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Escaping social media: the end of netizen's political polarization between Islamists and nationalists in Indonesia?

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ABSTRACT

The current article explains why netizens are escaping the political polarization observed in their activities on social media during the 2014 and 2019 Indonesian presidential elections. The research data were obtained from in-depth interviews with a number of netizens who were activists on social media and engaged in political polarization. The existing political polarization had been bolstered by netizen's activities that were rampant across various echo chambers, which were established and driven by ideological and affective elements. Netizens succeeded in escaping the existing political polarization on account of promises broken by the pair of presidential-vice presidential candidates they supported and due to a natural drive of the election being over. Nevertheless, this article reveals that netizen's escape from political polarization on social media does not necessarily suggest the end of the existing political polarization. The present study found that netizen's political polarization on social media has shifted to political polarization awareness and latent political polarization. This clarifies that the existing political polarization has simply evolved into a new political polarization. The findings in this research may have implications on factors that threaten democracy in the general election system or new relations of political communication in the era of new media.

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Introduction

Two netizen groups in Indonesia have been experiencing polarization due to political differences in their social media activities. The first group may be identified as people affiliated with Islamist groups, while the second group refers to those identified as being affiliated with nationalist groups. These two groups had been constantly appearing and gaining greater strength throughout every general election (Aspinall, 2005; Mietzner, 2008; Syahputra, 2020; Ufen, 2008). Politically speaking, the polarization between Islamist and nationalist netizens gained considerable significance during the

2014 Indonesian presidential election, the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, and the 2019 Indonesian presidential election (Afrimadona, 2021).

The political polarization in Indonesia is currently moving toward discord (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2020; Warburton, 2019). This discord persists within the context of the advent of new media. According to Syahputra (2017), such discord had been evident since the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election. In fact, the genealogy of the polarization has been apparent since Indonesia's period of inception during the assemblies held by the Investigatory Body for Preparatory Work for Indonesian Independence (*Badan Penyelidik Usaha-usaha Persiapan Kemerdekaan Indonesia-BPUPKI*) in 1945 (Syahputra, 2020).

Such political polarization in Indonesia is not only visible in the real world but in the virtual as well, particularly on social media and Twitter. The polarization was a representation of the two presidential candidates, Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto, during the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections (Irawanto, 2019; Mietzner, 2014). Joko Widodo was considered to represent nationalist voters while Prabowo Subianto represented Islamist voters. According to Pepinsky (2019), their second campaign in 2019 indicates significantly greater differences between the Islamist and pluralist (nationalist) groups in Indonesian politics. Namely the polarization of differences relating to the identity of both supporters. This explains both supporters' characteristics of representation, but not their personal religious-ideological representation (Panuju, 2019). In terms of netizen activities on social media, the formation of such polarization involved political buzzers from the respective camps that were subsequently known as cyber troops/armies (Hui, 2020). Buzzer is a unique term used in the Indonesian context. According to Lim (2017), the term buzzer refers to a netizen who is paid for their activities.

In politics, buzzers are recruited to promote issues that benefit certain candidates. These buzzers are micro-celebrities boasting numerous followers on social media. They were utilized as cyber troops/armies for the candidates' political campaigns. According to Bradshaw and Howard (2017), cyber troops/armies refer to actors representing the interests of political parties or candidates and they are responsible for manipulating public opinions online *via* social media. Social media analyses were able to uncover the polarization of the 2019 general elections by illustrating the interactions among buzzers on social media, particularly Twitter (Habibi & Sunjana, 2019; Syahputra, 2021). As political buzzers, they entered and were trapped in a strong and harsh political polarization due to their activities on social media or their presence in echo chambers (Sugiono, 2020; Mustika, 2019).

Currently, Indonesia is an exceedingly unique context for analyzing the on-going polarization post the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections. Such uniqueness is brought about by two new phenomena of political polarization currently unfolding in Indonesia. First, netizens deciding to repent for their past actions (Kumparan News, 2021; Nugraha & Faris, 2020). Second, netizens counterattacking the pair of president/vice-presidential candidates they endorsed in the 2019 presidential election. Various prior studies have indeed outlined the involvement of netizens as buzzers in several general elections (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Sugiono, 2020; Saraswati, 2018). However, there is yet a study that describes how these netizens escaped the previous

political polarization or counterattack the presidential candidate they previously promoted. This article is aimed at elaborating why these netizens escaped political polarization or counterattack the presidential candidate they formerly supported.

Methods and data

The present article is the result of a qualitative research that addresses the issue of why netizens of the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections escaped political polarization or counterattack the pair of president/vice-presidential candidates they previously supported. The research data were obtained from in-depth interviews with a number of netizens who were buzzers, influencers, and activists on social media and engaged in political polarization. The informants interviewed were AW, a buzzer with 163,000 followers on Twitter, MKB, a lecturer and highly active influencer on Facebook, and RA, a social media activist.

The source persons were chosen based on appropriateness, competence, and availability of access (Stokes, 2019) instead of representativeness (Bernard, 2018). The researcher has an interest in whomever has the best potential and is most appropriate in giving information to shed light on the topic of study. The source persons included AW (55 years old), a doctoral candidate in environmental science living in Jakarta with 163,000 followers on Twitter and working as a CEO (Chief Executive Officer) of a mining company; MKB (44 years old), a lecturer with a doctoral degree in the field of environmental science and technology in a higher education institution in the city of Yogyakarta who was active as an influencer on Facebook; and RA (30 years old), a bachelor's degree graduate in communication science working at a umrah travel bureau, who was active on social media.

In-depth interviews were done separately in the month of January, 2022. The interviews began with the most typical questions in qualitative studies to ensure the appropriateness of the selected informants, such as: *Have you ever been active on social media in order to support a presidential candidate during the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections?* Subsequently, more specific questions were asked during the interviews, such as: *Why did you support Joko Widodo or Prabowo Subianto? How did you escape political polarization? Why are you counterattacking the presidential candidate that you previously supported?*

The collected data were then categorized by theme based on the information acquired from the informants. The categories were made to address the problem statement proposed in the study. The categorized data were subsequently tested using various relevant theories or literary sources. Ultimately, the data were analyzed in an interpretative and descriptive manner, then presented in a conceptual theme as new research findings.

Political polarization: between affective polarization and ideological polarization

Polarization is a concept that has long been given due attention by scholars. According to Iyengar et al. (2012), influence based polarization within intergroup

dynamics depicts a widening emotional gap, lack of trust, and growing enmity among partisans. As a concept, polarization has numerous aspects like ideology (Colleoni et al., 2014; Dalton, 1987), social psychology (Iyengar et al., 2012), and economy (Weber et al., 2021). Meanwhile, as a socio-political concept, polarization has gained the attention of social scientists to describe different expressions of public opinions (Neudert & Marchal, 2019). Nonetheless, the term political polarization itself is a broad label that refers to several different phenomena at both the individual (such as the perception of individual partisans during general elections) and the institutional levels (e.g., among political parties and mass media) (Wilson et al., 2020). As such, we argue that polarization refers to a state and process in which the population is divided into two contrastingly different groups on political matters.

Politics is the most fertile ground for polarization to grow and develop the world over. This is why political polarization is not only growing and escalating rapidly in the United States (Arceneaux et al., 2013; Pew Research Center, 2017), but all over the world as well (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019; Gidron et al., 2019). These emerging and developing political polarizations unfold among all societal levels such as the political elites (Heaney et al., 2012), elected officials (Hare & Poole, 2014), and commoners (Frimer et al., 2017).

Scholars specify political polarization into two categories, namely affective polarization and ideological polarization (Fossati, 2019; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Iyengar et al., 2019; McLaughlin et al., 2020; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). *First*, affective polarization, which is an emotion related phenomenon, occurs due to political polarization being driven by negative feelings against members of the opposing political faction (Prinz, 2021). Members of opposing political factions view one another with contempt or fear, among other negative feelings. Accordingly, such political polarization may exacerbate enmity with others outside of different groups (Huddy et al., 2015; Mason, 2018). Affective polarization can be examined by looking at the positive attitude that individuals show toward others within a group, yet they behave negatively toward others from a different group. At a more intense level, this kind of polarization may have implications on damaging interpersonal relations, including reluctance to engage in any relations, or people may even resort to dehumanizing their political oppositions (Frimer et al., 2017).

Second, ideological polarization, which is a belief system upheld with a level of fervor that is disproportionate to viable reasons for engaging in politics (Jost & Amodio, 2012). In this category, beliefs change and diverge as public opinions that differ from the stance of the political opposition. In this case, polarization may become more intense and escalate if ideological difference(s) among political figures gain greater significance and intensify (Assyaukanie, 2019). As such, ideology may aggravate and make polarization worse (Iyengar et al., 2012). Partisans who identify themselves with the party that most appropriately represents their ideology continue to rise (Levendusky, 2009). This kind of polarization may continue to escalate into conflicts within a multi-party democracy like Indonesia.

While some scholars categorize political polarization according to the impacts it may cause, others specify it into high level (severe and damaging) polarization and low level polarization, which still holds hazard potential (McCoy & Somer, 2018;

McCoy et al., 2018). Researchers define severe or damaging polarization as a process in which diverse normal differences in the society become more aligned along a single dimension, differences across various sectors become increasingly stronger, and people have better understanding of politics and society and they start to portray them using the term “us” versus “them” (McCoy & Somer, 2018).

Political polarization in new media

Currently, various political polarizations have developed in the culture of new media. The advent of new media has often been suggested as the trigger for polarization’s emergence and growth. Accordingly, various literary sources consider polarization being closely correlated with social politics within the context of new media presence (Afrimadona, 2021; Barberá, 2018; Januar Ali & Eriyanto, 2021; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Temby & Hu, 2019; Wilson et al., 2020). The process of political polarization has escalated exponentially on account of new media’s ability to create echo chambers. The term “echo chamber” is associated with the internet, and it implies that people are exposed to opinions produced by users of similar thoughts/beliefs, despite social media offering various political information from all sides. Internet users favor information that aligns with their belief and they come together as a group that is based around a common narrative within an echo chamber (Auxier & Vitak, 2019; Cinelli et al., 2020; Colleoni et al., 2014; Grömping, 2014; Vicario, 2016).

According to Cinelli et al. (2020) an echo chamber can, thus, be defined as an environment where opinions, political affiliations, or beliefs of a user about a certain topic are reinforced as a result of repeated interactions with contacts or source persons who possess similar attitudes and inclinations on social media. Echo chambers can subsequently function as a mechanism to mutually strengthen their opinions within a group. As a consequence, echo chambers can mobilize the whole group toward a more extreme position. One’s tendency to seek similar information or to adhere to a common pre-existing opinion can explain the emergence of echo chambers on social media (Vicario, 2016).

Here, it is further explained that echo chambers on social media are created because people do not want to be involved in daily interactions with their political opponents. Many create their impressions of their political rivals by using the media, which means that social media are increasingly shaping the way they view their political environment (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). On social media, these views are manifested in partisan contents that can lead to socio-political divide and intensify polarization. Additionally, social media can move individuals from one echo chamber to another (Brady et al., 2020).

Despite social media’s capacity to create echo chambers, wherein echo chambers can subsequently form extreme political polarization, there is another view suggesting that mass media is also undergoing fragmentation (Van Aelst et al., 2017) and that it is partisan (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007). A fragmented and partisan mass media may reinforce polarization and make it become more ideological (Jones, 2002) and affective (Lau et al., 2017). The intensification of political polarization, both ideologically and affectively, drastically alters contemporary political climate. This will create even

greater polarization. This means that social media users will also increase (Pew Research Center, 2017), partisan news reports/coverages delivered by mass media will also multiply, while hostility among different political oppositions will surely expand more and more (Finkel et al., 2020).

The review of various literary sources mentioned in the above passages explains how political polarization can be defined and created, and how it can spread, expand, and intensify within the climate and context of new media, particularly social media. However, the review disregards the discussion about how an established political polarization ends within a climate of free speech and the context of new media, especially social media, in a democratic system like Indonesia.

Results and discussion

Polarized by affection and ideology in echo chambers

The political populism that Joko Widodo utilized as a presidential candidate during the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections was one of the appeals that had driven the emergence and intensification of affective polarization. Joko Widodo always presented himself as a humble individual with simple communication method that could easily be understood by the masses. Joko Widodo has embodied this character, who represents the typical attributes of Indonesians from the middle and lower social classes. Such personification has created a social longing among the people of Indonesia (Mietzner, 2015). Throughout his campaigns, Joko Widodo constantly shared his narrative as a figure with a humble beginning devoid of any special privileges that people of the elite class enjoy. Joko Widodo emphasized that he was born “in the cheapest room” of a local hospital (Endah, 2012).

According to MKB, a netizen and fanatic supporter of Joko Widodo, the campaign slogan “*Joko Widodo adalah Kita*” (Joko Widodo is Us) truly hit the mark and represented the deepest feelings he had.

One thing that influenced me the most to support Joko Widodo was his attitude and style, which was very simple and straightforward. In the Javanese social terminology, Joko Widodo is someone who hailed from the abangan group.

Initially, *abangan* is a social concept found within the belief system adhered to by the majority of the Javanese, which is the largest population group in Indonesia. This concept was popularized by Clifford Geertz in his trichotomy of *abangan-santri-priyayi* in his classical work *The Religion of Java* (2006). Geertz concluded that the belief system of the majority of Javanese people can be classified into three categories, namely *abangan*, *santri*, and *priyayi*. These social categories were influenced by Hindu and Buddhist cultures prior to Islam’s entry to Indonesia. These socio-cultural categories were based, particularly, on linguistic etiquette to differentiate people based on their social status or position. A humble manner of communicating with others is hence indicative of one’s social status. According to Burhani (2017), these concepts are not only used in religious and cultural discourses, but also in other subject matters like politics and economy.

In terms of political relations in the era of new media, the *abangan* character functions as a concept that closes the emotional gap between a candidate and constituents from the lower social class. Accordingly, political polarization can be analyzed as an emotional phenomenon as it is regulated by various feelings of likes or preferences. This means that people identify themselves by taking on the same identity that a candidate portrays as something authoritative, regardless of the political belief they follow. Such political identification is often observed as the essence of one's personal identity (Prinz & Nichols, 2019).

As for RA, a social media activist, he felt that he had no other choice but support Prabowo Subianto as there were only two presidential candidates during the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections.

I had no other choice, because there were only two presidential candidates to choose from. When I criticized Joko Widodo, surely Prabowo Subianto gained some advantages. As a result, there was acute polarization on social media. In the meantime, my life principles are inseparable from [my] religion. In Islam, a person who is not trustworthy should not be elected as a leader. This religious belief, indirectly, urged me to support Prabowo Subianto.

The above indicates that religion is still considered as an ideological basis for establishing political identity in electing a presidential candidate in Indonesia. According to Fossati (2019), Islam as a political identity in the 2019 presidential election was a vital political behavior and stance. This clarifies that ideology should be given more significant attention in Indonesia's political studies. The 2014 and 2019 presidential elections demonstrate that ideology played a key role in people's voting behavior when choosing their presidential candidate. According to Aspinall and Berenschot (2019), ideology as a basis of political identity has existed long since the early inception stage of the Indonesian constitution in 1945, and it is rooted in the role of Islam in politics and state. Religion serves as an ideological instrument in the decision making process of elections, from the perspectives of both the voters and the elected candidates (Assyaukanie, 2019).

Moreover, AW, a buzzer and Joko Widodo's former special staff, who actually turned into a fervent critic of Joko Widodo now, stated that he used to feel that he himself was being attacked when people were attacking Joko Widodo on social media.

When someone attacked Joko Widodo, I felt attacked too, because he was my idol at the time. I was engaged in a number of Tweet wars or I had arguments with netizens on social media.

Given the elaborations above, political polarization clearly developed on the basis of affection and ideology. Affective and ideological polarizations have subsequently been increasingly explored and exploited within echo chambers of the new media culture. All of the informants interviewed admitted that they were engaged in echo chamber activities during the presidential elections *via* various social media channels, particularly WhatsApp Messenger. According to Auxier and Vitak (2019), contents shared using social media, like the mobile application WhatsApp Messenger, have led the public to adjust themselves with the overload of various information. Vermeer et al. (2021) consider the use of WhatsApp Messenger may create interpersonal

discussions that evoke more intense political feelings and emotions since such kind of online platform is more personal in nature. Accordingly, WhatsApp Messenger, specifically, may stimulate conversations and discussions among netizens.

Latent polarization and polarization awareness: changing and shifting from existing polarization

Why did netizens in this study escape political polarization of the previous social media? The answer to this question is the core finding of this research. We will refer to the pre-established political polarization as the existing political polarization. All the informants we interviewed explained that they were able to escape the existing political polarization and changed themselves to establish another new political polarization on account of politicians breaking their political promises, being tired and weary of differences/opposition, and the fact that the general elections were over and done with. Nevertheless, each informant has specifically different reasons in responding to the politics of broken promises.

AW is an informant who was in Joko Widodo's inner circle from the time he ran as a presidential candidate in the 2014 presidential election until he was elected as president. Yet, he freed himself from political polarization as a Joko Widodo supporter (*Jokower*) because he claims to know about Joko Widodo's lies, such as his promise to be free of foreign loans and to achieve certain tax revenue targets. Instead, AW has currently turned into an opposition that strongly criticizes Joko Widodo.

During the 2014 presidential election, I was a hardline Jokower. I supported Joko Widodo since he became Governor of Jakarta SCR in 2012 until he became president in 2014. But I no longer supported Joko Widodo in the 2019 presidential election because he is a liar. I used to support Joko Widodo because I did not feel deceived. I got close to him at the state palace, so I know that all of it were merely political gimmicks. He is simple and straightforward, and I was one of the people who fell victim to his simplicity.

As for RA, although he initially supported Prabowo Subianto on account of having no other options as there were only two presidential candidates, he succeeded in escaping political polarization as a Prabowo Subianto supporter because the presidential election was over. However, since Prabowo Subianto decided to join Joko Widodo's cabinet as the Minister of Defense, both of them currently become targets of criticisms.

I gradually got out of the political polarization because the presidential election was over, the moment had passed. But nowadays I criticize Joko Widodo. As Prabowo Subianto has joined Joko Widodo's cabinet, I also criticize Prabowo Subianto because both of them are currently holding positions in the government.

Unlike AW and RA, MKB understands that Joko Widodo broke his promises, e.g., Joko Widodo's campaign promise to strengthen KPK (Corruption Eradication Commission), but he had emasculated KPK's position after being elected instead (Kompas, 2023), yet he continues to support Joko Widodo nonetheless.

I escaped polarization because aside from being weary and exhausted of opposition there's also the fact that the presidential election was over. But after Joko Widodo has been elected as president, I still criticize Joko Widodo's policies. For example, I criticized his

policy to strengthen KPK [Corruption Eradication Commission] and eradicate corruption. While in fact, during his campaign Joko Widodo promised that he would strengthen KPK. His policies were not what I expected, but I still support Joko Widodo.

The various statements made by the informants indicate that the political promises each presidential candidate broke serve as a moral assessment to escape polarization. This means that netizens realize that politics is the practice of communicating lies. This also explains that honesty, despite being frequently used as a campaign slogan, is not a virtue in politics. The classical essays written by the contemporary political philosopher Hannah Arendt, “*Lying in Politics*” (1969) and “*Truth in Politics*” (1968) explain that honesty is immeasurable among political virtues and lies are always seen as a justified tool in politics. The long term effect of political lies is diminishing public trust (Aughey, 2002).

The statements given by the informants also clarify that netizens have the authority to decide whether a presidential candidate or politician is lying or not, whether they are trustworthy or otherwise. Nevertheless, these statements also suggest that netizens do not have an established standard for assessing a presidential candidate or politician’s lies or truths. As shown by MKB, although he sees through the political lies, he still trusts and supports Joko Widodo. This clarifies that standards of honesty or breaking promises are a social construction (Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019).

This also suggests that netizens are capable of distinguishing between promises that are kept and those that are broken, and their assessments are established by various individual level attributes. Cases like AW and MKB, who have differing characteristics, we include them in the polarization awareness group. This group of netizens are aware that the candidate they support has broken the political promises made during the campaign but still continue to support them, or they counterattack them on social media. This illustrates a shift from the existing political polarization to political polarization awareness.

However, although many Joko Widodo supporters are disappointed in Joko Widodo for breaking a lot of promises after being elected as president (Aspinall, 2015; Muhtadi, 2015), they do not try to find common grounds on certain issues they have with Prabowo Subianto supporters. Similarly, disappointed Prabowo Subianto supporters do not try to reach a common ground with Joko Widodo supporters as their political opposition (Fukuoka & Djani, 2016). Both supporters from the opposing polarized groups ultimately felt weary of the long and exhausting political conflict and opposition. Then, they would naturally choose to escape from political polarization. Such position has actually kept the two factions in the same place where polarization remains latent in nature.

We refer to this as latent political polarization. The political polarization has not truly ended; it merely remains latent or temporarily inactive. The existing political polarization has stopped temporarily because netizens are weary of the long political opposition and they felt that the presidential election has ended. Nonetheless, the polarization may be revived and revitalized given that various sentiments of affective and ideological polarizations are reactivated and employed for identity politics. This phenomenon also describes that polarization may change or shift into another new form of polarization. Polarization remains, but the partisans and the *raison d’etre* differs.

This argument refutes the view (Lane, 2020) suggesting that the restoration of relations between Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto has ended the apparent rhetorical contestation and ideological polarization observed in Indonesian politics, wherein the more conservative right-wing Islamic political groups are now being marginalized. We contend that the contestation between Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto witnessed in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections may have been ameliorated following Prabowo Subianto’s induction as the Minister of Defense in Joko Widodo’s cabinet. Even so, the political polarization among their supporters still continues with a new format.

This also explains that for the time being, netizens have indeed escaped the pre-existing political polarization. But they can be categorized into two major groups, which are *first*, netizens representing the group that successfully escaped the old polarization but counterattacked the presidential candidate they initially supported. *Second*, netizens representing the group that succeeded in escaping the existing polarization but still continue to support the presidential candidate (as latent supporters) they previously promoted. We refer to this phenomenon of netizen political polarization with the following description: political polarization: from boom to doom toward gloom (Figure 1).

The figure above illustrates the research scope and process we are proposing to articulate the key research findings so that they can be understood in a more concise and simple manner. The figure above is used to describe the argument that political politization in Indonesia is inseparable from two general contexts, i.e., the citizens’ freedom of expression as an implication of political democracy in Indonesia and the advent of new media promising the opening of various spaces for expression on

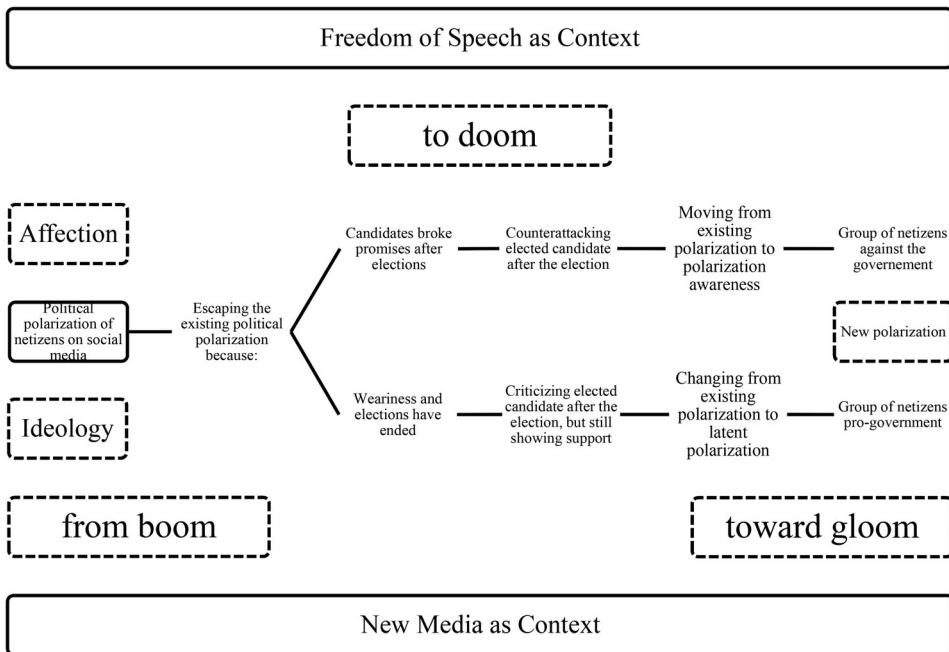


Figure 1. The theoretical argument.

numerous social media platforms. These two contexts had triggered the rise of information boom that further enabled political polarization. The political polarization disaster might have pushed netizens out of polarization.

Despite of some of the supporters' awareness to exit the pernicious political polarization during the presidential election, the polarization did not wane as it merely transformed. The transformation was driven by recurring behavior of breaking political promises and a saturated phase due to the complete end of the presidential election. We define this transformation of political polarization as the "doom" phase since political polarization still remains in two new forms that are driven by political fanaticism and awareness. Political awareness emerged in the form of netizens being critical of the government in their activities. Meanwhile, political fanaticism is a latent polarization that may be reawakened during political momentum such as presidential elections. We consider such situation as heading toward the "gloom" phase.

Political polarization: from boom to doom toward gloom

The advent of new media promising online space for netizens to engage in political activities on social media has created echo chambers (Grömping, 2014). What made this possible was that each individual feels unrestricted exchanging political ideas and information between one another (Semaan, 2014). All the informants we interviewed asserted that they were in a democratic climate allowing them to freely express their political perspectives and opinions about the presidential candidate they supported or opposed on social media.

Social media channels like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter were chosen by netizens to involve themselves in political groups, exchange information (such as links to media articles) and opinions, or engage in political discourses on various topics (Boulianne, 2016; Skoric et al., 2016). Other more exclusive social media platforms, like WhatsApp group, also function as a tool for community engagement and participation in their civil and political rights, particularly in finding collective solutions pertaining to broader societal issues such as food security, pollution, government corruption, and public health risks (Wei, 2016). As a result, sources of political information no longer lie at the hands of political parties, their candidates, or mass media. Political information may be sourced from netizens who vigorously engage in social media activities. This is highly plausible as netizens have the ability to reproduce, redistribute, and concurrently consume political messages disseminated throughout all social media channels. According to Wood and Smith (2005), such individual is called a prosumer (producer and consumer), which refers to people who are involved in social media interactions.

Netizens who were active as prosumers triggered and accelerated information boom. At this stage, it was difficult to clarify and distinguish which information was right and which was wrong, or which were hoaxes and fake news. It was no longer clear who or which were valid and trusted sources of information, since anyone was able to produce and distribute political information. This also illustrates a *boom* for new media but *doom* for conventional media (Donders et al., 2013), on account of the fact that under such conditions, conventional mass media like official newspapers

and television stations were also frequently trapped in reporting hoaxes and producing fake news (Molina et al., 2021; Stavre & Puntí, 2019). The political tendencies of netizens also influence how they selected the information they received. This includes selecting and discussing the information conveyed by mainstream media, i.e., conventional media (Syahputra, 2019). Media that were not aligned with their inclinations were considered media with partisan biases (Stroud et al., 2014).

During the *boom* phase, the existing political polarization that had been established became even more closed-minded/exclusive and reinforced political fanaticism. This is because netizens had been overwhelmed by information that further strengthened the candidate they support and information that further undermined the candidate they oppose. According to Godes and Mayzlin (2004), laypeople are more likely to convey negative information on social media. Subsequently, negative information may trigger anger, anxieties, and grief (Barrett & James, 1998). In this phase, netizens experienced a process of implosion to explosion. According to Syahputra (2019), this process illustrates an outward explosion. Netizens would, eventually, tend to choose, sort, read, distribute, or produce information that are likely to justify or bolster the aspirations or expectations they have based on their affiliation to certain controversial phenomenon.

The greater the explosion netizens have to endure in their political activities on social media, the stronger the political polarization will be. This is a transitional phase from boom to doom. Entering the doom phase, netizens who were present in the polarization had the courage to openly express hate speech. At this stage, freedom of expression in a democratic climate was defined as freedom to hate (Lim, 2017; Syahputra, 2021). Freedom to hate was then expressed on social media because social media made losing control of the consumption, production, and distribution of hate-ridden contents possible.

Nevertheless, social media environment creates its own control independently. This means that likeminded netizens within the echo chambers or those outside the echo chambers may serve as social control. Bessière et al. (2008) describe this as a distinction in the use of social media and the impact generated between individuals that have social support and those that do not. The phenomenon “*freedom of speech, freedom to hate*” is not exclusively observed in Indonesia, but in several other countries as well (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017).

Nowadays, when netizens have succeeded in escaping the existing political polarization on social media, because the candidate they previously supported has broken their promises or because they have become tired of the long period of polarization, the *doom* state, in fact, remains unchanged, it merely shifted. The previous *boom* phase pitted one group against another in a political polarization where different factions attacked each other on social media. In the second *doom* phase (after escaping the existing political polarization), the group of netizens disappointed in their candidate who broke their promises is pitted against the group of netizens who remain loyal to their candidate from the very start.

The intensity of political polarization among netizens in the boom and doom phases was caused by the government’s use of buzzers in their activities on social media (Syahputra, 2021; Lim, 2017; Paramaditha, 2013). The use of political buzzers served as another variable that would sustain the pre-existing state of political polarization. Although the format is different and it has changed, the political polarization

among netizens has become permanent in their activities on social media. Such conditions lead to the final phase toward *gloom*.

The gloom phase predicts an unchangeable and permanent state of political polarization as it involves paid political buzzers. According to Hui (2020), such phenomenon is not only witnessed in Indonesia, but also in several other democratic countries. In the future, given the content production-reproduction, distribution-redistribution, and consumption-reconsumption models, new media shall become the center of attention in all political activities. Nevertheless, according to AW, the permanent political polarization emerged because the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections in Indonesia during the current era of new media only presented two presidential candidates. Under such conditions, the public or netizens had no other alternatives and were somewhat forced by the system to choose to be a part of the only two available choices.

The parameter is the presidential threshold, which refers to the threshold for proposing presidential and vice-presidential candidates. The presidential threshold should be removed, if it is not removed, only those who have secured 20% support will have the right to run as a presidential candidate. If it remains 20%, then there can only be 3 presidential candidates. But with 0%, we will have a lot of presidential candidates, we'll have lots of choices so there's less polarization.

The presidential threshold is stipulated in Articles 221 and 222 of Law No. 7/2017 on General Election (2017). Article 221 states:

A presidential candidate and a vice-presidential candidate shall run together as a pair in a ticket nominated by a political party or a coalition thereof.

Meanwhile, Article 222 asserts:

A presidential candidate ticket shall be nominated by a political party (or a coalition thereof) contesting in an election that has managed to win at least 20% (twenty percent) of DPR [Indonesian House of Representatives] seats or 25% (twenty five percent) of national valid votes in the previous election of members of the DPR.

This legal perspective can specifically be used in Indonesia to understand the development of political polarization in the era of new media, particularly in relation to the general election regulation. According to the Indonesian Constitution (*Undang-Undang Dasar—UUD*), as the highest legal basis in Indonesia, each political party participating in the general election or every citizen has equal right and opportunity to nominate their presidential candidate and vice-presidential candidate to be democratically elected by the people (Mukhtarrija et al., 2018). Affording the opportunity for every citizen to be nominated as president will enable efforts to restore constitutional rights, as well as provide numerous alternative presidential candidates (Hutabarat & Affandi, 2019). Additionally, this is also to prevent discord through political fragmentation and intense ideological polarization which may potentially cause stagnation due to executive-legislative impasses leading to political instability (Prasetio & Sianipar, 2021).

Conclusion

Political polarization developed among Indonesian netizens due to affective and ideological drives. Both factors encouraged netizens to become fanatics of the presidential candidate they supported. Such fanaticism grew and developed into echo chambers

through netizens' activities on social media. Although the political polarization could be considered severe and destructive to social relations and democracy, netizens were able to escape the pre-existing political polarization on social media.

Netizens were able to escape the political polarization on social media because the presidential candidate they supported had broken their promises, because the presidential elections had ended, and because they naturally feel weary being in conflict with the opposition. However, netizens' escape from the existing political polarization is merely artificial and temporary on account of the fact that the polarization witnessed during the 2014 presidential election had resurfaced in the 2019 presidential election. Even after the 2019 presidential election the political polarization remains because the candidates who they previously supported had broken their political promises.

We refer to the phenomenon in which political polarization changes and shifts as polarization awareness and latent polarization. These are new findings in the research we conducted. In its entirety, the political polarization phenomenon experienced by netizens on social media is illustrated as *Political Polarization: from Boom to Doom toward Gloom*. The political polarization in Indonesia is heading toward a period of gloom in the future of democracy. We argue that the root of such gloominess can be traced back to the regulation on presidential threshold for presidential elections. Accordingly, we recommend that the presidential threshold be removed in order to prevent the rise of severe and destructive political polarization during the 2024 presidential election. Consequently, the current study may have implications on changing the general election system, influences on potential threat of polarization among netizens in democracy, or new relations of political communication in the era of new media. Given such a perspective, can removing the presidential threshold eliminate political polarization in Indonesia? Indeed, this is a question of great interest to pursue and study further.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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