

# The role of the internet and social media in the 2014 Indonesian elections

Kathleen Azali

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE HISTORY of Indonesian presidential elections, the 2014 elections witnessed just two candidates: Prabowo Subianto and Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo. It was also the first time the internet and social media played such a consequential part in the process.

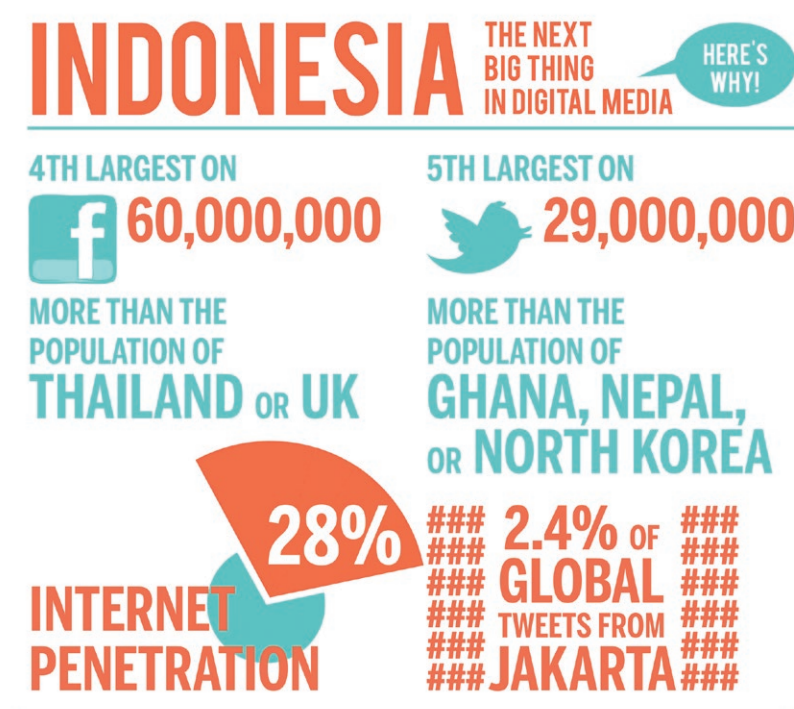
Only 70 million, out of 250 million citizens in Indonesia, are reported to have regular internet access. However, as more and more Indonesians use low-cost mobile devices, internet penetration has increased from less than 1% in 2000 to 15.4% in 2012. Indonesia also has the fifth highest number of social media users worldwide, following the US, Brazil, Japan, and the UK. According to research by SemioCast in 2012, Jakarta is the world's most active Twitter city, surpassing London and Tokyo, while Bandung ranked sixth. Facebook recorded more than 200 million interactions related to the Indonesian elections between March and July 2014, while Twitter recorded nearly 95 million tweets on the subject, starting at the beginning of 2014. This activity intensified during the final weeks of the elections, with a number of elections-related hashtags, such as #Jokowi9Juli or #Pilih\_No1\_PrabowoHatta, reaching worldwide trends. It must be remembered, however, that massive uses of bots and hacking attempts to manipulate social media have also been reported from both sides; these trending topics must thus be interpreted with caution as increased mentions or followers on social media do not necessarily translate to increased popularity. After all, one can buy 1,000 Twitter followers in Indonesia for IDR 15-50,000 (US\$1-5).

Both candidates used social media extensively, though many have noted that Prabowo's campaign was far more systematic and highly coordinated. Jokowi's campaign, in contrast, was less coordinated with different messages and accounts driven by random and unpaid volunteers. There might have been more than 1,000 disparate initiatives supporting Jokowi, resulting in a cacophony of diverse voices that made campaign messaging fragmented and

Interesting statistics on social media use in Indonesia. Adapted Infographic reproduced under a Creative Commons license courtesy of Trixia on Flickr.

incomprehensible. Nevertheless, despite this fragmentation, many came to rely more on their social media rather than on official news outlets for the latest political updates. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and mobile text messages also played a crucial role in the organization of events, like rallies and concerts.

The role of social media did not end even after ballots had been cast. Crowdsourcing was crucial in the monitoring of the ballot-counting process. With the General Election



Commission uploading scanned tabulation forms from 486,000 voting stations across the nation onto its website, many ordinary voters could check them online, scrutinise and point out strange counts and possible manipulation. Some initiated crowdsourcing projects to monitor the election. One tumblr account, c1yanganeh.tumblr.com, was set up to compile and list suspicious tabulation forms. MataMassa.org was set up by the Jakarta Independent Journalist Alliance (AJI) and iLab, and later endorsed by the General Election Commission, to collate and verify reports of electoral manipulation, intimidation, or any sorts of infringement. KawalPemilu.org, which emerged a few days after the election, gained the most attention with its real time display of robust tabulation. Interestingly, the website Kawal Pemilu [lit: to guard the election] was not established by a think-tank or governance-related organisation, but by an Indonesian citizen working overseas for a technology company. Ainun Najib created the website with the help of his Indonesian friends, all working in private technology companies in different overseas countries, in two days. Through Facebook he enlisted 700 volunteers to manually tally the 486,000 scanned forms and release the count results in real time. This attempt to maintain transparency over the vote tabulation process contributed significantly to the prevention of possible manipulation. This type of online crowd-sourced monitoring is now being considered for future regional elections.

The internet and social media have thus provided an avenue for citizen participation that was not available before. Nevertheless, the internet is not open, neutral, or free from barriers or censorship. Access to the internet and mobile gadgets in Indonesia is still limited to less than 30% of the population. At the same time, it would be short-sighted to limit the analysis of its potential to only those with direct access to the internet, since the networks of those potentially influenced by the information can be larger. For example, many issues raised online and on social media eventually crossed into mass media outlets like television and newspaper, where they gained significantly more attention. Ultimately, political participation and new media should not be separated from the society and media landscape that they are situated in.

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# Campaign culture: the strange and the bizarre

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THIS YEAR'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS in Indonesia have been defined as the most important political event of the country's recent history. And yet in the background of this momentous event was a strange and bizarre culture of political campaigning. Joko Widodo, Governor of Jakarta, a self-made entrepreneur from the town of Solo, won with more than 53 percent of the vote share against Prabowo Subianto, the former son-in-law of President Suharto. But the race turned out to be much closer than thought. Helped by Rob Allyn, a well-known American consultant,<sup>1</sup> the Prabowo camp crafted a no-holds-barred campaign that some observers say was a masterful display of political strategy. This strategy triggered a most bizarre series of events.

The first of these was at the start of the campaign when Prabowo paraded in Jakarta's main sports arena (GBK, Gelora Bung Karno) on a pure-bred stallion. Clad in 'safari' attire and a kris (traditional dagger) strapped to his thigh, he reviewed his 'troops' in front of thousands of supporters. While his former post as commander of the Special Forces (Kopassus) during the Suharto years explains the militaristic penchant, it signaled a deeper meaning for many. It showed that Prabowo had, very early on, understood the longing for authority in large sectors of the population who saw in the country's recent democratic experiment a threat to national integrity and a way for a corrupt and decentralized bureaucracy to accumulate astronomical sums of money.

However, the GBK event also made clear to observers and the general public that Prabowo truly believed in his own 'manifest destiny'. After all, there were claims that he was a descendent of the legendary Javanese war leader Diponegoro (1785-1855), an illustrious heritage that made Jokowi's modest background look even duller. The Prabowo camp also tried to show through the newspaper *Obor Rakyat* (The People's Torch), published specially for the campaign, that Jokowi was, in fact, a Christian-Chinese, working for Israel, America and the Vatican – in short an infidel and an enemy of Islam. The newspaper also stated that Jokowi's party, the PDIP, was the 'Party of the Cross' (*Partai salib*) working towards the Christianization of Indonesia. No doubt these 'revelations'



Ambassador Marciel Joins Governor Joko Widodo for Kampung Visit. Photo reproduced under a Creative Commons license courtesy of US Embassy, Jakarta on Flickr.

played a part in lowering Jokowi's standing in Muslim circles, particularly in the Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) of East Java, where the newspaper was largely distributed.

On the evening of Election Day, after the quick-count results came in, Prabowo appeared on TV declaring that he would not recognize the results of the seven institutes that had declared Jokowi the winner. After all, four other institutes had announced results showing that he himself had won (although none of these four made their data public). Prabowo declared that he would retract from the process. A day later, he announced that he was taking the case to the Constitutional Court. According to the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), an Islamist party and staunch supporter of Prabowo, his victory was solid. The party's real count results were exactly the same as the nation-wide poll it made on the

5th of July! The PKS gathered ten trucks of documents, a set of data that showed "massive, structured and systematic" cheating by the Jokowi camp. However, these trucks disappeared and the Prabowo legal team was left with two cartons of documents to present in the Constitutional Court.

In the meantime, Prabowo supporters gathered in front of the Court's office to vent their anger and protest against a purportedly stolen election. Young supporters wearing iPods, dark glasses and Nazi Swastika-themed attire mingled with upper middle-class housewives (*ibu-ibu*) donning Hermes luxury bags. Orators shouted their disapproval of the Electoral Commission (KPU), while declaring that the Red Garuda (Gerindra symbol) would rise again, because Indonesians were the "best race" in Asia (it is not known which of the 300 or more ethnic groups they were referring to). In some dark corner, a local shaman (*dukun*) made offerings to spirits to support Prabowo's initiative at the Court. In hindsight, this ludicrousness was, in fact, very rational. Joko Widodo's election signaled an enormous transfer of economic power in Indonesia. All those who, for years, had benefited from access to the state to build their fortunes, such as tycoon Abu Rizal Bakrie, through legal or not so legal means for some, felt they had no choice but to push for a Prabowo victory, by all means necessary.

In one of the many paradoxes that characterize Indonesia, these elections have been free, fair and relatively well-organized for a democratically young country. Jokowi's new style of politics, and the antics of Prabowo, mobilized a whole new generation of Indonesian youth through open public debates and an intensive campaign. With popular initiatives such as the kawalpemilu.org website, hundreds of volunteers accompanied the election process by using social media to guarantee the fairness of the final results. For these youths, the election was an essential moment in realizing the importance of the 'common good' and the ways through which it should be strived for and protected.

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## Reference

1 Rob Allyn is known to have participated in the campaign to discredit the Democratic Party's candidate, John Kerry, during the US presidential election in 2000.