for digital authoritarian behavior; it also introduces a transnational dimension wherein such behaviors are inherited or transmitted from external sources (Yilmaz, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The complexities surrounding the competing populisms in Indonesia, particularly in the lead-up to the upcoming February 2024 elections, present a complex and cyclical interplay within the realm of democratic processes. The dynamics of consolidation and deconsolidation in democracy create a compelling and challenging landscape that merits thorough investigation and extensive research to fully comprehend its multifaceted nature, demanding a comprehensive exploration to reveal its nuanced dimensions. There is an urgent need to explore the following key areas:

i) Understanding Diverse Manifestations: Investigate and categorize the varying forms and expressions of competing populisms within a specific country. Analyze their ideological underpinnings, rhetoric, and mechanisms of mobilization.

ii) Interplay with Democracy: Examine the complex relationship between competing populisms and democratic institutions. Investigate how populist movements impact the functioning, resilience, and legitimacy of democratic systems.

iii) Impact on Pluralism, Polarization, and Social Cohesion: Assess the effects of competing populisms on societal structures, focusing on their influence on pluralism, polarization, and social cohesion. Explore their implications for social fabric and unity.

iv) Digital Technologies and Populist Movements: Study the utilization of digital platforms and technologies by these populisms. Investigate how social media, online networks, and digital tools are employed to propagate populist ideologies and mobilize support. Explore the role of disinformation campaigns in shaping public opinion and polarizing societies.

v) Digital Divide and Its Implications: Analyze the digital divide's role in the context of populist movements. Explore how disparities in access to technology and information contribute to social fragmentation and exacerbate existing societal divides.

vi) Mapping Transnational Dimensions: Explore the transnational aspects of competing populisms. Map connections, influences, and collaborations among populist movements across borders, identifying shared ideologies and exchanges of strategies.

By addressing these critical research areas, scholars can help to deepen our understanding of contemporary political dynamics, contributing to informed policymaking and the preservation of democratic values in an ever-evolving global landscape.

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