

How Indonesia's cyberspace entrenches oligarchic power

Prabowo Subianto's victory in the 14 February presidential election has cast a dark shadow over the future of Indonesian democracy. His triumph is widely attributed to the support of his former archenemy, Joko Widodo (Jokowi), the very man once extolled by observers as a democratic reformist.

I argue that the rise of both Prabowo and Jokowi is the result of the extension of oligarchic power to an increasingly contested digital political space, in which elite interests engage in various control strategies to win votes and undermine any challenge to their ascendancy.

Oligarchic capture of cyberspace

The 2024 presidential election is testament to the resilience of the interwoven and inter-generational structure of political and financial power that represents the Indonesian oligarchy. The power of the oligarchs - sometimes in allegiance and sometimes in competition - in safeguarding their interests in different political and technological settings demonstrates how their massive resources have informed, if not defined, the tone of political conversations in cyberspace over the past decade.

They do so not so much by peddling misinformation as by co-opting or creating pseudo-digital activism in cyberspace. In this way, they pave the way for the emergence of digital populism and propaganda, such as employed by the Jokowi and Prabowo campaigns.

Studies, including my own research, show how Jokowi's image as a 'man of the people' and Prabowo's new persona as a 'cuddly grandpa' were manufactured by an army of cybertroopers, paid for by their supporters.

This has contributed to a polarisation of online civil society in which a cohesive and powerful counterforce has failed to emerge. Indonesian cyberspace is reduced to another site of political struggle dominated by competing elite interests.

Cyberspace as a site of intra-elite conflict

“Buzzing” has become a blanket term used by Indonesians to describe the behaviour of a vast “influence” industry in social media, which comprises political consultancy firms, public relations companies, social media influencers, an army of cyber-troopers/astroturfers (people who are paid to disseminate political propaganda and make it look like genuine public sentiment), and click-farm accounts (bots or individuals who are paid to interact with social media posts to create the appearance of positive engagement).

This industry is critical for the success of political digital propaganda operations and thrives on the political and financial resources of the oligarchs. It is important to note that while social media theoretically allows grassroots forces to mobilise virtually, the latter do not always have the financial capacity to do so in a highly influential way. Case in point was the 2020 anti-jobs law protest when labour unions, student groups and middle-class activists joined forces on social media to challenge the controversial legislation. The protest was immediately neutralised by oligarchic-powered cybertroopers and withered after a few days, while the better financed pro-jobs law campaign was sustained until the end of the year.

With the absence of a powerful social force capable of countering oligarchic power, Indonesia’s cyberspace has mainly become a new playground for elite contestation. This explains why the narratives and rhetoric used by the populists easily change, given the fluidity of the oligarchic configuration and their divergent interests. This also explains why digital pro-democracy campaigns often fail to bring about meaningful change, with the elite often co-opting such movements for their short-term interests.

This was clearly displayed in the 2024 presidential race. Prabowo inherited at least half of Jokowi’s buzzing firepower and was granted access to state power and the material resources of the President’s oligarchic backers. In addition, Prabowo was backed by an alliance of mining oligarchs and several giant capitalists who were said to have supported the pair behind the scenes. This allowed him and Jokowi to mobilise a large number of cybertroopers to back up their political campaign.

With oligarchic forces aligning with Jokowi’s support of Prabowo’s candidacy, the campaigns targeting the former general’s checkered human rights record—a key issue in the 2014 election, which first delivered power to Jokowi—were far less effective. A large part of the oligarchic-driven buzzing industry was paid to look the

other way.

Both Jokowi and Prabowo used social media to connect directly with their voter base, bypassing the traditional media that once served as almost the sole gatekeeper of political messages.

A more grounded digital activism

Narrative contestations on social media during the 2024 elections were either largely designed or at least co-opted by the elite. This was the case even when the narratives used by the elite to attack their rivals deeply resonated with the progressive elements of civil society, such as the massive campaigns against Prabowo as a human rights violator in 2014, and in 2024 against Jokowi as the new enemy of Indonesian democracy.

Indonesian progressives need to be conscious of the risk that narratives can be easily hijacked and twisted by better resourced elites. Meanwhile, cyberspace will continue to be a realm of fierce intra-oligarchic struggle over access to, and control of, state resources. Digital activism cannot rely on hashtags alone to bring about change.

This article, brought to you by the University of Melbourne, is part of an Asia Institute and Asialink series on democracy in Southeast Asia. The series coincides with the upcoming Southeast Asia Oration at the University, to be delivered on 4 July by Mr Pita Limjaroenrat MP, a Member of the Thai House of Representatives and Former Leader of the Move Forward Party.

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Image: A Prabowo-Gibran campaign in Yogyakarta, 8 February 2024. Credit: Shutterstock/Raynul.

A long version of this article can be read [here](#).