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Political Buzzer Networks as Threat to Indonesian Democracy

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Youth using his mobile phone in the business district in Jakarta, Indonesia, on 19 July 2024. (Photo by Afriadi Hikmal/NurPhoto) Photo by Afriadi Hikmal / NurPhoto / NurPhoto via AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- So-called “political buzzers” have been playing significant roles in Indonesian electoral politics. These buzzers (known elsewhere as “trolls” or “cybertroopers”) are mostly youths, especially students at university level. Studies examining youth participation in political buzzing have however been limited.
- This article argues that political buzzers are detrimental to democracy in Indonesia. They are mostly recruited to create and disseminate false or misleading information on social media (under fake identities), which could then undermine public trust in political institutions and processes. Secondly, they are usually motivated by financial payments, which enables the rich and powerful political actors to benefit from unequal political competition.
- Individuals affiliated with civic organisations are often involved in recruiting and managing political buzzer networks on behalf of political patrons. There is a critical need for civic organisations to play a more active role in nurturing civic responsibility among the middle class. Government agencies and civic organisations should also be more proactive in promoting accountability and curbing bad behaviour, such as in ensuring better compliance with laws that proscribe the dissemination of fake and inflammatory information on social media.

INTRODUCTION

Political buzzers play significant roles in Indonesian electoral politics. These are individuals employed by political actors to support their electoral campaigns or political interests in order to amplify specific messages online based on client directives. They employ fake social media accounts (anonymous) to pose as real-life users,¹ and influence public opinion by disseminating both genuine and fabricated news and information.

This group is not to be confused with “political influencers”. Political influencers are typically recognized public figures with authentic identities, aiming to sway public opinion using their already-established credibility.²

Meanwhile, the term “cyber troopers/armies” denotes “government or political party actors tasked with manipulating public opinion online... [who] purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks.”³ As a collective term, cybertroopers/armies can refer to political buzzers and influencers.⁴ What can add to the confusion is that countries in Southeast Asia prefer different words to signify these actors; for example, “troll” is used in the Philippines, “cybertroopers” in Malaysia, and “buzzers” in Indonesia.⁵

Initially, “buzzers” were primarily associated with commercial activities—often in endorsing products or goods. However, they have since shifted to political purposes. Their role became pronounced after the 2012 Jakarta regional election when Jokowi (Joko Widodo) and Ahok (Basuki Tjahaja Purnama) were running in the Jakarta Governor election. This trend continued in the 2014 presidential election when social media was also used by civil society and pro-democracy activists to support Jokowi. During the 2017 Jakarta regional election and the 2019 presidential election, these came to play a role in impacting political conflict on social media, aggravating hate speech which led to manifestations in society.⁶

Although political buzzers had initially exhibited little inclination to disseminate negative information, current trends indicate a surge in disinformation within electoral contexts. This extends across various levels of political campaigns, stretching from presidential to local elections, where nearly all political actors feel compelled to enlist buzzers to counteract opposing narratives propagated by their opponents’ buzzers.⁷

Most studies on electoral politics focus more on social media content dealing with political identity, mis/disinformation, hoaxes, negative campaigns, and moral issues.⁸ Few discuss the effectiveness of buzzers and the important role buzzers play in winning electoral politics.⁹ While some suggest that political buzzers predominantly comprise of youths mostly affiliated with student associations and civic organisations,¹⁰ youth participation in political buzzing is still underexplored.

This article examines how and why youths are recruited as buzzers, what motivates them to participate in buzzing activities, and the impact of political buzzers on democracy in Indonesia. We argue that while contributing to promoting and strengthening democracy, civic organisations—especially those that had played a significant role in the advancement of democracy and the downfall of the Suharto regime in 1998—became media for breeding

political buzzers among middle-class youths to manipulate electoral sentiments. This could be a threat to democracy.

CIVIC ORGANISATION AND POLITICAL BUZZERS

As an industry, political buzzing involves political figures or parties, consultants or agencies, and buzzers. While political buzzing can be carried out individually, it is generally conducted in groups. Youths, especially university students, are often recruited as political buzzers. Involvement in civic organisations with extensions in student organisations is the connecting thread between the three groups of actors involved. Civic organisations provide social capital both in the form of networks and trust among the actors involved. Participation in student and civic organisations expose youths to social networks of political actors/parties, and political consultants/agencies which in turn facilitate their recruitment into political buzzer networks. Common affiliation to a civic organisation helps foster trust, which is an important element in buzzer recruitment and during the political buzzing process.

Involvement in civic organisations often helps individuals to be more interested in political issues, be it in the form of signing petitions, joining a party, participating in demonstrations and protests, or casting a vote. However, political participation should be voluntary.¹¹ We argue that youth engagement in political buzzing is a paid activity, and allows for financial coercion of buzzers. Rather than fostering organic political participation as part of youth civic conscience, civic organisations in this case facilitate a dubious process of information sharing that undermines democratic culture.

In their network, buzzers have different hierarchical roles to play. Social media specialists are the top leaders in the network. They bridge the gap between political consultants/agencies and other buzzers. They are commonly seniors from the same organisation who have connections with political figures or consultants. They tend to recruit university students as political buzzers for several reasons. Students, especially those involved in organisations, tend to understand political issues, and this helps the framing of content they distribute on social media. Furthermore, students can be paid cheaply.

Apart from being a recruiter, the top leader manages the buzzers. Generally, political buzzers serve two roles, namely increasing the popularity of a political person or party through positive content or destroying their popularity through negative content. During elections, for example, some buzzers only focus on showing the positive aspects of a candidate, while others only spread negative content to reduce certain candidates' popularity and electability.

Top leaders also play a role in preparing daily themes and hashtags to be posted on buzzer accounts. Using the themes provided by the top leader, buzzers then create content in the form of narratives, images, and videos to be shared on various social media.

In short, relations among actors in political buzzing are established based on patron-client relations in which ties between leaders and followers are personal; there is a reciprocal relationship as the patrons (leaders) have access to political elites or consultants so that they have social and economic superiority while clients (followers) benefit from their support and influence. Due to this patron-client relationship, the recruitment process of buzzers is usually

personal, relying on organisational networks on campuses and senior trust in the juniors they recruit.

Buzzers we interviewed have revealed that being a buzzer is like doing any other professional job. For example, there is a working duration for a project. In one election period, they can be a buzzer for one, two, or even all presidential candidates but for different work periods. Buzzers also have regular working hours from Monday to Saturday although generally they only need 1-2 hours to create content. They commonly use several fake accounts and have a target number of contents to produce and post in a day; this could be between 1 or 2 or up to 3 contents if the candidates they are buzzing about an “urgent brief” (special content beyond daily themes) and “boosting” to improve their popularity due to a particular issue or condition affecting their popularity. They have certain achievement targets as an indication of their posts’ success. However, since the relationship is patron-client, these buzzers do not have a formal written work contract, and the top leader, political actors or consultants are not responsible for any harm, including legal consequences, resulting from their posts. It is fully the buzzers who hold the responsibility.

FINANCIAL MOTIVES TRUMP IDEALISM

While political buzzing can be done voluntarily by loyal partisans of any candidate or party, this is quite unlikely since most political buzzing is driven by funds. Political figures and parties that have large financial support have a greater opportunity to mobilize public sentiment online to improve their popularity and electability. Although most active during elections, political buzzers can also operate outside of election times. They generally target as clients, government institutions that have low levels of performance and public trust. These institutions are likely to need their services to boost the level of public trust. Thus, the assessment of political and governmental institutions’ performance risk being manipulated by buzzer-generated content.

Economic aspects are the main factors that entice youth to be political buzzers. Our interview data show that they can usually earn around IDR 2-3.5 million per month. Since it only takes a short time, it can be a side job in addition to their academic activities. One of the informants we interviewed stated that when he was offered to join political buzzing, he was still “idealistic”. He felt uncomfortable, especially when he had to buzz positive things for candidates that he did not like. However, finally, he felt he had to be “realistic”, considering what he was doing was just a job. The monetary benefit finally became the main reason why he could feel comfortable doing this job.

Most of the informants we interviewed preferred to use “realistic” to justify their buzzing job. Additionally, they come to compare political buzzing to other earlier forms of media propaganda. These informants did mention that with the coming of social media, political buzzing had become something normal and inevitable.

The political buzzer network also provides them with experiences to establish their own buzzer agencies. They can soon be free of their reliance on agencies, and instead directly approach figures or institutions needing buzzing services. One informant mentioned that because his seniors—who were top leaders—trusted him, he could recommend his juniors to be newly-minted buzzers. Handling buzzing project proposals or regular reports required by clients soon helped him establish his own agency.

For seniors who have become political actors themselves or are involved in political parties, consulting agencies, or top leaders, organisational ties help them build political power and support. They become political patrons respected and obeyed by their juniors. In return, juniors' obedience helps them build their political careers. One informant, for example, said that it was well-known that students who were active in campus organisations would usually be identified to become buzzers by seniors who were already involved in politics. Students who have good careers at campus organisations are likely to become involved in politics. Therefore, their participation in campus organisations helps them gain a network that increases their opportunities for political careers later.

IMPACT OF POLITICAL BUZZER ON INDONESIAN DEMOCRACY

As a representative of the middle class, youths, especially university students, and civic organisations are often glorified as promoting democracy. First, the middle class is considered one of the important agents that had brought about the country's transition to democracy. When the middle class grows, the country's democracy would also become more stable. Second, democracy presupposes the growth of civic organisations which claim to hold civic values that align with democracy. However, in the case of political buzzing, both the middle-class and civic organisations show contradictions in their goals. They not only support democracy, they also threaten democracy.

We argue that political buzzing jeopardizes democracy for several reasons.

First, economic motives and the logic of supply and demand play a big part in advancing the political buzzer phenomenon. Political buzzers hired by political actors generally work not to advance democracy, but rather for the interests of senior members within their organisations and for financial gain. Even in democracies that are already maturely consolidated, the paid buzzer phenomenon indicates that social media can be co-opted by the rich and powerful. This trend parallels the practices now observed in Indonesia.¹²

Second, political buzzers circulate disinformation to steer public opinion; this prevents the public from objectively monitoring and evaluating the policy-making process and the behaviour of political and government elites, as well as legislative candidates.¹³ The activities of political buzzers also cause society to be less informed or more polarized. The most obvious example of polarisation was political identity in the 2017 DKI Jakarta Governor elections, which led to religious hatred.¹⁴ This polarisation was amplified in the 2019 presidential election.

As paid political buzzers have become a trend and one of the important instruments in elections, they may potentially weaken political equality on social media, where public opinion is influenced by those with the financial resources to engage paid political buzzers.¹⁵ Thus, the political buzzer not only deals in public opinion disinformation but also contributes to reproducing political inequality.

Finally, political buzzers can also weaken public confidence in democracy. Manipulative practices and the spreading of hatred by buzzers can damage public trust in democratic

institutions, including the media, political parties, and government institutions. This can lead to decreased political participation and weaken the quality of democracy. Furthermore, political leaders relying on buzzers and misinformation will further reduce public trust in democracy as a whole.¹⁶

Political buzzers do realize that their actions may be harmful to democracy. However, to justify their action, they tend to hold pessimistic views that Indonesia's democracy is a pseudo-democracy—emphasizing procedural rather than substantive democracy and can only be enjoyed by the elites. Therefore, they believe that political buzzing is inevitable in Indonesia. The political buzzers we interviewed are also of the opinion that improving the quality of democracy cannot be initiated by those at the lower levels but should instead be addressed at the elite level first. The behaviour of political elites that undermine democracy needs to be reformed first, to serve as a good example for youths to prioritize the public interest over personal economic gain. However, we believe that improving the quality of democracy requires the participation of all members of society. It does not only depend on top-down but also bottom-up initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The proliferation of social media has transformed campaign and public communication strategies away from traditional methods such as newspapers, television and radio, and into the digital realm. Social media has contributed to the birth of “political buzzers”, broadly defined as media propaganda actors framing public political sentiments with the help of social media. Our study suggests that the middle class and civic organisations are crucial in breeding political buzzers. Similarities in civic organisation or student organisation backgrounds have enabled the formation of patron-client relations in the political buzzer network. Seniors who have been actively involved in politics use the network of civic and student organisations to build their political power. They serve as political patrons for those of their juniors who are willing to engage in political buzzing.

Political buzzers tend to harm democracy by creating a political environment manipulated by the interests of the rich and powerful. Consequently, they play a role in exacerbating democratic regression and the falling level of public trust in democracy.

Given the potentially negative impacts of political buzzers on democracy, the government must be firm in law enforcement for violations committed by them. While there is no regulation that explicitly prohibits political buzzers, they can be charged using the electronic information and transaction law (UU ITE) when they disseminate false and harmful information. The election management and supervisory bodies (KPU and Bawaslu) should take firm action against violations committed by candidates who use political buzzers to spread fake information and polarize the public.

It is also critical to develop various communities concerned about a healthy social media environment for democracy and play their role in countering political buzzers. Some existing communities include Masyarakat Anti Fitnah Indonesia (MAFINDO), which actively socializes the dangers of false information (hoaxes) and creates immunity to hoaxes in

Indonesian society, and SAFEnet, a civil society organisation that advocates for digital rights, including the right to access the internet, free expression, and security in the digital realm. Furthermore, it is necessary to restore civic consciousness and responsibility among youths to increase their critical awareness of and concern for improving the quality of democracy in Indonesia. Critical thinking youths are key to promoting democracy by holding governments and politicians more accountable. Finally, it is imperative to revitalize the role of civic organisations in promoting a healthy democratic environment that allows for freedom of speech and holds political figures and the government accountable.

ENDNOTES

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