Social Media and the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election: What's New and What's Not

Leonard C. Sebastian and Januar Aditya Pratama

SYNOPSIS

Social media has been transforming Indonesian politics since 2012. For candidates and the public alike, the use of digital technology in the elections of 2024 presents new challenges and opportunities. A more diverse electorate, the proliferation of artificial intelligence, and the possible return of identity politics are three issues to note for the upcoming elections.

COMMENTARY

Social Media and the Indonesian Political Landscape

Like the elections of 2014 and 2019, which saw the emergence of social media influencers and, to some extent, the so-called "buzzers", the impact of social media on the 14 February presidential election will be evident; however, it will have its own merits and challenges.

While the threats of both disinformation and misinformation persist, there are novel dynamics shaping the 2024 presidential election in Indonesia, namely, the proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, with its impact of producing more combustible dynamics on social media, and, unlike during previous elections, the presence of a more diverse electorate.

A More Diverse Electorate

People of the Gen-Z generation alone comprise more than 23% of the electorate; combined with millennials, they constitute the [majority](#) of voters. Furthermore, these two generations [dominate](#) the internet and, by extension, social media.

Consequently, the candidates competing for the presidency this year have tailored their campaigns to fit the demands and needs of the youth, especially first-time voters. Such conditions, in turn, provide unique opportunities and challenges.

Gen-Zs and millennials prefer informality and are less than enthused by a traditional political campaign, which in turn has incentivised the three candidates to pander to them: Anies Baswedan by reaching out to K-pop fans, Prabowo Subianto by presenting himself as *gemoy* or cute, and now Ganjar Pranowo, who is striving to revive his flagging campaign, by using the penguin *meme* on various social media.

In the recent presidential debate, when candidates faced off on defence, security, international relations and geopolitics, there were instances of digression, especially by Anies, to focus on non-traditional security issues to pander to this electorate. At every opportunity, climate change, unemployment, and other social justice matters were reiterated in each candidate's visions.

The candidates also need to comprehend how the younger and the older generations differ in their perceptions of the past. While the baby boomers may be more receptive to sentiments resembling New Order reality, like the need for price controls and subsidies, which candidates could exploit, Gen-Zs and millennials are less receptive to such election ploys. Curiously, although Prabowo is often linked to the New Order regime, it is the young generation that dominates his voter base. This oddity implies that Gen-Zs and millennials are unperturbed by the incumbent defence minister's association with the Suharto regime.

AI and Machine Learning: Opportunities and Risks

Since 2021, the use of large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT has gained traction in Indonesia, with both good and bad outcomes. Politicians and their supporters have not resisted the temptation to use such tools.

In one example, a technology called "Deepfake" was used to spread disinformation. It involved a video manipulated through AI to give the impression that President Joko Widodo was giving a [speech](#) in Mandarin, which compelled the Ministry of Communications and Informatics to expose it as a [hoax](#). Another example is how the technology was used to bring the late president Suharto back to life in a [video](#) uploaded by Golkar politician Erwin Aksa.
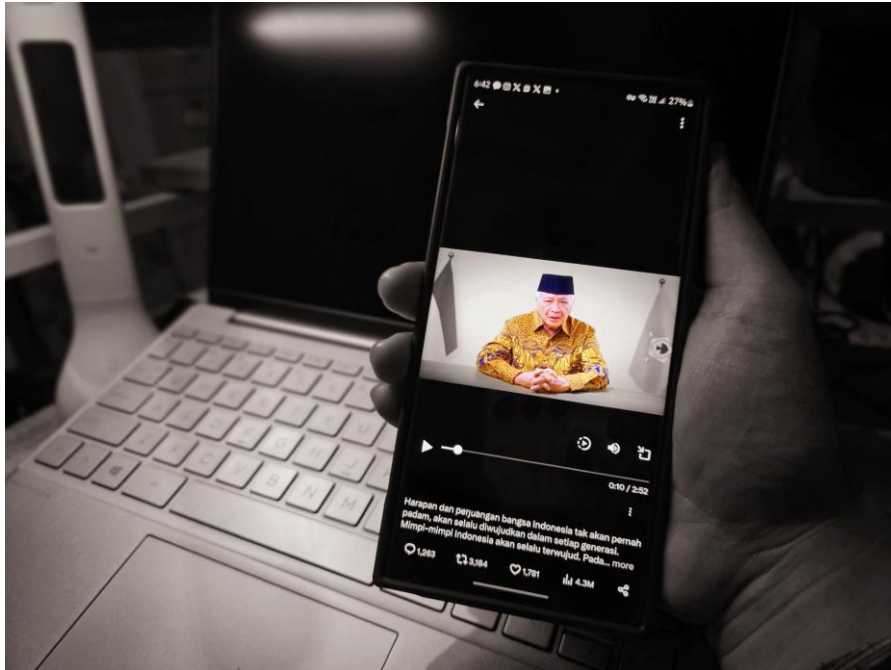
One of the many ways Indonesian presidential candidates are using digital technology in their election campaigns is through artificial intelligence (AI), as seen in a video uploaded by Golkar politician Erwin Aksa in which the late president Suharto appears to be brought back to life. *Image from Erwin Aksa via X.*

Beyond the harmful tailoring of information, AI and machine learning can also be used to analyse social media dynamics and thus indirectly influence it with algorithmic manipulation.

While the use of generative AI and machine learning was [observed](#) as early as during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, such tools could further help actors manipulate public behaviour on social media by determining which information should be viewed by the masses.

LLMs have been used by buzzers to distort information on social media by imbuing their narratives with emotional appeals, misleading facts and biased interpretations. Today, the use of bots is far more considerable and algorithmic manipulation has never been easier.

AI and machine learning, though, could also be used positively. Although raising ethical and legal questions, the use of AI art by Prabowo's campaign team has nonetheless garnered a positive response for its heart-warming tenor. Another positive example is the Drone Emprit platform, designed by Ismail Fahmi to gather and map sentiments on social media, particularly X (formerly Twitter), after specific political events, including those related to the upcoming elections.

Less Polarisation, More Organic Debates?

Arguably, discussions and debates on social media can be more tense owing to the rise of "micro-influencers" alongside the increase in bot activities. What makes micro-influencers different from traditional mass media is the fact that they have smaller but highly engaged followings, which could range from 10,000 to 50,000 followers. This is a characteristic almost unique to the younger generation, with such influencers

actively engaging their audiences in online discussions and gaining the status of *primus inter pares* in the eyes of those followers.

With a general decline of public trust in formal institutions and a corresponding rise of "peer-to-peer influence", such "peers" are deemed as more trustworthy than the traditional mass media. This means that partisanship towards online echo chambers and opinion leaders that fit into them can be exploited, especially by micro-influencers.

Recurring Challenges from the Previous Elections

Identity politics, a recurring theme in Indonesian politics – arguably since the 212 Aksi Bela Islam demonstrations – continues to haunt the Indonesian political landscape. While some would argue that polarisation would not be as severe as it was in previous elections, this dynamic nevertheless seethes beneath the surface.

It sustains itself in new forms, one of them being recent anti-refugee sentiments against the Rohingya refugees. On social media, many would use it to advance their preferred candidate's agenda. An example is the efforts by the opposition to Anies to portray him as an immigrant, like those from Myanmar, only that he comes from Yemen. Another example is how some Indonesians could be influenced by the use of religious and ethnic identities to sway their decisions on which party or candidate to elect.

Approximately 30% of the population are vulnerable to identity politics owing to low digital literacy and susceptible to manipulation by well-funded buzzers and social media influencers.

Unlike the profoundly polarising dynamic that characterised the two previous presidential elections, a three-cornered fight dilutes the discussions leading up to the 2024 election. However, this does not mean that heated debates do not appear on social media or that identity politics will not return with a vengeance in the second round of the election, especially if it is contested between Prabowo and Anies.

Conclusions

Social media shapes the 2024 election landscape in three ways:

First, the presence of younger demographics in the voter base incentivises candidates to tailor their campaigns to match their needs. While the Gen-Z and millennial generations care for relatively novel issues like climate change, they have nonchalant attitudes to democracy and human rights issues, compared with their older counterparts.

Second, as sources of credible information, greater importance is placed on peer-to-peer influence than on the established mass media in the upcoming elections. This is due to the increasing use of social media and the growing lack of trust in formal institutions.

Finally, there are early signs of the use of identity politics. If a second round of elections has to be held for the presidency, those early signs could be exacerbated and the polarising dynamics of the 2014 and 2019 could re-emerge.

***Leonard C. SEBASTIAN** is Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the Indonesia Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.* ***Januar Aditya PRATAMA** is a Research Analyst with the Indonesia Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.*

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