

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **Polarisation on- and off-line in Indonesia’s 2019 Presidential Elections**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- An analysis of Indonesia’s political “hashtag wars”—the competition to dominate Twitter’s trending topics—illustrates how the opposition has to date failed to build momentum around a single anti-government cause.
- The Jokowi-Ma’ruf Amin campaign has aggressively sought to counter damaging hoaxes and to deploy religious identity politics in order to control the narrative on Islam.
- Jokowi-Ma’ruf’s strategy is likely to contribute to their electoral success on April 17, 2019, but risks deepening polarisation in Indonesia around the divisive issue of Islam in politics.

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's 2019 presidential election is a rematch of the contest in 2014 between Prabowo Subianto and Joko Widodo (Jokowi). Yet in two key respects, the candidates' roles have been reversed. In 2014, Jokowi, the fresh-faced reformist, held sway online in what was arguably Indonesia's first social media election. Memorably, Jokowi volunteers—highly motivated and idealistic millennials—injecting his campaign with much of its energy and creativity. In 2019, however, Prabowo and his running mate Sandiaga Uno are dominant on social media and the Jokowi volunteers appear jaded. Prabowo-Sandi enjoys the most motivated and militant volunteer online army. Similarly, when it comes to exploiting religious identity politics, it is now Jokowi, rather than his opponents, who leads the charge. This short-term strategy, based on emphasising Islamic identity, is likely to help Jokowi's reelection on April 17. But in seeking to turn a weakness into a strength, Jokowi risks further entrenching Indonesia's political polarization over the role of Islam in the state, both in the Twittersphere and in real life.

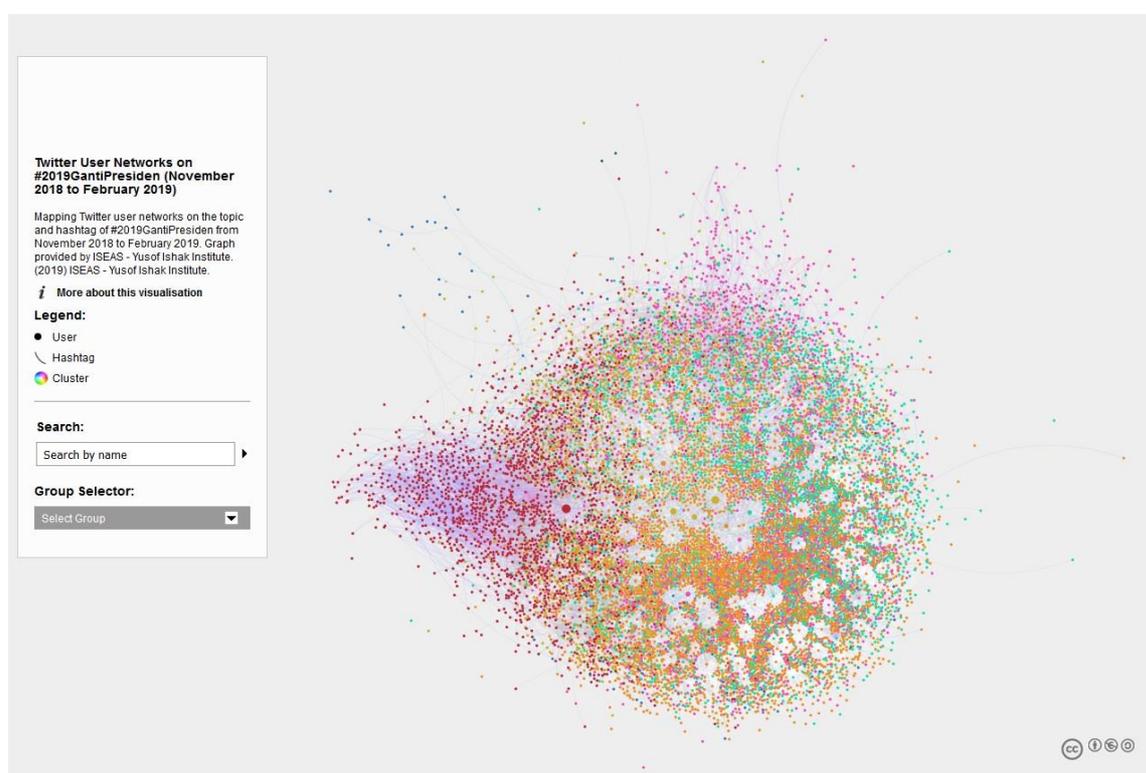
## TWITTER HASHTAG WARS

According to an internet proverb, "Twitter is not real life." As in recent elections elsewhere in the world, in Indonesia it can be difficult to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic actors online, and to gauge how much the conversation has offline impact. The best example so far of a successful online-offline message in the 2019 campaign is the opposition "change the president" hashtag (#2019GantiPresiden). So-called hashtag wars have become a fixture of Indonesia's political conversation, but most topics that seek to build momentum around a cause have a short half-life of a few days to a week. #2019GantiPresiden, however, transcended both temporal and physical boundaries. The hashtag, created by PKS politician Mardani Ali Sera, was used to frame opposition campaigning in 2018 and was printed on t-shirts, banners, and other campaign paraphernalia. The mobilizational power of the hashtag saw several "change the president" events taking place in key cities such as Surabaya and Pekanbaru. The events were opposed by local police and pro-government groups, sometimes leading to public melees between the opposing sides.<sup>1</sup>

A December 2018-January 2019 study by Charta Politika found that #2019GantiPresiden was the best known of the political slogans on either side of politics. It was perhaps effective not just because it had been in circulation the longest but also, as Executive Director of Charta Politika, Yunarto Wijaya, observed, because it appealed to all those opposed to Jokowi, not just the Prabowo camp.<sup>2</sup>

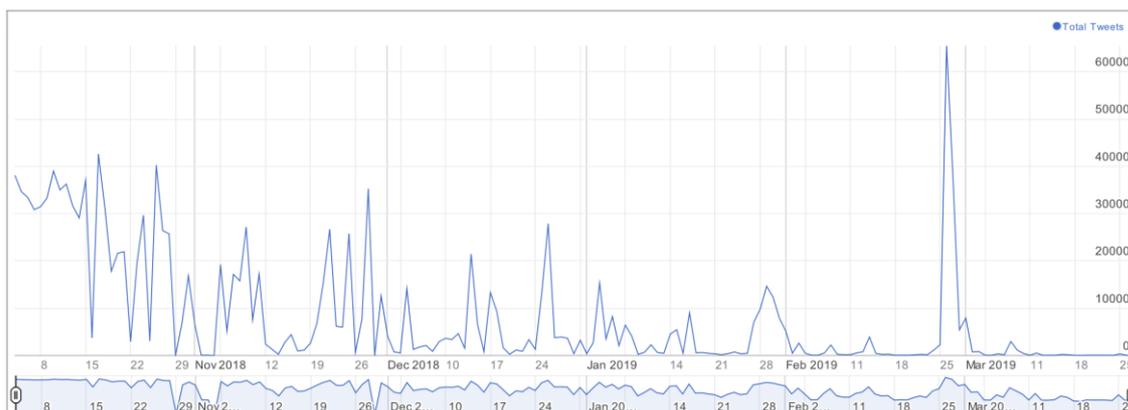
This early success spooked the Jokowi government, which sought to use the security services and political allies to disrupt the events. Events featuring opposition activists Neno Warisman and Ahmad Dhani were broken up by pro-government groups. But this only seemed to add momentum to the movement, lending the hashtag a certain revolutionary chic. One opposition figure even thanked the government for what he characterised as political "persecution" elevating the events to a national level. "I'm pleased there were these cases [the opposition to Neno Warisman and Ahmad Dhani]. Not pleased because of the unrest, but from the perspective of snowballing."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the viral hashtag appeared to be gathering force as a social movement.

In our analysis of hashtag data from Twitter for November 2018 to February 2019 using Gephi, an open-source network analysis and data visualisation programme, users who were involved in the #2019GantiPresiden conversation converged on one large, highly-connected cluster that included leading opposition figures, mainstream news media, and automated bot accounts (see Figure 1). Even pro-Jokowi accounts used the hashtag, helping to amplify it. This convergence is in contrast to other opposition hashtags that are typically fragmented into smaller clusters of users, many with limited ties (social influence). A notable feature of the “change the president” conversation is that many of the most influential accounts, measured in terms of “betweenness centrality” and reflected by the size of each circle (node), appear to have been targeted as spam or automated bot accounts and have since been removed from the platform.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1. #2019GantiPresiden Twitter network (November 2018-February 2019). Size of each circle (node), referred to as user, indicate the influence the user has on the Twitter network, lines connecting between users who interact indicate the hashtag (differentiated by colour and grey for none) used in the tweet(s), and clusters are differentiated by node colour. Graph provided by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. © (2019) ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.**

Although both sides use “cyber armies”, influencers, and bots to amplify their messaging, Prabowo-Sandi appears to enjoy the most influential network of both organic and fake accounts. After major campaign events, such as a presidential debate, commonly the competition to dominate the Twitter trending topics rankings is won by the opposition side. After the presidential debate of February 17, for example, Prabowo may not have looked like he “won” the debate itself, but he did win Twitter. #PrabowoMenangDebat (#PrabowoWonDebate) was the most successful campaign-related hashtag. The hashtag featured in 173,000 tweets, landing it second place in Twitter’s “Indonesia trends” ranking behind only the generic #DebatPilpres2019 (#PresidentialDebate2019) hashtag.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 2. Hashtag Tweets: Total Contribution: November-March. Source: Hashtagify.**

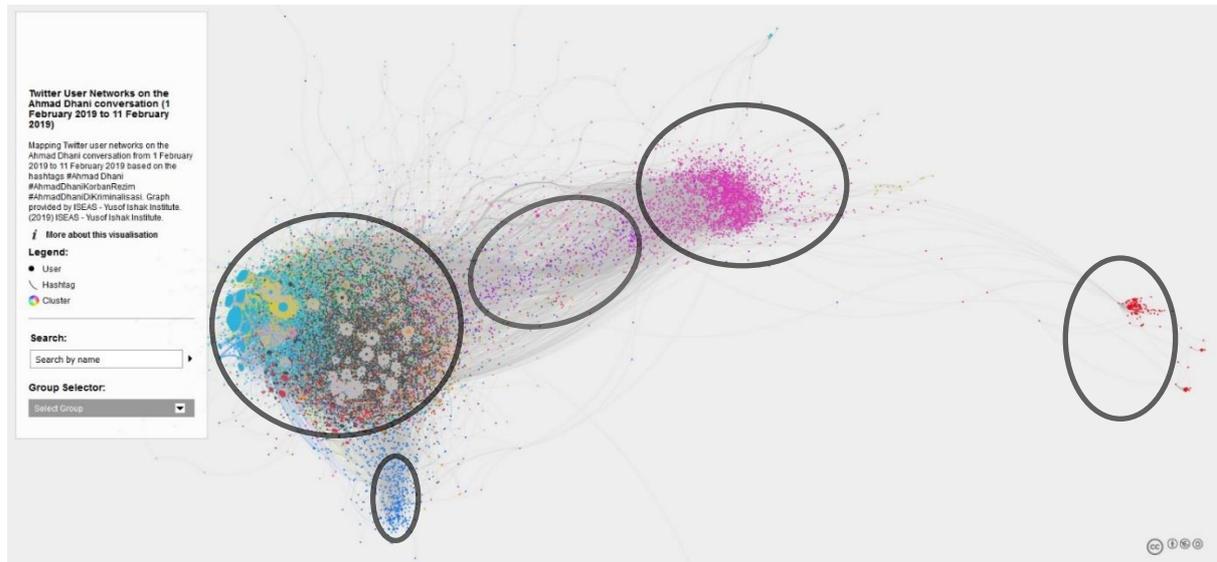
From early 2019, however—as the campaign entered its last months—Prabowo-Sandi switched focus to a more standard campaign hashtag, #2019PrabowoSandi, after much public advice to do so, including from Islamic Defenders Front leader Habib Rizieq.<sup>6</sup> The decline in the use of #2019GantiPresiden is illustrated in Figure 2 (although the hashtag enjoyed a brief revival in late March). The shift away from #2019GantiPresiden may also have been influenced by opposition figures seeking to avoid further government backlash. A pro-government narrative promoted the view, once expressed by presidential spokesperson Ali Mochtar Ngabalin, that the hashtag movement was a form of treason (*makar*).<sup>7</sup>

Either way, it is notable that since the tactical shift, the opposition has failed to build momentum around a single issue that might hurt Jokowi’s bid for re-election. This is not for want of trying, and notwithstanding the sense that although Jokowi has had a solid 20-point lead in most polls throughout the campaign, it would only take one striking error to erase his lead. Outgoing vice president Jusuf Kalla likened Jokowi to a badminton player who has to avoid the unforced error of smashing the shuttlecock into the net.<sup>8</sup> Given the short-termism of the news cycle, the nightmare scenario for Jokowi would be to commit such an error—a religious faux pas, perhaps—in the final week of the campaign.

Numerous issues that the opposition sought to weaponize against Jokowi have simply scrolled off into the digital past—the mismanagement of the September 2018 Poso earthquake, the mishandling of terrorism convict Abu Bakar Ba’asyir’s aborted prison release, and the “criminalization” (i.e., arrest and trial) of opposition figures. The last issue—that the Jokowi government is using the legal system to target its enemies—is perhaps the most successful opposition narrative. Yet it remains a story without an effective hero.

The case of Ahmad Dhani, the former rock singer and current Gerindra politician, demonstrates this point. On January 28, Dhani was convicted for hate speech and sentenced to 1.5 years in jail for a series of intemperate tweets in 2017 which related to former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) and blasphemy, of which Ahok was convicted.<sup>9</sup> In the immediate weeks following the jailing of Dhani, who is a member of the Prabowo-Sandi national campaign team, the story dominated the news cycle and the conversation online. An analysis of the Twitter discussion, however, shows that the structure of the conversation was more fragmented than that of #2019GantiPresiden, and into several distinct clusters (see Figure 3). A closer examination of the nodes in the network reveals a

high reliance on bot accounts. Unable to generate the same interest or cultural momentum as the “change the president” meme, Ahmad Dhani, like previous opposition campaign issues, was quickly overtaken by other events. Even the police cancelling of a March 10 concert in solidarity with Dhani in Surabaya did little to revive the issue, despite the effort made by Sandiagio Uno to set aside time for the event on his busy national campaign schedule.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 3. Ahmad Dhani Twitter Conversation (1 February 2019 - 11 February 2019).** Size of each circle (node), referred to as users, indicate the influence the user has on the Twitter network,, lines connecting users who interact indicate the hashtag (differentiated by colour and grey for none) used in the tweet(s), and clusters are differentiated by node colour. Main clusters can be identified by grey circles. Graph provided by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. © (2019) ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

Fragmentation—sometimes labelled *cyberbalkanization*—characterizes the political conversations online. Just as the internet facilitates access to diverse information sources, it also separates audiences into filter bubbles and echo chambers.<sup>11</sup> Polarization can ensue. In Indonesia, where the masses might once have been thought of in terms of multiple political streams (*aliran*), now they are characterized online as different species. Jokowi supporters are derided as *cebong* (tadpoles), while Prabowo supporters are labeled *kampret* (bats). The increasing polarization and fragmentation online means that campaign messaging must be targeted at particular audiences. This is the approach the Jokowi campaign team has taken in its online strategy.

## JOKOWI’S IDENTITY POLITICS CAMPAIGN

The primary focus of the Jokowi team’s social media strategy is to counter hoaxes that characterize him as anti-Islam. According to Yose Rizal, founder of social media analysis firm Politicawave, there have been ten major hoaxes that targeted Jokowi since 2014. Longstanding false narratives include the claim that Jokowi is associated with communism and that he is a lackey of foreign Chinese interests. Recent hoax stories include the claim that the Islamic call to prayer will be prohibited and that Jokowi’s vice president will be replaced by Ahok.<sup>12</sup> Jokowi has at every opportunity sought to enumerate and deny these

false narratives, risking the phenomenon of audiences remembering the misinformation more than the denial.

At a campaign event in Yogyakarta on March 23, Jokowi tackled the problem more directly than ever before. In exercised tones he declared: “For four and half years I was defamed but I stayed silent. I was denigrated but I stayed silent. I was belittled but I stayed silent. I was slandered, but I also stayed silent. But today in Yogyakarta I declare that I will fight back!” Jokowi added that a campaign to slander him and divide the nation was spreading offline. “Now it is not only on social media,” he claimed, “but it has already begun from door to door and is starting to do damage, and is intended to break up this country.”<sup>13</sup>

To counter this online and offline campaign against him, Jokowi has mounted his own massive social media and door-to-door campaign in key areas where he is vulnerable. One of the main areas of focus is West Java, where high religiosity and Prabowo’s success in 2014 put Jokowi at risk of losing. In West Java, the regional campaign team (Tim Kemengan Daerah, TKD) has established an elaborate system of online and offline teams and local command centres in order to counter anti-Jokowi messages. A topline recommendation in an official TKD West Java report gives a flavor of the campaign in the battleground province:

Identity politics narratives are strongly attacking Jokowi-Ma’ruf in the region of West Java, including the call of the manager of Ma’had Nurul Falah Cirebon [Islamic school] that said it was forbidden [haram] to vote for Jokowi because he is a liar and a servant of foreign interests. Ustadz-ustadz [Islamic teachers] in West Java attack Jokowi with the stigma of criminalizing ulama [religious scholars] and blasphemy. It is recommended that TKD West Java enact a strategy to counter this narrative through a door-to-door approach to several pesantren in West Java, to strengthen the narrative that Jokowi is not criminalizing ulama and is pro Muslim.<sup>14</sup>

A striking feature of Jokowi’s ground campaign in West Java is the prominent place in campaign material given to his running mate, the conservative cleric Ma’ruf Amin, a native of neighbouring Banten province. In campaign signs found widely in West Java, an image of Jokowi and Ma’ruf is featured below the title “Umaro-Ulama” (Figure 4). Umaro, in reference to Jokowi, is Arabic for a Muslim administrator and Ulama, in reference to Ma’ruf Amin, is the term for a religious scholar. Indeed, Jokowi-Ma’ruf, more than Prabowo-Sandi, can be seen appealing to Muslim identity politics in devout West Java.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 4. Campaign sign, Bandung, West Java.

## THE RISKS OF POLARISATION

Indonesia, with its multiplicity of almost interchangeable political parties and low party identification, is less polarised than many other countries, such as the United States. Eve Warburton argues that in comparative terms, polarisation in Indonesia is more “shallow and temporary,” driven by political elites when they are fighting heated elections.<sup>16</sup> Even then, there is only one major issue on which people are divided: the role of Islam.

But there is a risk that the 2019 election will see an acute condition turn into a chronic one. Ironically, in 2019 it is Jokowi, the pluralist candidate, who is campaigning the strongest on Islamic identity politics. In a dramatic campaign video released in late March, Jokowi and Ma’ruf Amin deployed the symbolism of Islamic dress, and to a background of Arabic singing, invited people to “hijrah [emigrate] together to an advanced Indonesia.”<sup>17</sup> Rather than countering polarisation over Islam by reasserting Indonesia’s Pancasila-based principle of religious neutrality, Jokowi has played into a piety arms race with the opposition.

On the eve of the election on April 17 both sides have called on their supporters to wear white to the polling booth—as if the vote were an act of religious observance. The Jokowi-Ma’ruf National Campaign Team made its call in reaction to a call first made by the anti-Ahok opposition 212 movement to wear white and guard the polling places until closing time. The competing calls have raised fears of unrest on voting day.<sup>18</sup> Jokowi’s strategy of turning his weakness on Islam into a strength may help him ensure his chances of re-election. But this short-term gain may come at a longer term cost. The polarisation that we see online during elections may come to define Indonesia’s national conversation.

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- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, the chaotic scenes on August 26, 2018 in Surabaya. “Massa Pro Kontra #2019GantiPresiden Ricuh,” Kompas TV, <https://www.kompas.tv/index.php/content/article/31431/video/berita-kompas-tv/presiden-nu-memiliki-komitmen-kebangsaan>
- <sup>2</sup> “Charta Politika: #2019GantiPresiden Diubah Justru Rugikan Prabowo,” *Tempo.co.id*, January 16, 2019, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1165666/charta-politika-2019gantipresiden-diubah-justru-rugikan-prabowo/full&view=ok>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://kumparan.com/@kumparannews/2019gantipresiden-gerakan-malu-malu-dukung-prabowo-1535957616717692370>
- <sup>4</sup> *Betweenness centrality* is the number of times a node falls along the shortest paths between two other nodes, representing the influence of a node over the flow of information in a network.
- <sup>5</sup> Twitter trending topics, February 18, 2019.
- <sup>6</sup> “Mardani Dukung Rizieq Ubah 2019 Ganti Presiden Jadi 2019 Prabowo Presiden,” *Detik*, January 7, 2019, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4373803/mardani-dukung-rizieq-ubah-2019-ganti-presiden-jadi-2019-prabowo-presiden>
- <sup>7</sup> “Jubir Istana: #2019GantiPresiden Makar!,” *Detik*, August 27, 2018, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4184132/jubir-istana-2019gantipresiden-makar>
- <sup>8</sup> “Kalau Tak Nyangkut Net, Jokowi Menang,” *Rakyat Merdeka*, March 27, 2019, p. 12.
- <sup>9</sup> “Ahmad Dhani Divonis 1,5 Tahun Penjara,” *Detik*, January 28, 2019, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4403894/ahmad-dhani-divonis-15-tahun-penjara>
- <sup>10</sup> “Sandiaga Sesali Konser Solidaritas Dhani Batal Digelar,” *CNN Indonesia*, March 10, 2019, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20190310213934-32-376019/sandiaga-sesali-konser-solidaritas-dhani-batal-digelar>
- <sup>11</sup> Filter bubbles refer to the personalised experience created by social media platforms using algorithms to filter the content users see based on predications of what will engage an individual user. See Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*, Penguin UK, 2011.
- <sup>12</sup> “Jokowi-Ma’ruf 80 Persen Positif, Prabowo-Sandi 26 Persen Negatif,” *Rakyat Merdeka*, February 8, 2019.
- <sup>13</sup> “Pidato Berapi Api Dari Jokowi Saat Deklarasi Alumni Jogja di Yogyakarta,” March 23, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nk5S\\_8nK5eM&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nk5S_8nK5eM&feature=youtu.be)
- <sup>14</sup> TKD Jawa Barat, “Pantauan Social Media,” 31 January-06 February 2019.
- <sup>15</sup> For a snapshot of Sandiaga Uno’s campaign in West Java, see Liam Gammon, “On the 2024 campaign trail with Sandi Uno,” *New Mandala*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/on-the-2024-campaign-trail-with-sandi-uno/>
- <sup>16</sup> Eve Warburton, “Polarization and Democratic Decline in Indonesia,” forthcoming, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- <sup>17</sup> “Makna iklan kampanye Prabowo Jokowi,” *Alinea*, March 26, 2019, <https://www.alinea.id/pemilu/makna-iklan-kampanye-prabowo-jokowi-b1XcX9i85>
- <sup>18</sup> “Gerakan Subuh 212 Ditangangi Rabu Putih,” *Rakyat Merdeka*, March 28, 2019.

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