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# Patronizing the Mass: How Middle-Agents Deepened Populism and Post-Truth in Indonesia 2019 Presidential Election

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## ABSTRAK

Pemilihan presiden Indonesia (Pilpres) 2019 secara luas disorot sebagai pertandingan ulang dua pemimpin populis antara Jokowi yang teknokratis dan Prabowo yang chauvinistik. Setidaknya terdapat dua dimensi yang berkontribusi terhadap atmosfer populis pada Pilpres itu, yakni kondisi sosial-agama masyarakat dan penampilan pribadi calon presiden. Dengan mengacu pada dua hal tersebut, sebagian besar analisis menyebut Prabowo lebih populis dibandingkan dengan Jokowi karena pidatonya yang energik dan wacana chauvinisnya. Namun, tak bisa dipungkiri, polarisasi di tingkat akar rumput sama tajamnya, baik di kalangan pendukung Jokowi maupun Prabowo. Lalu, sampai sejauh mana seseorang dengan sikap dan retorika populis yang halus seperti Jokowi dapat memiliki pendukung yang diwarnai sikap benci dan kondisi pasca-kebenaran yang mendalam. Studi ini menggarisbawahi media sosial dan agen perantara sebagai prinsip tambahan untuk pembentukan kubu yang semakin jelas di antara kedua pendukung. Dengan menggunakan analisis isi, penelitian ini mengungkap kekuatan populisme dan pasca-kebenaran dari sejumlah kecil sampel *twit* dan komentar untuk memahami bagaimana interaksi masyarakat dan para agen perantara dapat memperdalam perpecahan antara para pendukung populis dan kondisi pasca-kebenaran. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa, meskipun Jokowi dan Prabowo menampilkan gaya populis yang berbeda di pentas politik elektoral, penyampaian wacana yang memecah belah, provokasi, dan penghinaan marak dilakukan oleh agen perantara keduanya di media sosial.

Kata kunci: Pilpres 2019, media sosial, pasca-kebenaran, populisme, agen perantara

## ABSTRACT

Indonesian 2019 presidential election was extensively highlighted as a populist rematch between the technocratic Jokowi and the chauvinist Prabowo. There were at least two dimensions that contributed to the existing populist atmosphere at the presidential election: the religio-social condition of the people and the personal appearance of the presidential candidates. By referring to the two factors, analysts predominantly mentioned that Prabowo was more populist than Jokowi due to his energetic rhetoric and chauvinist discourse. However, it is undeniable that the polarization at the grassroots level was equally vitriolic in both Jokowi and Prabowo supporters. To what extent, then, could a person with a subtle populist gesture and rhetoric such as Jokowi could have

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vitriolic supporters and a deep post-truth condition. The research at hand underlines social media and middle-agents as additional tenets for the emerging entrenchment between the two supporters. Using content analysis, this research unpacks the populism and post-truth energy of a small sample of tweets and comments to comprehend how the interaction of the people and middle-agents could deepen populist cleavage and post-truth condition. This research found that, although Jokowi and Prabowo envisaged a different populist style at the front of the electoral stage, the articulation of divisive discourse, trolling, and mockery are equally sparking from their middle-agents in social media.

Keywords: 2019 presidential election, social media, post-truth, populism, middle-agents.

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## INTRODUCTION

The study of populism and post-truth was extensively growing in Indonesia, at least, since the surge of conservative Muslims toppled down Basuki 'Ahok' Tjahaja Purnama, a candidate of 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, and spiking at the immediate aftermath of the 2019 Indonesia presidential election. The rally was a rematch of the 2014 election between Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo, and Prabowo Subianto. The 2019 election drew massive attention due to its novel social atmosphere and political maneuver. It was orchestrated on a well-digitized political landscape and exhibited dense identity-based patronage. Various works of literature and commentaries (Hadiz 2018; Margiansyah 2019; Mietzner 2020; Putri 2019) highlighted the consolidation of Islamic movement by staging their respective middle-agents, namely Habib Rizieq, Bachtiar Nasir, and many other whom sided with Prabowo. While at the same, Jokowi seemed to be excluded from a similar highlight, he was still identified as equally populist as Prabowo, but with less aggressive rhetoric.

It is noticeable that Jokowi and Prabowo had different populist maneuvers. Prabowo had to maintain the grassroots Islamic movement to attract Muslim voters. In consequence, the respective middle-agents must also frequently sow affective and emotional discourses to gather the mass cohesively. By contrast, Jokowi tied himself to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), one of the largest Muslim organizations in Indonesia, and naming Ma'ruf Amin, a conservative cleric who gave a legal *fatwa* to

sentence Ahok, as his running mate. Hence, Jokowi had successfully saved a lion's share of Muslims' support. These populist maneuvers infer different discursive structures. Prabowo's middle-agents took blatant techniques, namely streets and mass gathering, as discourse catalysts which later echoed through social media. Meanwhile, Jokowi took a noiseless and what seemed to be a middle-agent-free method.

Many scholars were more energetic to underline the boldness of Prabowo's rhetoric and discursive structure than Jokowi's. The analysis often relied on a comparative study of the verbal quality of both candidates (Hatherell and Welsh 2019; Margiansyah 2019). Populist characteristics such as romanticizing historical glory, chauvinistic gesture, ostracizing 'the other,' anti-elite, invoking the heartland (imagined community), self-declaring as 'the mouthpiece of the people' (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017) were hugely devoted to Prabowo more than Jokowi (Gueorguiev, Ostwald, and Schuler 2019; Margiansyah 2019; Mietzner 2020). In contrast, some observers noted Jokowi's populism by addressing his non-verbal qualities, such as *blusukan* (unplanned visits), casual appearance, and closeness with the people in less developed areas, which echoed widely in social media (Hatherell and Welsh 2019; Margiansyah 2019). However, it left two unanswered questions: *first*, to what extent can a candidate who had no blatant middle-agents and less verbal quality of populism earn his discursive catalyst and be sufficiently populist to be categorized as a populist. *Second*, if Jokowi lacked discursive catalysts, how could the post-truth condition in his capsule be adequately as solid as Prabowo's.

Reflecting on the first question, the research at hand notes that the role of middle-agents as discourse catalysts in populism scholarship remains limited and is often scattered in its additional details. However, amid a vastly digitized political landscape, it is necessary to pay equal attention to both verbal and nonverbal quality to address how a political patron and his middle agents consolidate populism. In an interconnected world such as today, platforms allow non-verbal political communications to replicate in a more decentralized way and give middle-agents less restrictive authority to proclaim themselves as the

'mouthpiece of the people' and nod toward certain affiliations. Given that, besides utilizing verbal analysis, it would also be fruitful to extend the threshold of nonverbal communications more than just appearance and relational performance between candidates and the people, but also include the middle-agents appearance and performative action in social occasions, as well as relational performances between candidates and middle-agents. Such attempts, related to the second question, aim to trace how the relationship between middle-agents and the people creates an affective basis for post-truth politics. Thus, instead of giving a detailed account of populist parameters and identification, this research focuses on how the role of middle-agents in consolidating populism in online space and how their direction could provide a basis for a post-truth condition during the Indonesia 2019 presidential election.

#### RESEARCH METHOD

This research embarks as a qualitative study of content analysis. Content analysis is not only beneficial to comprehend how the internet and social media interact with political actions, regime transformations, and digital control (Bradshaw and Howard 2018; Herring 2009), but also helps to highlight how power flows through narratives, unpack manipulative interests, and so forth. The study of populism in content analysis is slightly growing due to the increasing trend of populist message distribution in the digital space (Blassnig et al. 2018; Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017). The attempts ranged from longitudinal research, employing a massive amount of content scrapping in a selected period (Blassnig et al. 2018; Ernst et al. 2017; Hameleers and Vligenthart 2019), to critical analysis of content narrative (Engesser et al. 2017; Sengul 2019). However, both methods have their pros and cons. Longitudinal research is more suitable for revealing macroscopic political patterns in a certain period or comparing political trends in two or more countries, while critical content analysis remains prospective to capture close-up panorama between interrelated elements and actors.

The research at hand collects a small sample of tweets and comments from both structural and non-structural politicians as well as

ordinary citizens from February 11, 2018, to April 15, 2019, a period where the heat of electoral contestation intensified in Indonesia's political climate. To unpack its substance and relational position, this study utilizes a few seminal insights from previous research, such as populist communication opportunities and features (Ernst et al. 2017), as a pivotal point to reveal further relation between post-truth populism.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### *Populist Communication and Post-Truth*

Although the research at hand recognizes that there is no final concept of populism, it is necessary to mention the minimal definition and its recent development. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) argued that populism was a thin-centered ideology that consisted of antagonistic relations between the 'pure people' versus 'the corrupt' elites and saw that politics should be the expression of the general will of the people. However, by considering diverse political contexts and developments in different hemispheres, scholars have put forward the key elements of populism (ideology, actor, and 'the people') into a more non-dichotomous nuance (Postill 2018; Sengul 2019; Waisbord 2018). For example, the variety of ideology has expanded from *left-right* to *left-center-right* (Mietzner 2020; Postill 2018). However, a set of ideological preferences in a particular country affects the characteristics of populism. In Europe and the US, left and right-wing populists tend to swing their political narratives on religious, racial, economic, and native-immigrant sovereignty issues. Countries under a crime-ridden condition such as the Philippines, Brazil, or Mexico are inclined to use the 'populist of fear' (Chevigny 2003). Thus, by reinforcing politics of hope and anxiety, Rodrigo Duterte won the 2016 Philippines election through 'penal populism' (Curato 2017). In Indonesia, theocratic and technocratic political tones represent right-wing populism and centrist populism in the 2019 presidential election due to the vanishing leftist movement for decades (Postill 2018; Mietzner 2020).

Given the diversity of ideology and cultural capital, the antagonistic currency of populism also drew contextual roots. Some Western observers pointed to the failure of the neo-liberal system in providing a healthy democratic climate amid technological, demographic, racial, and economic challenges as a catalyst for populist antagonism (Baron 2018; Gerbaudo 2018). Meanwhile, others insisted that the antagonistic localities of populism consist of the complex entanglement of economic, cultural, existential, and other factors which are prospective for further explorations and irreducible for neo-liberal's failure (Postill 2018). Thus, criminals might be treated as 'the other' who threaten 'the people' for populist actors in a crime-ridden country, where social security becomes a prospective issue (Valiquette and Su 2018).

In the United States, for example, there is a clash of values between older people, particularly whites—which revolve around jobs, economic growth, and other things that people living in the Great Depression and war era care about—and the values of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and any sort of progressive agendas among American young adults. This collision allowed Trump to antagonize non-white citizens as villains who undermine traditional American values (Norris 2017). In Indonesia, the antagonistic currency of populism occurred from the long-standing, politically maintained racial and religious sentiments surrounding the dichotomy of Muslims against non-Muslims, natives (*pribumi*) against non-natives (especially those of Chinese descent), nationalism against communism, and Islamism against liberalism (Bourchier 2016; Kimura 2017; Tirtosudarmo and Hadi 2019).

In its localities, populism also has myriad forms of communications to configure its triadic elements (the elites, the people, and the others). However, it can be characterized by either its agency or political status. The agency status points to whether a particular communicative action is orchestrated by humans, non-humans (bots), or a combination of both. Meanwhile, the political status refers to the social and political capital of human actors have in consolidating the general will of the people: they can either be structural or non-structural politicians. Observers, as mentioned in the introduction, are favored to the direct

top-down communication between high-ranking political actors and the people for the account of populism's triadic elements, while the intermediary positions of non-structural politicians are rarely included in the account. In fact, non-structural politicians also take a significant role in condensing grassroots consolidation and elevating electoral affinity for high-rank structural politicians. Thus, the promotor of populist discourse may involve comedians, books, bots, community leaders, low or middle-ranking politicians, and any sort of actors that ideologically or culturally fits with the enclaves of the people, the others, and the elites in a given society (see Kusumo and Hurriyah 2018; *Toronto Star* 2012; Viner 2016).

These multi-dimensional communications are inherently part of a bigger frame of Chadwick's hybrid media system where the net and real-world mutually fed and echoed each other, whether in formal forums such as social media, campaign rally, or in the casual occasions such as religious altars, face-to-face conversations, slums or squares (Postill 2018). This, however, points at the emerging trend of interdimensional experience in which people comprehend and manifest their lives and thoughts in both offline and online worlds as inseparable reality (e.g., Kalpokas 2019; Tirtosudarmo and Hadi 2019). The practice depends on the populist's ability to recognize discursive and political opportunities in the respective country. Discursive opportunity refers to any societal concern over ideology, culture, economics, or any critical affairs that are deemed to have a disruptive impact when crafted in a communicative message (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017), even though such impact would not be impactful when it is not supported by the speaker's political position. In other words, political opportunity determines the possible directions for navigating the populist messages (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017).

At the same time, populist communication features, namely ostracizing the others, invoking the heartland or historical figures, emphasizing the sovereignty of the people, and taking an anti-elites/establishment stance (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017), may become parts of a larger attempt to put public feelings and opinions in a game of impul-

sive interdimensional experience. These disruptive features encourage divisive effects in society and configure the logical basis for its antagonistic political partisanship. Later, the accumulation of personal emotions sublimed into 'affect,' in which individuals engaged in a will of connectedness with a particular group and internalizing its cultural and ideological norms, worldview, and frame of reference, where emotional alignment and discursive appropriation take place (Döveling, Harju, and Sommer 2018). By the existence of an interdimensional experience, personal emotions and communal affects not only circulate across the spatio-temporal and societal boundaries, but also maintain their continuation, reconfiguration, and contagion (Döveling, Harju, and Sommer 2018).

Amid a digital-savvy political landscape, populism received a propitious communication space. Populist' truth commitment, which stands against scientific and liberal paradigms (Waisbord 2018), is mostly bestowed by the digital sphere in obtaining disputed arbitrary interpretations among political elites and the competing masses. Hence, facts, opinions, and misinformation have become subjective artifacts in which ideological and cultural pre-cognition operate in individuals and communal domains. This line is inherently part of where post-truth had taken a role in populist communication. It does not mean that populism and post-truth are solely embedded in textual relativity or social constructivism (Waisbord 2018). However, it engaged in a broader nuance that consists of complex combinations of textual fragility of social media contents, personal emotions, communal effects, computational manipulations, and cognitive biases (Gracia 1995; Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook 2017; McIntyre 2018; Wooley and Howard 2019). The deteriorating democracy accompanied by the growing digitalization of media smoothens populism in navigating their narratives, provides political meaning, and constructs foundational will against the elites (Waisbord 2018).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### *Populist Agency in Indonesia*

Although the initial roots of populism in Indonesia have been noticed since before New Order (Hadiz 2016), the embryo of populism was acquired significant development after the fall of the New Order in 1998 (*reformasi*). *Reformasi* would later determine the political and discursive structure of Indonesian populism motifs. Shortly before *reformasi* erupted, the Islamic *tarbiyyah* movement, at the same time, was at its high surge due to the accommodation of Suharto's rule (Fuad 2020). In 1970–1998, the *tarbiyyah* movement predominantly targeted educated youth groups by programming Bina Masjid Kampus and Latihan Mujahid Dakwah under the director of the Indonesian Islamic Dakwah Council (DDII) and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) (Hilmy 2010).

The *tarbiyyah* movement taught their cadres four basic principles: having a well-established basic Islamic knowledge, upholding Islamic attitude and ethical principle (*akhlaq*), depriving themselves of idolatrous activities, and disconnecting themselves from anything related to enemies of Islam (Fuad 2020). As few decades went by, the movement's cadres have been distributed in many strategic social positions, allowing them to promote Islamic narrative in broader-cum-authoritative channels such as educational, social, and civil institutions. Some notable alumni, like Salim Segaf Al-Jufri and Anis Matta, are holding strategic structural political positions, which would later contribute to the rise of Indonesian populism in recent years.

One of the major concerns for the *tarbiyyah* movement is that Islam and politics are inseparable. Therefore, their struggles aimed to capture the formalization of Islamic values in Indonesia's political system (Fuad 2020). The *tarbiyyah* movement believed that the established Suharto regime was corrupt and un-Islamic (Fuad 2020). This view was a response to Suharto's long-standing business with the military and tycoons, who were mostly Javanese and Chinese. The racial division, *pribumi* and non-*pribumi*, that re-emerged in the 1970s made Chinese people considered as migrants (Tsai 2011). Given that historical back-

ground, the Chinese were often perceived as Suharto's cronies who have widened the economic gap between natives and non-natives (Tirtosudarmo and Hadi 2019). As Kimura (2017) confirmed, the sentiment towards Chinese people has not only crystallized from the 1990s to the early 2000s but has persisted to the present day. Some latest research (Lim 2017; Nadzir, Seftiani, and Permana 2019) even shows that this sentiment evolved through myriad narratives in the digital space (Lim 2017; Nadzir, Seftian, and Permana 2019).

After *reformasi* erupted, the *tarbiyyah* movement, in which the members were mainly occupied under the PKS banner, evolved in a more distributive way. The fall of Suharto allowed the spirit of unity to spring in various concerns. Thus, the Islamic Defender Front (FPI), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah Communication Forum (FKAWJ), and many similar organizations burst on to the scene to pursue their Islamic agenda and express their freedom of speech and union. Ahead of the 1999 general election, the revivalist party such as the Crescent Star Party (PBB) was also established (Hilmy 2010; Platzdasch 2009).

Although the political climate in the aftermath of *reformasi* tended to be more democratic, this does not mean that it was free from Suharto's influence. Suharto gave way to two sentiments that would continue to this day (Mietzner 2013). *First*, Suharto's New Order successfully demonized the leftist-egalitarian movement and any unions or grassroots activism. *Second*, chasmic partisan and personal cleavages within society make it inhospitable for leftist activism to be reborn.

Nevertheless, those historical outlines lead to an outcome of discursive and political opportunity. For discursive opportunity, it gives: *first*, no discursive rival for Islamism except for nationalism. Hence, the Islamist movements flourished at an unprecedented pace, accompanying the deepening nationalism among the state's elites. *Second*, Suharto's leftist 'ghost' propaganda persists until this day and is politically exploitable, whether for the incumbent or grassroots organization leader. *Third*, sympathy for leftist or egalitarian discourses often faces resistance, either from the established regime or from Islamist groups.

In other words, today's political discourse was deeply rooted in Indonesian political history. It gives long-standing tangled memory, affect, imagery, longing, and hope for society and political elites to project today's concerns and agendas.

Besides, it cast the pattern for the structural and non-structural political opportunities in the 2019 presidential rally. In the Islamist line, many notable *tarbiyyah* alumni held influential positions in today's socio-political affairs, either in structural or non-structural ones. Salim Segaf Aljufri, for instance, served as the 2015–2020 PKS' Majelis Syura (the consultative council) leader. However, the position is not always linear between an individual's background and an organization's ideology. Yusril Ihza Mahendra, a 64-year-old lawyer, has since 2015 become the chairman of the Crescent Star Party (PBB), one of the Islamist party. A prominent organization for the 2016 mass rally against Ahok, GNPF-MUI, was once headed by a prolific preacher, Bachtiar Nasir, before Yusuf Martak, an ex-Vice President of PT Energi Mega Persada (Raditya 2019), took his position in 2017.

At the grassroots level, the flourishing Islamism influenced the growing number of young preachers with an incredible number of social media followers. Some of them displayed Islamist undertow in their social media accounts and did not hesitate to perpetrate political endorsement and disagreement during the 2019 presidential election. Felix Siau, a preacher of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia with millions of followers in multiple social media platforms, for instance, consistently advocates the formalization of a *khilafah* (caliphate) government and criticizes the established regime (Weng 2018) in social media, accompanying HTI spokesperson Ismail Yusanto in handling the public discourse through mainstream media. Those, however, were the coalescing names surrounding the vibrant-cum-charismatic leader, Habib Rizieq Shihab, of Islamic Defender Front (FPI)—a vital token for Prabowo's presidential rally beside his financial supporters, business moguls such as Hasyim Djodjohadikusumo and Sandiaga Uno (Mietzner 2020).

In contrast to Prabowo's group of supporters, which are mostly composed of religious and political elites, the secular nationalist camp has

a more nuanced spectrum of political opportunity, stretching from religious, political, and cultural elites. During the aftermath of *Aksi Bela Islam* in 2016 to the 2019 election, NU cadres widely filled strategic positions. Ma'ruf Amin, who would later be named as Jokowi's running mate, was the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) leader at that time. The nomination of Jokowi's vice-president candidate was also orbiting around names such as Muhammad Romahurmuziy and Muhaimin Iskandar, who was chairmen of the United Development Party (PPP) and the National Awakening Party (PKB), respectively. In addition, among the non-structural actors who backed Jokowi are Candra Malik, a cultural enthusiast who followed one of NU's most respected figure, Habib Luthfi Yahya, in endorsing Jokowi; and Mukti Ali Qusyairi, who is the author *Ulama Bertutur Jokowi* (2018), a book that serves as a counternarrative for allegations against Jokowi (Defianti 2018). Meanwhile, from established parties, there were names such as Airlangga Hartanto of Golkar; media tycoons and party leaders, Surya Paloh (Nasdem party) and Hary Tanoesodibjo of Perindo also gave their support for Jokowi through the nationalist group.

These Islamist and nationalist political opportunity structures reflect the ideological position of populism in Indonesia, whether moguls stand behind both sides structurally or not. Following the line, the 2019 presidential campaigns are notoriously known to be funded by natural industry oligarchs (Morse 2019). According to Prabowo and Sandiaga Uno's campaign manager, 98 percent of their electoral fund came from the businesses of the two candidates (Debora 2019). Sandiaga Uno provided \$8.1 million, or 61 percent of total campaign expenditure, from his energy, mining, agriculture, and infrastructure businesses. While Jokowi-Ma'ruf received approximately \$9.2 million, or two of third of the total electoral budget, from shadowy funding, *Perkumpulan Golfer* (Golfer's Club), and other names such as Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan (Morse 2019).

Accordingly, five tenets can be pointed out from Prabowo and Jokowi's political agencies. First, besides earning electoral affinity from oligarchic support, both candidates also used non-structural agents to generate social support by benefiting from the existing feeling of crisis

from the respective groups. Second, while Jokowi used diverse non-structural agents ranging from a cultural enthusiast, prominent ulama, book authors, and so forth, Prabowo had a smaller spectrum of non-structural agents that mostly are religious figures. Third, these layers created different realities between grassroots political perceptions and elite political agenda. These contrasting realities, arguably, reflected the ideological orbit where Islamism and nationalism are undertaken by oligarchic interest. Fourth, the middle-agents bridged the grassroots political perception to fit with the elites' political agenda. Fifth, this did not only exemplify that the political elites were indebted to a particular community patron (Hadiz 2018) but were also indebted to the larger strands of non-structural agents, especially the online ones.

### *Online Environment of Populism in Indonesia*

Indonesia's online sphere has been a fertile ground for nefarious deeds since its emergence. Factors such as poor media literacy, poor-designed regulations, and a lack of democratic commitments are key factors in point (Paterson 2019). According to the 2017 APJII Survey, there are 143.26 million internet users in Indonesia, with 41.55% utilized online platforms to consume religious information, while the other 50.26% chose to read political information. This evidence shows that the arable prospect for emotional exploitation in Indonesia's political communication has been laid before the 2019 presidential election.

In pertinence to that, the Ministry of Communication confirmed that there were approximately 26 of 38 blocked websites that spread religious and political misinformation in 2018. However, the response against that digital malaise remains limited around bureaucratic preventions, namely: Gerakan Literasi Nasional by the Ministry of Culture and Education; which encourage the national cyber authority, Badan Siber dan Sandi Nasional (BSSN), to curb malicious contents; and cooperate with MUI to release *fatwa* against misinformation and hoax (Arwendria and Oktavia 2019). More substantial threats such as a lack of democratic commitment, computational propaganda, and blatant populist rhetoric (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017; Margiansyah 2019) were beyond

the reach of those preventions and remained entangled until the voting day. Consequently, political parties and private contractors became the main conductor for bots and human agents in engineering the media sphere in Indonesia. The works of these manipulative agents consisted of boosting support for the favored political affiliation, attacking their opponents, and creating polarization of public opinion (Bradshaw and Howard 2019).

Blatant misinformation from misleading sources and implicit ‘truthiness’ from political actors may tap the individual beliefs and feed public emotions. Thus, even before the election day, the problem of Indonesia’s online sphere was that the preventive policies remained prone to the practices of broadcasting misinformation, implicit post-truth, and antagonistic populist rhetoric. Prabowo, Jokowi, and their agencies are the cases in point. For example, the incumbent plays two paradoxical roles in the electoral game: verbally condemning the practice of misinformation while at the same time politically practicing media manipulation. In July 2018, Jokowi urged the people to use their ballots wisely and be aware of online manipulations (Ratnasari 2018), but on April 16, 2019, a day before the election, the excessive force of buzzers is deployed on Twitter, amplifying Jokowi’s tweet (Fahmi 2019).

Similarly, the opposition was also on account doing the same thing. On April 15, 2019, Prabowo’s coalition parties told the public to avoid misinformation mindfully (Putri 2019). However, the day after the message was broadcast, a few of Prabowo-affiliated influencers successfully created a pseudo-organic conversation on Twitter, beating Jokowi’s buzzer force in the level of interaction (Fahmi 2019). Besides computational engineering, both candidates also exhibit religious discourses to attract their respective supporters. However, the implications went too far.

In the short period before the election, Jokowi embarked to Mecca for *Umrah*. A photo of him entering Ka’bah was uploaded on his social media. Similarly, Prabowo also posted his religious activity on Twitter to celebrate the election day (see figure 1). Since the polarization among the public kept sharpening from the 2016 demonstrations against Ahok

to the date of Jokowi and Prabowo's pious tweets were uploaded, they could not escape from interpretative polemics among the public. The post-truth condition occurred from the dissent of beliefs, not from a dichotomy of *fact* versus *emotion* (d'Ancona 2017; McIntyre 2018).



Figure 1. Jokowi and Prabowo's Tweet for Performative Religious Discourse

Following Maurer's (2016) postulation, when one is involved in political practice, the one's verbal or non-verbal activities are always bounded in political interpretations linking a set of the cultural or ideological history of his or her audience to figure out the respective performance, either glaring rhetoric, pretentious deed or promise, or a subtle body gesture or visual appearance. The tweets at hand and Maurer's line are not the point for the postmodernist version of post-truth, where reality is created in an individual's mind (d'Ancona 2017; Fischer 2020; McIntyre 2018). Instead, they refer to the social constructivism version of post-truth, where different 'beliefs' competing for a reality outside the mind (Fischer 2020). Figure 2 shows that the competing beliefs among supporters are an inherent part of these religious tweets: Jokowi and Prabowo supporters believed that their individual beliefs are true and that their opponent was wrong. By uploading the portrayal of sacred and pious moments, both candidates represented a contestation in earning electoral affinity from Muslim voters, despite inviting vitriolic comments from the opposing supporters.



Figure 2. Comments from Jokowi and Prabowo's Tweet in Figure 1

Another pious occasion of Jokowi and Prabowo also took place a few days before the election day. On April 13, 2019, Jokowi met Habib Luthfi Yahya and KH Maimoen Zubair before his campaign rally in Gelora Bung Karno Stadium (Kuwando 2019). The video of Habib Luthfi Yahya welcoming Jokowi in Gelora Bung Karno Stadium, which was uploaded on April 14, 2019, by Candra Malik received 7,400 views (figure 3). Similarly, on April 13, 2019, a tweet from Dahnil Anzar Simanjuntak showed the photos of Prabowo and Sandiaga Uno visiting a prominent television preacher, KH Abdullah Gymnastiar, widely known as Aa Gym, amassing 2,600 likes. In these tweets, the political interests and religion as a social capital interacted with each other and exemplified how the middle agents manage their positions to convert their social capital for the desired political outcome. By displaying religio-political affiliation of their patron, both influencers directed their audience where to align.

Worth noting that there was a different communication style between Malik and Anzar in guiding the audience to a particular political affiliation. In addition to being NU's influential cultural icon, Malik placed himself as a Habib Luthfi Yahya student. In other words, he showed his audience that he was an internal part of a religious community, not a part of the political elites. In contrast to Malik, Anzar placed his position under the banner of the political elites, not behind the lines of Aa Gym. Subsequently, their affiliative position determined the

discourse that ideologically plausible to feed the beliefs of the partisans. By referring to Habib Luthfi Yahya as an authoritative figure, Malik implied that Jokowi was the chosen political side for NU. Meanwhile, the devotional process from Aa Gym to Anzar's patron illustrated that Prabowo and Sandi were virtuous candidates for the presidency and vice presidency. Both Malik and Anzar employed the *argumentum ab auctoritate* strategy in their religious discourse. The difference was that Malik tended to emphasize Habib Luthfi Yahya's charisma, while Anzar was inclined to highlight Aa Gym's virtuous advice as a representative testimony of the Muslims.



Figure 3. Malik and Anzar's Tweets; Jokowi and Prabowo Meet Different Religious Leader.

The examples above show that the affiliative border for the audience is disciplined by the charisma of a religious figure. Religious influencers, however, play a role as the coordinator to put the people under a clear community demarcation. Furthermore, the encounter of religion and politics has made spirituality embedded in populist online communication. Then, the notion of freedom of political choice expands into a fear of betraying a religious leader. This puts politics no longer be based on scientific evidence but instead based on religion as a source of alternative truth, where believing in non-empirical claims credited as part of faith is emphasized (McDermott 2019). Thus, recognizing which candidate the respective religious leader is inclined to may affect how the audience calculates the afterlife consequence of a political preference. In other words, *what*, *where*, and *whom* from a subtle

movement of political safari may impact the affective basis and logic of the people. Influencers, regardless of their religious, political, or educational background, disseminate populist messages or viewpoints directly or indirectly on Twitter by occasional will. This perhaps is the development of where the echo of populist *zeitgeist* migrates gradually from conventional media (Hameleers and Vligenthart 2019) to the digital one with its myriad forms and facilities of communications.

Additionally, trolling and populist communication feature takes place beside the middle agents religious rhetoric in endorsing a presidential candidate. Figure 4 envisages that middle-agents employ a sort of intertwined strategy of post-truth and populist communication, like preferring to use facts that support their beliefs or political stance; mockery; and emphasizing people’s will. As Prabowo’s endorser, Anzar’s tweet contained ‘emphasizing people’s will’ feature to sharpen the news’s impact on public opinion. While in Jokowi’s camp, Denny Siregar added a simple caption of mockery on a news headline he captured. In line with their difference in news preference, both Anzar and Siregar’s captions also exhibited different framing. Anzar portrayed his tweet as a serious matter, while Siregar tended to trivialize the issue at hand. They may not interact intentionally on Twitter, but their impact on public opinion may be severe. Both tweets led to the entrenching belief that each candidate committed electoral fraud. (See figure 5).



Figure 4. Denny Siregar and Dahnil Anzar Citing Mainstream Media News

In relevance to that, the atmosphere of moral sentiment was strongly articulated in the reply section (figure 5). Supporters of Jokowi in Siregar's tweets and Prabowo's supporters in Anzar's tweets expressed myriad narratives and reasoning to maintain their belief from unfavorable facts. However, the audience's response ranged from conspiratorial analysis, incitement, mockery, and even pious grievance. These replies represent the mixture of various strands of emotions on how each side debunks their opponent. In the case at hand, post-truth emerged neither from hoaxes nor fake news but rather from tailored facts and fragmented ideologies. Although the middle-agents cannot be blamed for the entire situation, they remain hugely contributive to the occurring atmosphere. Connotative and denotative meaning in a news headline, where the news is reposted, who posts the news, and what captions are written, are a kind of determinant factors whether the post-truth condition may take place in an audience, in addition to the ability of the populist actors to ignite affiliative emotions and throw fragmented meanings (Engesser et al. 2017; Esser, Stepińska, and Hopmann 2017; Waisbord 2018).



Figure 5. Comments from Siregar and Anzar's Tweet

Siregar and Anzar's tweets exemplify that, first, mainstream media can neutrally spark, embolden, or legitimize the populist messages of middle agents (Blassnig et al. 2018; Esser, Stepińska, and Hopmann 2017). Second, although the middle agents' tweet may contain no populist communication features, other forms of technique, namely mockery and trolling, may take place as its substitute. Third, populist communication feature such as 'ostracizing others,' 'emphasizing people's will,' and 'invoking the heartland' is eminent in the reply section. However, a similar style is also prominent within structural politicians' tweets with broader employment of affective basis and ideological affiliation, as the following transcript shows:

PBB will act as Islamic opposition forces, defend Islam, the nation, and the state from bankruptcy and its downfall! [Original: PBB akan tampil sebagai kekuatan oposisi Islam, membela Islam dan membela bangsa dan negara dari kebangkrutan dan keruntuhan!]. (Mahendra 2018a)

During the pre-election times, Crescent Star Party stands as one of the leading supporters of *Aksi Bela Islam* serial demonstrations. PBB's leader, Yusril Ihza Mahendra, exemplified the populist feature of 'advocate for the people'. Mahendra played a polarized role between 'the Muslim' (the 'pure' people) and 'the corrupt elite,' which was framed as a devastating threat to Islam's sustainability. Furthermore, he called for defense on Islam with a broad segmentation range:

The jargon of the fight for the oppressed is our platform. We fight for the Muslim community and anyone who is wronged and repressed by the regime. We do not theorize; we act! [Original: Jargon pembealaan terhadap kaum terzalimi adalah platform kami. Kami membela umat Islam dan membela golongan mana saja yang terzalimi dan tertindas oleh penguasa. Kami tidak berteori, tapi kami bertindak di lapangan dengan tindakan nyata]. (Mahendra 2018b)

Another way to engage the audience to an emotional affiliation is by bringing up historical figures or the motherland that longs for glory. The use of these figures is to promote the convergence of a context, in which the imagination of 'the ideal' and 'the utopia' or 'the nonideal' and 'the dystopia' influences the audience's status-quo perceptions. Consequently, it might affect the audience's political stance. As Fahri Hamzah tweeted:

Our founding fathers wanted themselves to be the manifestation of the general will of this country. Bung Karno, for example, claimed himself as The Mouthpiece of the Indonesian People. [Original: Para pemimpin kita dulu, ingin dirinya menjadi penjelmaan dari seluruh kehendak rakyat negeri ini. Bung Karno misalnya, menyebut dirinya sebagai Penyambung Lidah Rakyat Indonesia.]. (Hamzah 2018)

A similar effect also applies when the populists use anti-elite or anti-legal elite articulation:

#SupportYIMPunishKPU; Do not let your hatred against a certain group makes you inflict injustice upon them. PBB is my party; the star and crescent is my banner [#DukungYIMPidanakanKPU; Janganlah kebencianmu terhadap satu golongan, membuatmu berlaku tidak adil... PBB partaiku..Bulan bintang panjiku]. (Hasan 2018)

Hasan's tweet emphasized the true representation of the people's will. The tweet expressed a sense of delegitimization of a state-operated institution. Hasan calls for the people to delegitimize the Election Commission (KPU). He believed that the established elite had derogated the people's will.

Transcripts of structural politicians' tweets exhibit a sort of affective grammar referring to Islamism. Glittering generalizations, institutional name-calling, and claiming as the people's mouthpiece foster not only emotional engagement but also embolden the way how Muslims are supposedly treated. Following Engesser et al.'s (2017) words, "the

fragmentation can be an ‘inherent incompleteness’ of populism that encourages the individual social media user to be able to complement fragments of populist ideology with various additional ideological elements and tailor it to her or his specific political attitudes.”

## CONCLUSION

Middle-agents have had a strong influence in creating a populist atmosphere during the 2019 presidential election. Their social capital and ability to optimize digital media gave resonance for the public to comprehend bigger discourses that fit with their preferred ideology. Some of the structural and non-structural politicians spread pious but fragmenting, taunting, and conspiratorial messages to seduce the audience into a particular stance of ideology, political attitude, or arbitrary interpretation. This left inconclusive or even vicious perceptions of reality among each partisan. Thus, although each presidential candidate might only show populist rhetoric, gesture, or appearance, it seems that online interactions among the masses and influencers ignite a post-truth condition, not just because of the emergence of tailored facts, but also due to the affiliative influence among individual social media users. Additionally, although Prabowo and Jokowi have contrasting maneuvers in the offline world, their middle-agents had equal power to spark moral sentiments in the online space.

Thus, it is important to revisit the notion that Jokowi and Prabowo barely received their populist status on their character and political gestures (Margiansyah 2019). The status is credited to the result of the work of their middle-agents and the spread of online communication. In other words, instead of blaming the candidates for the existing populist condition, it seems that the middle-agents and online activities contribute more to the current populist climate in Indonesia—in addition to the long-standing religious, socio-cultural inequality, and oligarchic networks fueling its frameworks in the real world (Fossati and Mietzner 2019; Mietzner 2020).

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