

How Indonesia's expanding cyberspace has become an oligarchic playground to entrench power

The electoral victory of Prabowo Subianto in the February 14 election has cast a dark shadow on the future of Indonesian democracy. His dramatic ascent from the ashes of two election defeats in 2014 and 2019 is widely attributed to the support of his former archenemy, Joko Widodo (Jokowi), the very man once extolled by observers as the democratic reformist who prevented Indonesia from turning into an autocracy under a Prabowo presidency. While many lamented Jokowi's betrayal of the democratic mandate bestowed on him, this article argues that the rise of both Prabowo and Jokowi as digital populists is the natural consequence of oligarchic power in an increasingly digital political space.

I argue that the ascent of digital populism in Indonesia is an outcome the oligarchic co-option of cyberspace as a new terrain of capital accumulation and an arena of struggle for power and wealth—a testament to oligarchic resilience in different political as well as technological settings.

This article examines the structural and material factors that drive the use of populist rhetoric and propaganda in the digital realm in Indonesia, and how it was critical for the maintenance of oligarchic dominance. I argue that 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 by the competing oligarchic factions who harnessed the power of social media as an 'organ of public opinion' and digital populists to further their respective interests.

This has resulted in a polarised online civil society incapable of facilitating the emergence of a cohesive and powerful counter-force, as expected by liberal scholars and digital optimists, leaving Indonesian cyberspace as another site of political struggle dominated by competing elite interests.

Debating Indonesian populism

Populism is generally defined as either a political ideology (ideas) or style (performative actions) in which 'the people', defined specifically by populists, are pitted against 'the elite' or the 'other' (ethnic/racial minorities or foreign migrants). Various types of populisms have emerged in Europe, the Americas and Asia, making the concept more elusive to define.

Scholars have debated the nature of populism in Indonesia, too, particularly after the 2014 election that pitted Jokowi and Prabowo. Prabowo was described as an 'oligarchic populist', while Jokowi a 'polite' or 'technocratic populist'. Such a framing was proposed by those who argued against the notion of oligarchic domination in the reform era following the fall of former authoritarian President Suharto in 1998. In this case, Jokowi was portrayed as representing reform vis a vis the conservative elite. Meanwhile, the oligarchy theorists, who argued otherwise, put both politicians in the same basket: 'secular national populists', as opposed to 'Islamic-based populists'. They contended that both populisms in Indonesia are powered 'from above' to sustain oligarchic power.

The conceptualisation of Indonesian populism which focuses on the different personalities of Prabowo (elite) and Jokowi (reformist) is dated now, considering that both Jokowi and Prabowo today are practically indistinguishable. I therefore focus on the analysis of oligarchy theorists which focuses on the structural factors that produce the populists, rather than the populists themselves. This analysis goes further by examining the ways in which an oligarchic system of power and an expanding cyberspace created the conditions that enabled the rise of digital populists.

I argue that both leaders work according to the structural necessities set by the oligarchic system, rather than personal ideology, which turns Jokowi into a man of contradiction. They are both products of the same oligarchic system of power in Indonesia, including the way the state organises the use and abuse of information technology as a tool of control.

Theorising digital populism

Communication scholars are less concerned about the definition of populism and its classifications. As Lone Sorensen states 'approaching populism from a

communications perspective implies a shift in focus from what populism is to what it does and how it does it.' It therefore focuses more on the ideational and stylistic aspects of populism, which refers to the content or the anti-elite, or the us-versus-them ideology peddled by the populists, and the rhetoric they used to steer people's emotions.

Here I use Giuliano Bobba's definition of digital populism as an 'outcome of the effect of the web in general and of social media in particular on the populist practices of politicians, the media and citizens', which includes, 'not only the use of digital channels to conduct populism, but also the changes that the digital environment has on the very content and style of populist arguments.'

The notion that digital technology has empowered populists around the world is intuitive, considering the emergence of global populists such as former US president Donald Trump, former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte, and Indian prime minister Narendra Modi. These political leaders have built their digital persona as defenders of the people against the corrupt elite on social media, boosting their electoral appeal.

There is no doubt that the nature of digital technology has benefited populists more than other types of politicians. As explained in the study by scholars Sven Engesser, Nayla Fawzi and Ander Olof Larsson, the internet provides direct connections to the group of people (usually defined as 'the people') targeted by the populists, creating an impression that by bypassing the media establishment 'the people' are more sovereign in cyberspace. This allows them to demonise not only the elite but also the 'others' that are deemed to be a threat.

However, it is inaccurate to suggest that the anti-elite rhetoric of the populists will always translate into anti-elite policies or strategies once they are in power. While digital populism studies in liberal democracies consider the rise of right-wing/left-wing politics on social media as a critical factor that explains the rise of digital populists, implying a more balanced power relationship between digital populist leaders and their populist followers, I argue that the case is different in Indonesia. In Indonesia, like elsewhere in the world, neoliberal contradictions have created the conditions for populist politics, but populism there has become integral to elite powers. Digital technology has been instrumental in that process.

Digital populists and the ‘buzzing’ industry

The 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election was the critical juncture during which the political campaign industry became an indispensable element in Indonesian politics. While it was often mistaken for a form of ‘digital volunteerism’, it was in fact, as outlined by Muningsar Saraswati in her doctoral thesis, ‘a common strategy of popular support mobilisation by the political elite in Indonesian elections’.

‘Buzzing’ is a blanket term used by Indonesians to describe the ‘influence’ industry on social media, which comprises political consultancy firms, public relations (PR) 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). The buzzing industry is therefore critical for the success of digital political populists.

It is important to note that while social media allows grassroots forces to mobilise virtually, the latter do not always have the capacity to do so. Jokowi’s digital ‘volunteers’ during the 2014 and 2014 elections, particularly their top leaders, were materially compensated by the oligarchic faction that considered him the best candidate to protect their interests, then led by Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) Megawati Soekarnoputri, former Vice President Jusuf Kalla, coal and military oligarch Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan and media mogul Surya Paloh, chair of the NasDem political party.

The buzzing industry was then already maturing as businesses looked online to advertise their products; and was intertwined with the political patronage system as it had been during its formative years in the early 2010s. In addition to the older oligarchs above, who have their respective operatives to organise and mobilise online campaigns for Jokowi, many political buzzers I interviewed for my research highlighted the important roles played by the new elite or younger oligarchs such as media tycoon Erick Thohir and telecommunications tower businessman Sakti Wahyu Trenggono.

Trenggono was a member of a team of experts for Jokowi’s campaign in 2014 and its general treasurer in 2029 and Thohir was the campaign team chairman for Jokowi in 2019. Trenggono was later appointed as the Minister for Fisheries and Maritime

Affairs, while Thohir was assigned to lead the State-Owned Enterprises Ministry (SOEs). Both are linked to the vast network of political buzzers through at least two major pro-Jokowi social media operatives: Arya Sinulingga, Erick's spokesman at SOEs, and Dede Budhiyanto, an ally of Trenggono and a commissioner at state-owned shipping company PT Pelni.

Prabowo, meanwhile, relied on the financial support of his younger brother, Hashim Djojohadikusumo, and his running mate, Sandiaga Uno, to finance his campaigns, including the use of cybertroopers during the 2014 and 2019 elections. Hashim, founder of business conglomerate Arasari Group, and Sandiaga, co-founder of investment company Saratoga, were once listed among the 50 richest people in Indonesia. The former was dropped from the list in 2021, the latter in 2014.

Populist rhetoric without ideology?

By examining what populists do, rather than what they are, it is fair to say that Jokowi and Prabowo have more in common than previously thought. Their ascent was facilitated by the oligarchy that seeks to maintain control in digital Indonesia, in which media powers are no longer concentrated on media institutions but dispersed to include social media platforms as well as buzzing agencies and their troops/influencers.

Both Jokowi and Prabowo, with support from their respective oligarchic backers, used social media to connect directly with their voter base, bypassing the traditional media that once virtually served as the sole gatekeeper of political messages. But given their dependence on elite support, they limited their anti-elitism rhetoric and relied heavily on the tactic of 'othering' to polarise the online community and solidify their base.

In their article, Inaya Rakhmani and Muninggar Saraswati argue that both Prabowo and Jokowi could be classified as 'authoritarian populists', citing the fact that both used cyber-armies and PR consultants to engage in divisive rhetoric in cyberspace to garner votes. The strategy was mainly used to engineer consent and also mobilise negative public sentiment against each other, or the specific elite faction that is excluded from 'the people'.

Neither Jokowi nor Prabowo was truly anti-elite, however. Their campaigns actually relied more on fearmongering, excluding or 'othering' certain segments of society that could be considered as either 'pro-Western/Chinese interests and therefore anti-

Indonesia' or 'pro-radical Islamist ideology and therefore anti-Indonesia'. Both candidates used the state ideology of Pancasila and nationalism, which were also used by Suharto's New Order oligarchy to disempower civil society forces. This shows that both digital populists, as argued by scholars Vedi Hadiz and Richard Robison, had no plan to challenge the oligarchy. In fact, they have been instrumental in maintaining oligarchic power in digital Indonesia, in which populist rhetoric and ideology are seen as a viable way to secure public consent.

Cyberspace as a site of intra-elite conflict

With the absence of a powerful populist movement from below (not even the proponents of Islamic-based populism were able to forge cross-class alliances to prop up their Islamic state project), Indonesian cyberspace has mainly become an elite playground.

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 was clearly displayed in the 2024 presidential race when Jokowi, Prabowo and former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono joined forces to challenge two rival oligarchic factions, one led by the PDI-P and the other by the NasDem Party with the support of former Vice President Kalla.

With oligarchic forces revolving around Jokowi's support of Prabowo's candidacy, the negative campaigns targeting the former General's checkered human rights record—a key issue in the 2014 election—were far less intense. This is largely because a large section of the buzzing industry was paid to look the other way.

Identity politics did not play a large part in the 2024 election. One reason for this is that Prabowo's main rival, Anies Baswedan—who was accused of weaponising sectarian sentiment to defeat his rival, Basuki 'Ahok' Tjahaja Purnama, in the 2017 Jakarta election—chose to portray himself as a pluralist and inclusive leader to expand support among more secular voters. The other reason is that the buzzing network that peddled sectarian politics in the previous elections was linked to the elite faction backing Prabowo, who nominated Anies for governor in their attempt to undermine Jokowi.

But the most decisive factor of the elite contestation in 2024 was the fact that Prabowo inherited at least half of Jokowi's buzzing firepower and, more importantly, was granted access to state power and the material resources of the President's

oligarchic backers. Prabowo, who ran with Jokowi's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, was backed by an alliance of mining oligarchs comprising Luhut; Recapital Group co-founder Rosan Roeslani; Adaro CEO Garibaldi Thohir; and Jhonlin Group founder Syamsuddin Arsyad, also known as Haji Isam, among others; as well as several big businesses, including conglomerate PT Djarum and HM Sampoerna (the largest tobacco company in Indonesia) who were said to have supported the pair behind the scenes.

This allowed Prabowo and Jokowi to mobilise a large number of cybertroopers to back up their political campaign. Several political buzzers I interviewed claimed that the Prabowo camp offered higher payment for buzzing work. The common expression I heard about Prabowo's campaign is '*duitnya gak berseri*' (they have unlimited supply of money), indicating the ticket's massive spending on digital campaigns.

Digital populism is here to stay

As the main electoral battleground in cyberspace moved from Twitter to Tik Tok, digital populists used new strategies to engage with voters. This included rebranding Prabowo from a no-nonsense strongman to a humorous and cuddly grandpa.

That said, while the narratives change, populist styles of campaigning prevailed, even though it was arguably less intense. The Prabowo camp, for example, portrayed Anies and Ganjar Pranowo as being beholden to their respective oligarchic backers (Surya Paloh and Megawati), while their candidate was portrayed as a political leader who answered to no one. Anies, meanwhile, accused the Jokowi-backed Prabowo camp of cronyism, while Ganjar asserted his humble origins as the only candidate in the race who came from an ordinary family and thus not part of the elite.

The narrative contestations on social media during the 2024 elections were still largely designed, or at least co-opted, by the elite to further their interests. This is 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, and then against Jokowi as the new 'enemy' of Indonesian democracy. These narratives were used by the elite to mobilise public sentiment in cyberspace in an ongoing intra-oligarchic struggle over access to and control of state resources.

Indonesian progressives need to be aware that such narratives could be used by the elite to mobilise public sentiment in cyberspace in an ongoing intra-oligarchic struggle over access to and control of state resources. Digital activism cannot rely on hashtags alone to bring about change.

This article is a long version of an article published by Melbourne Asia Review and Asialink's Insights as part of a special 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.

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