



Disinformation, International Relations, And The 2024 Indonesia's Election

Disinformasi, Hubungan Internasional, dan Pemilu Indonesia 2024

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Abstrak

Asia Tenggara sangat rentan terhadap disinformasi selama masa pemilu. Studi sebelumnya mengungkapkan bahwa disinformasi sering kali dilakukan oleh aktor yang didukung oleh partai politik, seperti yang terjadi di Indonesia dan Malaysia. Meskipun perspektif tersebut relevan, pemahaman lain diperlukan untuk memahami kompleksitas disinformasi, khususnya ketika ada irisan dimensi domestik dan internasional. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada konteks tersebut melalui studi kasus Indonesia. Perlu dicatat, disinformasi dalam pemilu Indonesia sebelumnya telah melibatkan unsur internasional, seperti disinformasi selama pemilihan presiden 2019 yang menyebutkan adanya kerja sama antara Partai Komunis Indonesia dan Tiongkok untuk mengamankan kemenangan Joko Widodo. Berdasarkan kejadian ini, studi ini mengeksplorasi sejauh mana dimensi internasional dieksploitasi untuk disinformasi selama pemilu 2024. Dengan menggunakan metodologi kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis data yang dikumpulkan dari diskusi publik, jurnal akademik, buku, laporan lembaga, dan media berita. Artikel ini memiliki tiga pembahasan. Pertama, mengidentifikasi contoh spesifik disinformasi yang terkait dengan isu internasional selama pemilu. Kedua, mengobservasi aktor yang menyebarkan disinformasi dan motif yang mendasarinya. Terakhir, studi ini membahas tantangan dalam menyelesaikan disinformasi. Pada akhirnya, penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa isu-isu internasional secara aktif dieksploitasi untuk disinformasi selama pemilihan umum Indonesia tahun 2024. Penelitian ini juga menggarisbawahi perlunya kajian Hubungan Internasional (HI) untuk lebih memperhatikan keterkaitan antara ranah domestik dan internasional, serta untuk mengakui kapasitas aktor 'mikro' dalam menyebarkan disinformasi.

Kata Kunci: *Disinformasi, Pemilu Indonesia, Aktor Non-negara.*

Abstract

Southeast Asia is highly vulnerable to electoral disinformation. Previous studies reveal that such campaigns are often driven by actors endorsed by political parties, as observed in Indonesia and Malaysia. While this perspective is relevant, a more nuanced understanding is required to grasp the complexity of disinformation, particularly where domestic and international dimensions intersect. This research contributes to this understanding through an Indonesian case study. Notably, disinformation in previous Indonesian elections has involved international elements, such as false narratives during the 2019 presidential election alleging cooperation between the Indonesian Communist Party and China to secure Joko Widodo's victory. Building on this precedent, this study explores the extent to which international dimensions were exploited for disinformation during the 2024 election. Employing a qualitative methodology, this research analyzes data collected from public discussions, academic journals, books, institutional reports, and news media. The article presents three layers of analysis. First, it identifies specific instances of disinformation related to international issues during the election. Second, it investigates the actors propagating this disinformation and their underlying motives. Finally, the study demonstrates the challenges inherent in combating this problem. Ultimately, this research concludes that international issues were actively

exploited for disinformation during Indonesia's 2024 election. It further underscores the need for International Relations (IR) scholarship to devote greater attention to the nexus of domestic and international spheres, and to recognize the capacity of 'micro' actors in spreading disinformation.

Keywords: *Disinformation, Indonesia's Election, Non-state Actors.*

INTRODUCTION

While rapid advancements in information technology have hyper-connected the globe, they have also democratized the spread of disinformation. This global surge in fabricated narratives has deeply impacted Indonesia, particularly during high-stakes electoral cycles. The 2019 presidential election highlighted this exact vulnerability, where domestic campaigns were aggressively targeted by internationalized hoaxes, such as the false assertion that candidate Prabowo Subianto was supported by Erdogan. Another, Joko Widodo, one of the presidential candidates, was portrayed as a communist (The Straits Times, 2024). As stated by The General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), the accusation was very intense during the campaign (Siregar, 2019). Tempo reported, Obor Rakyat as a printed mass media spread hoaxes that Jokowi was the Indonesia Communist Party's sympathizer and Chinese-Indonesian descent (Tempo, 2018). Even though the disinformation might take place within the domestic context, it was also safe to say that the international dimension was relatable. The development of communism in Indonesia was influenced by external powers. Ruth T. McVey argued that the Sino-Soviet bloc facilitated the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) establishment in Indonesia. It was born in 1914 and became the most prominent political party as well as the pioneer of communist movement in Asia to expand beyond the Former Russian Empire (McVey, 1965). Marxist argued, the development was a response to 'imperialism' (Marxist, No Year), which was operated by Western countries resulting anti-communist sentiment among Indonesians. Rendy Pahrun Wadipalapa argued the past history was exploited by political actors to create an 'imaginary threat' for contemporary contexts (Wadipalapa, 2023).

Another example was the disinformation about the video that has been circulating on the social media platform YouTube with the title "Viral!! Thousands of foreign workers from China finally come out of hiding." The issue circulated on Youtube and was uploaded in an account namely Media Prabowo Sandi in January 2019. That channel has 3.759 subscribers, and the video was played 5.813 times (Ministry of Communication and Information, 2019). Furthermore, disinformation also circulated that Jokowi sells Indonesia to China. In addition, three women in West Java spread disinformation that Jokowi planned to legalize same sex marriage (Agie, 2019; Duile and Tamma, 2021). The latter narrative was a more strategic target for exploitation given the socio-cultural context, as the majority of Indonesians tend to oppose the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community. This aligns with the argument by Timo Duile and Sukri Tamma regarding 'outside' ideologies, where LGBT identities are associated with Western liberalism and perceived as incompatible with Indonesian moral standards. On the other hand, Prabowo also became a target of disinformation as Islamic forces accused him of establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia (Duile and Tamma, 2021). The 2019 election might end, but the issue of disinformation remains. Indonesia held an election again in 2024 which was prone to disinformation as well. This study discussed the issue by looking at the international dimension. It matters as to comprehend the importance of the international and domestic realm in disinformation issues.

International Relations (IR) studies put more concerns on state actors and security centric in the disinformation issues. For example, Alexander Lanoszka studied Russia's disinformation strategy targeting Baltic states (Lanoszka, 2019). Similarly, Carlos Espaliú-Berdud argued “disinformation campaigns are becoming increasingly important as a tool of geopolitics or international relations, either on their own or in conjunction with other, more classic weapons in international society, such as the age-old use of force (Berdud, 2023).” Other scholars such as Giuseppe Anzera and Alessandra Massa found geopolitics contributed to disinformation. Even though they mentioned ‘soft power diplomacy’, the main actor who utilized this is the state (Anzera & Massa, 2021). Furthermore, André W.M. Gerrits demonstrated that the security impact of disinformation should not be overstated because it does not bring any changes on the international balance of power (Gerrits, 2018). While those researches are relevant, disinformation is complex as it involves many types of actors such as non-states which do not only operate in the international sphere but also relate to the domestic realm. Both affect each other, and we need to consider other aspects such as identity, social, and economy. This research contributes to this context.

METHODS

This paper investigates the extent to which international issues were exploited for disinformation during the 2024 Indonesian election. This inquiry is necessary to comprehend the relevance of the international dimension in broader disinformation issues. Contextualizing this study within Indonesia is highly relevant, as the country has undergone a remarkable democratization process since the end of the Soeharto era, yet remains vulnerable to such democratic risks. To analyze these issues, this study used qualitative methods by conducting library research. Relevant literature was collected from journals, official reports from governments and private organizations, and news outlets. The topics included disinformation, media, and elections. The study concluded that international issues relating to security, the economy, society, and identity were exploited for disinformation during the 2024 Indonesian election. This signifies that non-state actors are also capable of spreading disinformation, which is an area IR studies should give more attention to.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Disinformation, International Relations, and the 2024 Indonesia's Election

According to the Civil Society Coalition Against Election Disinformation, the percentage of disinformation in Indonesia reached 55.5% in 2023 when it would hold an election in 2024. It mentioned there were 1,292 political disinformation in 2023 which increased twice compared to the 2019 election. YouTube was the platform for distributing the most political hoaxes with a percentage of 44.6%, followed by Facebook with 34.4%, TikTok with 9.3%, X (formerly known as Twitter) 4%, WhatsApp 1.5%, and Instagram 1.4% (Rumah Pemilu, 2024). In 2024 Indonesia's presidential election, there were three presidential and vice presidents' candidates namely Anis Baswedan - Muhaimin Iskandar, Prabowo Subianto - Gibran Rakabuming Raka, and Ganjar Pranowo - Mohammad Mahfud. According to MAFINDO, an Indonesian non-profit organization focused on combating online disinformation, all the candidates became the target of disinformation either with a positive tone or attacking other candidates. It found candidate number 1, Anies Baswedan, was the most frequently mentioned in hoax narratives, with 206 positive tones and 116 negative ones. His vice candidate, Muhaimin Iskandar, got 17 positives and 5 negatives. Candidate

number 2, Prabowo Subianto (28 positive, 66 negative) and Gibran Rakabuming Raka (12 positive, 74 negative). Meanwhile, the last candidate Ganjar Pranowo (63 positive, 73 negative), Moh. Mahfud MD (44 positive, 5 negative) (Radio Republik Indonesia, 2024). Some disinformation issues associated with international dimensions which were interesting to discuss.

The first issue was disinformation circulated on Facebook stating Chinese armies or Chinese Communist Party Armies came to several cities in Indonesia. It was said they disguised as foreign workers because Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka lost in the 2024 presidential election (The Ministry of Communications and Informatics, 2024). The issue has become 'marketable' in Indonesia's politics since the government welcomed the influx of workers from China. The Ministry of Manpower of the Republic of Indonesia mentioned there were 73,011 foreign workers in Indonesia in the first semester of 2023. Most of them are from China with 33 thousand workers (Databoks, 2023). They worked in the service sector, agriculture, maritime, and mining. Ali Maksum and Ahmad Sahide argued their coming had alienated local workers while Indonesia had to deal with high unemployment challenges (Maksum & Sahide, 2019). Furthermore, Faisal Basri, an economist from the Senior Institute for Development of Economics and Finance, demonstrated there were unequal salaries between Chinese workers and locals. For example, a Chinese mining company in Indonesia paid between 17 million rupiahs to 54 million rupiahs, meanwhile it paid lower for local workers (CNBC Indonesia, 2023).

The second issue was disinformation stating that seven ballots were imported from China. According to the post, the boxes were destroyed for the ruling president's interest, Jokowi (Tempo, 2024). This seemed to state there was a foreign intervention during the election. Similarly, a video circulated on TikTok with a narrative stating that the Chinese communists had sent bribes to rig the election. The video also claimed Jokowi had 20 overseas bank accounts to save the money (The Ministry of Communications and Informatics, 2024). It was interesting how China-Indonesia relations became scapegoats and politicized for disinformation. It was worth notifying that bilateral relations among both countries are more intense. In October 2023, Jokowi met China's president, Xi Jinping, to sign 10 *Memorandum of Understanding* (MoU) to further collaboration specifically in economy (Kontan, 2023). Despite the good intentions, the image of China in the eyes of Indonesians tends to be negative. According to a study, "more than four-in-ten Indonesians said China's power and influence is a major threat to their country in the 2018 survey, versus only 27% who said this in 2013 (Pew Research Center, 2019)." Given this context, it became an opportunity to be politicized.

The third case of disinformation targeted Anies Baswedan. Posts circulated claiming that Anies Baswedan was a friend of the United States (US) and planning to serve the U.S's interests in Indonesia if he is elected. It compared Anies with former President Suharto who was considered a friend of the US. This may be related to historical events in Indonesia in 1965-1966, when Washington supported Suharto and the Army to eliminate the leftist movement in Indonesia. An expert said there was a political tendency to insult Anies (Tirto, 2024). The fourth issue was a video circulated on social media that showed Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, supporting one of Indonesia's presidential candidates, Prabowo Subianto (Kompas, 2024). This seemed to be driven by the rise of Indonesians' support of Russia against Ukraine. An analyst argued "this has been filled by latent anti-American and anti-western perspectives, the idealization of strong leaders like Putin, religious arguments suggesting Russia is an ally of Islam...(Aljazeera, 2022)." Others mentioned Indonesians favored Putin as representing the strong image of leadership, similar to Prabowo Subianto (CNN Indonesia, 2022). The last disinformation case was A video circulated that Ganjar Pranowo, presidential candidate from Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-

P), was being surrounded by young people. The narrative was that Ganjar gathered LGBT communities (CNN Indonesia, 2023). LGBTQ communities in Indonesia are viewed as ‘un-Indonesian and a Western import’ (South China Morning Post, 2023).

Identifying Actors Behind Disinformation

It matters to identify some actors behind disinformation during Indonesia’s election because it leads us to understand the motives. Study in International Relations (IR) emphasized the role of state actors which disinformation, related to propaganda, is exploited to pursue national interests. With that case, the battle is between states. However, seeing the disinformation issues in Indonesia’s election that has involved international issues, IR studies have to give more attention to other entities. Ross Tapsell (2019a) argued the phenomena in Indonesia was driven by partisan ‘buzzer’ teams (Tapsell, 2019a). They included social media influencers and micro-influencers that participated in campaigns. Other scholars argued ‘buzzers’ often spread biased information to attract readers’ emotion. Given the limited capacities of the Indonesian government to control disinformation, it has become a political opportunity for those actors to spread disinformation.

A more interesting analysis was about the characterized politicians as social media users. Even though the analysis was not about disinformation per se, we could understand their association and motives. Those scholars identified three types of politicians such as underdog, member of the opposition party, and persons with ideological extremism or distinctiveness (Hong, Choi, & Kim, 2019). The first proponent was politicians who do not gain much attention from the traditional media which lead them to empower social media. The second one was politicians from the opposition party. They tend to have limited resources in traditional media which then become a reason for them to use social media more. Meanwhile, the latter includes politicians from left and right wing whose ideologies sometimes do not fit traditional news media. This will make social media the best option to deliver their message. However, it seems challenging to provide evidence and assume these categories are associated with political actors who spread disinformation. Ross Tapsell gave his alternative thought. For instance, one of the candidates, Prabowo Subianto, tended to use ‘toxic positivity’ campaign strategy instead of ‘negative tactics’. Tapsell observed Prabowo’s attitude during debate that Prabowo tended to agree on opponents’ statements instead of giving different stances (AJI Indonesia, 2024). On the other hand, Ika Idris from Monash University argued that media companies also can spread information. Idris gave an example such as a media company, namely Tribun Network, produced low quality journalism which ever spread disinformation about Russia-Ukraine war (Idris, 2024). This might be not evidence of disinformation actors during Indonesia’s election, but it reminds us to give more attention to this issue that non-state entities were relevant. Nancy Faeser, a Federal Minister of the Interior and Community from Germany, argued ‘global digital networks’ to spread disinformation (Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, No Year). Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Defense identified more detailed types of actors in disinformation (The U.S. Department of Defense, 2020). They are as follows.

“.....bots, sock puppets and trolls. Bots are fully automated social media accounts and controlled by code set up by a human. A sock puppet is an account created by one person to impersonate another to mask the account creator's identity. A troll is a person who intentionally sows discord and provokes negative emotion to get attention.....” (The U.S. Department of Defense, 2020).

Challenges in Countering Disinformation

The first challenge in countering disinformation is globalization. Globalization followed by technology development that facilitated the information circulation. Stig Hjarvard argued electronic media such as satellite television, internet, computers, mobile phones etc. have made social interaction increase across distance. Hjarvard added, the media also coverage international events which transnationalizing the public sphere and formed public opinion (Hjarvard, 2001). Media, such as television, has programs that are globally distributed from various countries. The ongoing live events broadcasted has facilitated global communication which audiences around the globe are now being informed at the same time and in the same way (Holm, 2001). The good impact of this was integration and 'exchange in social interaction' among citizens, as Klaus Bruhn Jensen mentioned (Jensen, 2001). The flow of information is more rapid as the internet develops. According to the Broadband Search, there are 5.18 billion internet users in 2024, which is equal to 64.6% of world population. Among those users, there are 5.25 billion people who possess smartphones (Broadband Search, 2024). Harper argued social media platforms have expanded and followed by persistent flow of information have transformed global communication (Harper, 2010). In recent times, we have seen the impact of the internet and social media in shaping opinions around the world (Akinlua, 2022). This is very effective considering people have that platform. Facebook with its 2.99 billion users, Instagram 2.5 billion users, and Twitter 450 million users, making the information flow farther and wider (Broadband Search, 2024).

However, despite this development of technology, it also facilitated disinformation. Indonesia that experienced massive change of technology development was affected by this process. A study reported, Indonesia's internet penetration has reached 64.8% since 2018, 73,7% in 2020, 77,01% in 2022, 78,19% in 2023, and 79,5% in 2024 (Indonesia Internet Service Provider Association, 2024). Following the high use of social media platforms among Indonesians, the information penetration including international news, has been more intense. According to We Are Social, 90.9% of Indonesians use Whatsapp, 85,3% use Instagram, 81.6% use Facebook, TikTok 73,5%, Telegram 61,3%, and X (formerly known as Twitter) 57,5% (Radio Republik Indonesia, 2024). The various social media platforms have facilitated information penetration, including disinformation. The second challenge to combat disinformation in Indonesia is the emergence of authoritarian rule in recent years. Government has made an effort to implement Article 14(1) of Law No. 1/1946 on criminal law regulations. Sadly, it has become an opportunity for the government to attack those in opposition. An expert mentioned restriction on freedom of expression is getting stronger. For instance, human rights activists namely Haris Azhar and Fatia Maulidiyanti were sent to jail because they criticized the politics and economics conditions in Papua (ICJ, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This research found international issues in terms of security, economy, social, and identity were exploited for disinformation during the 2024 Indonesia's election. For example, disinformation circulated on Facebook stating Chinese armies or Chinese Communist Party

Armies came to several cities in Indonesia, disguised as foreign workers; disinformation stating that seven ballots were imported from China; a video circulated on TikTok with a narrative stating that the Chinese communists had sent bribes to rig the Indonesia's election; a video circulated claiming that Anies Baswedan was a 'friend' of the United States (US); there was also a video circulated on social media that showed Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, supporting one of Indonesia's presidential candidates, Prabowo Subianto; then Ganjar Pranowo, presidential candidate from Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) gathered LGBT communities.

There are several actors who are spreading disinformation. While IR studies tend to more highlight the state actors' role, the cases of disinformation during Indonesia's election has reflected that 'micro' actors are also capable of disseminating it. On the other hand, it took place in both domestic and international spheres. Some scholars mentioned some actors such as 'buzzer' teams, social media influencers, 'voters', politicians, commercial actors such as strategic communication firms, social media platforms, public relations firms, sock puppets, bots, and trolls. The more intense globalization followed by technological development as well as the rise of authoritarian rules have made tackling disinformation efforts in Indonesia more challenging. Therefore, we need a complex mechanisms as it follows, (1) more intense and sustainable collaboration between government and civil societies such the Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission, and other relevant actors in improving digital literacy among citizens; (2) empower more localized leaders because their power are more recognised and 'legitimate' among Indonesians; (3) give equal opportunities for Indonesians across the archipelago to learn about digital literacy to establish more resilience society.

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