Identity in the Contemporary Indonesian Post-Truth Society:
Primordialism on Social Media in the 2017 Election of the DKI Jakarta Governor

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Abstract: This article examines the identity politics in contemporary Indonesian post-truth society. The development of information-communication technology today has given rise to new challenges in contemporary Indonesian society. On the one hand, it has opened up the communication space among citizens in a more democratic way. On the other hand, it has also raised a number of issues. One such issue is the rise of primordialism through social media. A number of studies have shown an increasing trend of primordialism based on religious, ethnic, and class identity through social media. There is also still an ongoing process of the production and reproduction of false information on social media focused on a particular political interest. Fake news, hoaxes and slander can be spread through social media. Furthermore, facts and truth seem to no longer be important. In a post-truth society, the most important thing seems to be convincing the masses of a certain goal. Using the critical discourse analysis method, the author analysed the netizen conversations in the election of the Governor of DKI Jakarta in 2017 as a case study of identity politics in Indonesia. This article underlines the role of social media utilisation as a part of identity politics in contemporary Indonesian post-truth society.

1 INTRODUCTION

The 2017 Governor of DKI Jakarta election was considered by many observers to be one of the worst local elections in Indonesia (Nugroho, 2016; Erizaldi, 2017; Sirait, 2018). One of the most prominent phenomena in the 2017 DKI Jakarta election was the use of primordial symbols, such as ethnicity, religion and class, as a sound picking voter toolkit. In order to win the Pilkada contestation, a number of supporters of certain governor candidates utilised the facts of ethnic differences (*pribumi* versus non-*pribumi*), religious differences (Islam versus non-Islam) and class differences (*wong cilik* versus conglomerate) as a strategy to influence prospective voter decisions. Primordial sentiment was waged, rather than candidate competencies and track records.

Furthermore, in contrast to the elections in the previous year, the 2017 DKI Jakarta election took place in the reality of a contemporary Indonesian post-truth society. This is the reality of people who live and who have lived in the time of the current development of the latest communication and information technology. This is the reality of people who are familiar with using the internet and various online tools. It is in this reality of digital society that identity politics finds a new space of existence, namely social media, in Indonesia. Data from a number of studies shows that social media is the latest political propaganda tool that is very effective at achieving certain political goals (Sunstein, 2018). Moreover, in the reality of today's society, which is often referred to as the "post-truth society" in which facts and truth are no longer singular, social media is the main tool for spreading false news, hoaxes and uncensored slander. In this context, the 2017 DKI Jakarta election took place in the contemporary Indonesian post-truth society, where there is the widespread use of social media especially for political interests, as well as the rise of identity politics and primordialism based on ethnicity, religion and class in local political contestation.

This article has tried to answer the main question of the research carried out in early 2018, namely on how the phenomenon of identity politics through social media occurred in the 2017 DKI Jakarta election. More specifically, this article will underline the role of social media as the main driving factor of identity politics and the rise of primordialism in the

reality of contemporary Indonesian post-truth society.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity often becomes a battlefield of political interests. A number of studies have shown that ethnicity, race, religion, gender and class background are widely used as "political capital" to gain power (Appiah, 2006; Heryanto, 2012; Afala, 2018). Hindu and Islamic religious identities in India and Pakistan, for example, are the main social capital used for political purposes (Appiah, 2006). On the other hand, identity is also often formed through political processes. A number of new countries born after the end of the Second World War were largely formed based on similarities of identities (especially race, ethnicity and religion) and through identity politics (Appiah, 2006; Castells, 2010).

Identity politics is a concept that describes how various backgrounds of the individual actors' identities are used for the benefit of gaining political power. Initially, identity politics was a social movement against injustice and the discrimination of minority groups in the United States during 1960s, such as black people, native Americans, women, gay men and diffable groups (Appiah, 2006; Fauzi, 2010). In its later development, the subject of identity politics does not only refer to subordinate groups, but it also now includes subjects who have considerable political capital. Nowadays, the category of identities for identity politics has developed to include ethnicity, religion, class, family, occupation and other identities (Fauzi, 2010; Afala, 2018).

The politics of identity in Indonesia has been going on since the era of the formation of the nation-state to date (Haboddin, 2012). Fighting and mobilising political forces based on identity backgrounds is not a new phenomenon in Indonesia. However, it must be admitted that the practices of identity politics in Indonesia found an explosive momentum after the Reformasi Order. The adoption of a decentralised system of government, regional territory expansion, multi-party systems and a local electoral system, has triggered a resurgence of identity politics (Haboddin 2012; Ramstedt, 2011). Since the Reformation Era, for example, in various Pilkada in Indonesia, the phenomenon of clashes of identity symbols has emerged as the political capital of potential regional leaders. Furthermore, the impact of the rampant practice of identity politics in

Indonesia is related to the rise of primordialism, which is the understanding or belief that the ties of origin and background of certain identities (race, ethnicity, religion) are the main elements of individual identity (Ubed, 2002; Haboddin, 2015). Other identities are considered to be unimportant. As a result, society is vulnerable if there are inter-group conflicts based on divisive primordial sentiments. Such conditions are exacerbated by the reality of contemporary Indonesian post-truth society, in which facts and truths are defeated by mere beliefs and emotions (Ball, 2017; McIntyre, 2018).

The 2017 DKI Jakarta Governor's election is widely regarded as the culmination of the practice of identity politics in Indonesia (Nugroho, 2016; Kharisma, 2017; Suntoro, 2018; Sirait, 2018). With the support of social media, identity politics carried out by certain governor candidates in the 2017 DKI Jakarta election utilised primordial ties in the form of ethnic, religious and social class identity in order to gain power, rather than demonstrating their competence, track record and vision as a leader. A number of studies show that social media, more than others, plays an important role in the practice of identity politics, including in the 2017 DKI Jakarta election (Nichols, 2017; Erizaldi, 2017; Nugroho, 2016; Saraswati, 2017; Taplin, 2018). With the help of social media, the process of information dissemination, discourse and issues, as well as mobilisation and opinion formation took place both massively and effectively.

3 METHODS

This qualitative research study used the critical discourse analysis method. The critical discourse analysis method is one of the newer methods in social and cultural sciences research. Three important postulates in this method are that it is an interdisciplinary approach, that it seeks to demystify ideology and that it is reflective and critical of both the data and research objects (Wodak, 2009; Fairclough, 2010). According to Fairclough (2010), the method of critical discourse analysis includes three dimensions: text, discursive practices and social praxis. Text in this case includes speech, writing, stories, pictures, films and others. Discursive practice refers to all forms of textual relations of production and consumption. In this dimension, there is a subjective interpretation process. Finally, social praxis is an action taken based on discursive inter-textual understanding.

In this study, the author utilised data in the form of texts (including speech, writing, stories, pictures, films, etc.) on social media related to the identity politics during the 2017 DKI Jakarta election. Approximately 300 texts in various forms and media channels have been used as the data in this study. Furthermore, this text was then sorted into themes based on the primordialism symbols and content, in turn based on ethnicity, religion and social class.

The social media platforms chosen in this study were Facebook and Twitter. The selection of these two types of social media platforms is because they are the main media platforms used during the 2017 DKI Jakarta election (other less important social media used was Instagram). Through these two types of social media, it is hoped that the ongoing identity politics and the rise of primordialism in the case of contemporary Indonesian post-truth society can be described and analysed.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 *Pribumi* versus *Non-Pribumi*

This study found that the first primordial sentiment that emerged in the practice of identity politics in the social media of the 2017 DKI Jakarta Election was related to ethnic identity. Netizen conversations on social media are dominated by the issue of "*pribumi* versus non-*pribumi*." The term pribumi refers to the idea of native citizens, who are not foreign descendants. Although the concept of "*pribumi*" has been widely criticised by scholars because it is considered to be misleading (Ubed, 2002; Haboddin, 2015), in the reality of the people of DKI Jakarta, this vague identity is still considered to be important. In the 2017 DKI Jakarta election contest, the *pribumi* identity was represented by the candidate for the governor of Anies Baswedan, while the non-*pribumi* candidate was Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok, of Chinese descent.

The main texts that dominated social media, especially Facebook and Twitter at that time, were "Ahok Cina", "Ahok not pribumi", "Ahok was born in Cina", "Ahok is a communist Cina", "Ahok PKI" and "Ahok is not a native Indonesian" (Sarwanto, 2017). Popular hashtags on Twitter during the election included #AhokSumberKegaduhan for example, and discussed a lot about Ahok's ethnic background. Disinformation was also disseminated through social media massively, and was not infrequently manipulative in order to gain voter support. Although the facts prove that Ahok was born in Indonesia and has Indonesian citizenship, discursive interpretations show that the texts of politicised ethnic identity have been accepted and trusted by netizens.

On the other hand, the perception of netizens that Anies Baswedan is a *pribumi* seems to be well received, even though actually Anies is a Yemeni descendant. Although the text that "Anies *pribumi*" and its variants do not appear too many times on social media, but the dichotomy of "*pribumi* versus non-*pribumi*" seems to have convinced netizens that Anies Baswedan is a *pribumi*. Discursive interpretations like this certainly cannot be separated from the long history of hatred and discrimination of Chinese descendants in Indonesia, who are always considered to be "immigrants", "rich people" and "greedy." As a consequence, the netizen's social practices in the 2017 DKI Jakarta election resulted in them giving their votes to Anies Baswedan, who is considered to be "*pribumi*" rather than their votes going to the "non-*pribumi*", Ahok

4.2 Muslim versus Non-Muslim

In addition to ethnic identity, religious identity was also one of the dominant primordial sentiments during the 2017 DKI Jakarta election. Identity politics distinguishes between Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok as a non-Muslim (Christian) and Anies Baswedan as a Muslim, and he consciously utilised religious identity as an important voter getter during the election. In the 2017 DKI Jakarta election, religious-based hatred sentiments were even getting stronger when Ahok was considered to have defamed Al-Qur'an, Surat Al Maidah 51. The accusation of blasphemy then sent Ahok to jail, sentenced to two years.

Moreover, the dominant text relating to religion-based identity politics in social media is dominated by lawsuits against Ahok, the prohibition on choosing *kafir* leaders (non-Muslims), as well as the prohibition of worshiping Ahok's supporters when they pass away. Netizen conversations on Facebook were also mainly filled with suggestions not to choose Ahok as the governor of DKI Jakarta. While on Twitter, popular hashtags such as #*Tangkap*Ahok, #Ahok*PenistaAgama*, #*GeloraJihad,* as well as #SaveUlama were scattered throughout during the election.

This study further found that this discursive interpretation of the primordial text of religious identity has a stronger influence than ethnic identity. Superficial religious understanding, as well as the lack of digital literacy, has made netizens easily

receive misleading information on social media. As a consequence, at the level of social praxis, these political texts and disputes between Muslims and non-Muslims have been proven able to mobilize some of the DKI Jakarta residents to carry out large-scale demonstrations demanding that Ahok should be detained and punished. Identity politics, supported by the power of social media, once again has proven to be overthrowing Ahok as a governor candidate considered once to be clean, competent and visionary.

4.3 *Wong Cilik* versus Conglomerate

Although less prominent than the two previous identities, the last primordial sentiments that emerged in the 2017 DKI Jakarta election were to do with differences in social class. Some scholars do not include social class as a part of primordial identity (Haboddin, 2015). However, some others place social class as one aspect of primordial identity (Afala, 2018). The author followed the second group of scholars and found data in the field stating that social class can be part of the primordial identity.

In the 2017 DKI Jakarta election, social class-based identity politics sought to be seen in the differences between the lower class people commonly referred to as "wong cilik" and the upper class or conglomerates. In order to win over the sympathy of the electorate, the supporters of each governor candidate tried to build the image as them being the defender of the "wong cilik" and on the other hand, they sought to get away from their proximity to the conglomerate group.

Netizen' conversations on social media on this topic were dominated by words such as "governor of the people", "advocate of wong cilik", "wong cilik party", and also texts about "against black conglomerates", "anti-Aseng", "anti-foreigners" and the "Governor of the 9 Dragons". Interestingly, in contrast to the two previous identities that tend to show a sharp dichotomy between the candidates, in the issue of class identity, almost all of the candidates tried to build an image as being the "defender of wong cilik" and "enemy of the conglomerate".

An analysis of the texts on social media at the time showed the tendency of the supporters of governor Anies Baswedan to place Ahok in the position of supporting "capital owners". The term "Governor of the 9 Dragons", for example, was given to Ahok which was considered to bring in the interest of wealthy Chinese businessmen. The expression "anti-Aseng" also emerged as a symbol of the rejection of Chinese businessmen in Indonesia (Aseng is a typical Chinese Indonesian name). These texts appear to be in the form of writing, meme images and both factual and hoax videos that tend to corner the identity of one of the governor candidates.

In a scheme like this, discursive interpretations that arise later can be read as an attempt to discredit Ahok as a candidate as he is a governor of Chinese descent from a family of businessmen, and close to the Chinese business circle. Meanwhile, on the other hand, Anies Baswedan was quite successful in building the image of the identity of candidates who were siding with the wong cilik. His rejection of the Jakarta Bay reclamation project, for example, became popular campaign material that was widely shared through social media by his supporters. This is, of course, because the reclamation project is considered to be a symbol of support for Chinese business class groups.

This symbolic association in turn had positive results for the support team of the governor of Anies Baswedan. At the level of social praxis, this study found that the texts of "wong cilik advocates" and "anti-Aseng" proved to be able to mobilise voters to support Anies Baswedan. That is, although less prominent, primordial sentiments based on class identity through social media turned out to play a role in the identity politics of the 2017 DKI Jakarta election.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Identity politics during the 2017 DKI Jakarta election took place on a massive scale through social media. The data in this study shows that the presence of social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, has become a strong trigger for the development of primordial sentiments being more open and intense. In the 2017 DKI Jakarta election in previous years, the intensity of the practice of identity politics did not take place as it did in 2017. The emergence of a DKI Jakarta governor candidate from minority groups, namely Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, who is of Chinese descent and Christian, has encouraged the rise of identity politics and primordialism in Indonesia.

Social media texts in identity politics during the 2017 DKI Jakarta election included three themes of identity, namely ethnicity, religion and social class. Of the three, ethnic background (*pribumi* versus non-*pribumi*) and religion (Islam versus non-Islam) became the point of attention of netizens, while

social class background (*wong cilik* versus conglomerate) received less attention.

The existence of social media has proven to play an important role in the identity politics in the 2017 DKI Jakarta election. Societal divisions based on primordial background (ethnicity, religion and social class) took place more openly and dangerously. In the reality of contemporary Indonesian post-truth society, a better political will is needed for managing primordial differences and preventing the negative side of identity politics.

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