

# The Internet and the Public Sphere in Indonesia's New Democracy: a Study of *Politikana.com*

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**Abstract**—This paper aims to explain how the new media has affected and is influencing politics in Indonesia's new democracy. More specifically, this paper will explore the role of Web 2.0 based websites and how they are being used in promoting democracy in Indonesia, a country which ended an era of authoritarian government in 1998. The Web 2.0 website <http://politikana.com> will be presented as a case study to explain how this new Internet-based media affects the democratic process in Indonesia by expanding public sphere as well as an additional information source.

**Index Terms**— Democracy. Indonesia, Internet, Politikana.com.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE Internet as a new form of media greatly affects the way we live and communicate as well as has become a major source of our information (Dutta-Bergman & Chung, 2007). In the political communication area, the Internet is believed to have the capacity to reinvigorate the public's interest in politics as the Internet makes it easier for people to acquire political information as well as express political opinions (Dutta-Bergman & Chung, 2007). As Dahlberg argues, following Kellner (1998 as cited in 2001, p. 1), the Internet has produced “new public spheres and spaces for information, debate, and participation that contain the potential to reinvigorate democracy and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas”.

The coming of the web 2.0 that offers more interactivity (Orr, 2007) between its users has strengthened the belief. Web 2.0 based media is seen as providing new avenues for discussion and interactivity between users, hence promoting democracy by generating public sphere. Among the genre of this web 2.0 based media that are popular, at least before Facebook and Twitter, are youtube and blogging, with the latter emphasizes in information exchange (Thompson, 2003; Zuniga & Rojas, 2009).

In Indonesia, particularly before Facebook and Twitter take over the arena, blogging has been popular and has reached a

significant level in the society. It is estimated that some 500,000 blogs were present in the country as of October 2008 (Freischlad, 2008) and as of October 2009 Technorati estimates that there are 850,000 bloggers in Indonesia. The first annual Pesta Bloggers (Bloggers' Party) was held in October 2007 and was attended by more than 500 bloggers from Jakarta and other big cities around the country (Adamrah, 2007; Freischlad, 2008).

Despite the vibrant development, however, it was not clear whether the internet, particularly blogging has expanded public sphere in Indonesia. The study of blogs and blogging in Indonesia up to the time this research was conducted was limited. A study about Indonesian blogs and blogosphere was conducted by Nadine Freischlad (2008) who looked at the group identity in Indonesian blogosphere.

This paper aims to look at how the internet based media has affected and is influencing Indonesia's democratic endeavor. It explores whether and how a new media form of blog can promote democracy in the newly reformed country Indonesia by expanding the public sphere during and around the national elections in 2009. A user generated content website called *Politikana.com*, that was created during the campaign period by several prominent bloggers in the country with the main goal to provide medium for Indonesians to talk about elections and politics as well as daily public matters, is used as the case study. Politikana is chosen because it is the first user generated content website in Indonesia and it was born with the spirit of becoming a public sphere (Chuan, 2009).

The research is done in a desk study (internet research) method by observing the entries in politikana during and around the period of the elections. The findings show that politikana has functioned as an additional information source, especially about the elections and other important national issues such as terrorism and bombing, justice and freedom of expression as well as fight against corruption. The website has also served as an avenue for vibrant discussion and debates about those issues and many other topics of public matters. Moreover, politikana demonstrates to a large extent the characteristic of a public sphere in a Habermasian sense, which could be easily understood as “associational spaces”, encompassing the “core setting of informal public life” (Oldenburg 1989 as cited in Schneider, 1997, p. 12).

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## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. *The Internet, democracy and the public sphere*

One of the key topics discussed by experts in the field of political communication is whether the Internet as a new media has a potential influence in increasing or revitalizing democratic life (Banerjee, 2003b; Dutta-Bergman & Chung, 2007). Banerjee argues that technical characteristics of the Internet such as its non-hierarchical architecture and interactive features, its global dimension and natural resilience to any form of control also count as reasons why the Internet is believed to be potentially beneficial for promoting democracy.

Furthermore, the Internet is seen as a place where citizens can seek a variety of political information that they want and need before making political choices. They also argue that the Internet has the capacity to reinvigorate the public's interest in politics as the Internet makes it easier for people to acquire political information as well as express political opinions. Dutta-Bergman & Chung explain further that information in the Internet leads to deeper political learning which in the end will prompt more acts of participation. In this context, the Internet is seen as a means for educating individuals that can stimulate citizen participation. Moreover, the information available on the Internet will enable citizens to be better equipped so that they will make a rational choice in political actions.

Following Kellner (1998 as cited in 2001, p. 1), Dahlberg argues that the Internet has produced "new public spheres and spaces for information, debate, and participation that contain the potential to reinvigorate democracy and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas". This argument is in line with the idea that conversation, talk or discussion is a fundamental element in a democracy (Kim, et al, 1992, p. 362, Scheider, 1997)(1997, p. 8) Bruce Agre (1989) Huspek and Kendall (1991).

Schneider (1997) explains that conversation is very important as democracy is hard to sustain without the availability of skills and opportunities for every individual to engage with others in discussions about public issues. Schneider further argues that political discussion is essential in creating citizenship in a democracy. He says that the opportunity for citizens to talk and "converse" can be found through places called "associational spaces", encompassing the "core settings of informal public life" (Oldenburg 1989 as cited in Schneider, 1997, p. 12). This space can be understood as what Habermas calls the public sphere.

Dahlberg further argues that the Internet also has the potential to enhance democracy as it is decentralized and it can enhance the public sphere made up by rational-critical discourse. The rational-critical discourse enables the formation of public opinion through which official decision making can be held democratically accountable.

The invention of Web 2.0 in the last decade of last century has strengthened the belief that the Internet has a positive impact on democracy and generating a public sphere because it provides new avenues for discussion and interactivity

between users. Web 2.0 emphasizes user generated content, social networking and collaboration (Orr, 2007). The reason this new medium has such a capacity, according to many commentators, is because it is interactive, free, easy to use, relies on user-generated content, and "gives power to the people" (Grossman, 2006, p. 43 as in Orr, 2007). Grossman has noticed that Web 2.0 offers some interesting alternatives for political engagement although it does not change the factors that motivate people to participate in politics.

Echoing O'Reilly Media, Orr (2007) describes Web 2.0 as the second generation of tools provided by the Internet which principles are participation and collaboration and with an emphasis on sharing of resources amongst users. Social networking sites, wikis, communications tools, file-sharing, blogging, vlogging and torrents are included in this group. Orr further explains that blogs could be considered as the core example of the Web 2.0 form. Blogs have developed rapidly and have become more mainstream in recent years. It is difficult to determine the total number of blogs worldwide, however Times Online estimates that the number of blogs has approached 200 million in 2009 (Appleyard, 2009).

Thompson (2003) finds that weblogs exist somewhere between electronic journals which deal with the writer's own life and times and journalistic sites which adopt a pose of relative objectivity familiar in other media. In the discussion about the potential of blogs to generate a public sphere, Thompson argues that weblogs offer more open participation in an electronic public sphere because they allow two-way communication which does not exist in traditional broadcast and print media.

The two-way communication makes blogs and the blogosphere a potential means for fostering deliberation through rational discourse. Even pessimists like Sunstein (2008) acknowledge this, saying that to a large extent the blogosphere is a place for deliberation in a Habermasian sense. Citing Aristotle (1972 as cited in 2008, p. 90), Sunstein further explains that when various groups "all come together...they may surpass—collectively and as a body, although not individually—the quality of the few best". Furthermore, he cites Rawl (1971) who argues that discussion is a way of combining information and enlarging the range of argument. Habermas' work is also cited by Sunstein (2008), who argues that "rational discourse is supposed to be public and inclusive, to grant equal communication rights for participants, to require sincerity and to diffuse any kind of force other than the forceless force of the better argument". Using Habermas' understanding of the "ideal speech situation" in the public sphere, Sunstein (2008, p. 91) argues that it could be said that the blogosphere operates to some degree in a "Habermasian fashion" as it has the possibility to foster the coming out of "the better argument".

Dahlberg (2001) however, does not merely accept that the Internet will directly enhance democracy. In order to be considered as a public sphere, communication in the Internet has to fulfill the six requirements that he has developed, which are quite similar to what Schneider (1997) developed in examining the public sphere in a Habermasian sense. The six

requirements are (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 2):

1. Autonomy from the state and economic power.
2. Exchange and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims.
3. Reflexivity or participants must critically examine their cultural values, assumptions, and interests, as well as the larger social context.
4. Ideal role taking which means participants must attempt to understand the argument from the other's perspective. This requires a commitment to an ongoing dialogue with difference in which interlocutors respectfully listen to each other.
5. Sincerity. Each participant must make a sincere effort to know all information, including their true intentions, interests, needs and desires, as relevant to the particular problem under consideration.
6. Discursive inclusion and equality. Every participant affected by the validity claims under consideration is equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever.

#### *B. The Development of the Internet and Democracy in Indonesia*

As elsewhere else in the world, discussion about the Internet and its relationship with democratic dynamics is ubiquitous in Indonesia. The Internet came to Indonesia's wider public when the country was in transition from an authoritarian to a democratic system. It is certain that other aspects of the nation were changing, yet the role of the Internet is pervasive. For many decades, the country has been under the control of the authoritarian regime of the Suharto government. Freedom of expression was restricted and freedom of the press was a utopian dream. Thus the Internet, which became popular in Indonesia coinciding with the end of the regime, can be seen as breaking down the wall of the state monopoly over the civic space (Lim 2006a, 2004b, 2004a, 2003b, 2003a) and it has also played a role as an alternative media source (Hill & Sen, 2005). Basuki (1999) believed that at that time, the Internet was regarded as an alternative medium for views and news that would otherwise have remained unheard and unwritten.

The Internet has grown significantly since it was first introduced in the 1980s and became publicly available in the second half of the 1990s. Internet users in Indonesia embrace the technology in their daily activities and always take part in the newest developments of the technology such as social networking sites, Web 2.0 communications and blogging. At the end of 2008, Indonesia recorded 25 million Internet users (Internet World Stats, 2009), about 50 times the 512,000 recorded in 1998. The business sector has embraced e-commerce, the government has applied the technology in the bureaucracy, and the public embraces it as a new space for communication.

#### III. CASE STUDY: POLITIKANA AND INDONESIA'S PUBLIC SPHERE

##### *A. Talking Politics Online: 2009 Elections and Daily Politics on Politikana.com*

Politikana.com is a user generated content (UGC) website established to facilitate discussions about the 2009 election and other political issues in Indonesia and is often referred to as the first political UGC website in Indonesia (Politikana, 2009a; www.theunspunblog.com, 2009). The official press release for the website launch in April 2009 claimed that Politikana was the only political website that implemented the concept of Web 2.0 and declared itself as the "the place of ideas", where its users could have discussions, interact and express their opinions about politics in a broader sense.

According to Politikana's publisher Enda Nasution, who is also one of the most prominent Indonesian bloggers, Politikana was established with its main goal of educating Indonesians, particularly younger people who have access to the Internet, about politics in general (Chuan, 2009a). Building people's interest is important and it can be achieved through exercises of throwing around ideas and interactively discussing them with others. Arguing and forming opinion are also part of the important process of politics facilitated on the Politikana website. Nasution explains that politics can be understood as something beyond elections, political parties and government. However, not many Indonesian citizens have this sense. Thus, he argues that a site such as Politikana would be very important in educating people about their rights and responsibilities, social contracts with the state, and any aspect of citizenship in daily life.

He explains further that Politikana will let its users have control of the website's management. The content will mostly be contributed by the users, although guest writers will be invited to contribute to give a more balanced perspective on the discussion. Users will also act as moderators through a rating mechanism. The rating options, which include: *boring, interesting, cool, and important*, will determine the position of an article on the main page of the website. The rating system is not only applied to the content, but also to the users' image. A user could be rated (according to what they call image or *pamor*) by other users based on the content of their writings.

Some of Politikana's management team members have media connections and the site is also supported by one of the leading news organizations *Tempo*, which manages *Tempo magazine*, *Koran Tempo* (a daily newspaper), and *Tempo Interactive* (an online portal). It also has a management team to run the website professionally, although so far it has not revealed any business activities. Hence, it is safe to presume that Politikana is basically born from civil society, from the people who have concern about social issues and an interest in politics and civic life. It has so far remained free from both corporate influence and state control, which fulfils the first condition of online public sphere required by Dahlberg (2001).

In terms of content, Politikana provides great freedom to its users to post almost any topic in various formats. Once registered as a member, users can post anything in the form of

opinion articles, reports, or any kind of writing. The management has made it easier for the users to put their posts into six different categories: *Nasional* for issues of national interest, *Daerah* for regional related issues, *Media Watch* for comment on news published in the mass media, and *Suara Internet* to accommodate issues or links to an Internet source. The other two categories are *Pemilu '09* for topics related to both the legislative and presidential 2009 elections, and *OOT* or Out of Topic which accommodates any kind of post that cannot be put into the previous categories. Users will have access to update their uploaded posts whenever necessary.

Those who want to contribute pictures are also welcome. They can upload pictures (photographs and other images such as cartoons) which are shown as a slide within any articles that are posted. Another facility is that users can post their comments or ratings for posts from other users, which contributes to the ranking of an article and the *pamor* of the post author. As the management puts it, the rating mechanism will determine the position of a post. A highly rated post will automatically be shown on the front page, while a poorly rated post will be on a less favourable page.

Contributors are invited to post their opinions on this website which, according to the management, is aimed at providing balance to the content. The contributors come from various backgrounds and areas of expertise, and include prominent journalist and poet of the Tempo group Goenawan Mohammad (GM), film director Iman Brotoseno, Roby Muhammad, a PhD candidate from the University of Columbia in the USA who is currently researching social networking, and M. Fadjoel Rahman, a political commentator who is always very critical of the government. During the election period, the website also put links to candidates and their partners' websites so that readers could post something there. The Politikana management also invited political candidates to post something related to their campaign on the web in the section called "*Suara Mereka*" or "their voices". Politikana also includes links to all presidential candidates' website.

All these rules set in Politikana display the spirits of public sphere that include equality (Schneider, 1997) as it is open to all Indonesian (as long as they have Internet access). It also encourages participation (Schneider, 1997, Dahlberg, 2001) in any form be it through posting articles, comments, pictures, and for any topics related to elections and many other issues of daily public matters.

#### *B. Online Public Sphere in the Making: Deliberating Politics on Politikana.com*

As noted above, issues in Politikana are basically categorised into six groups: *Nasional* (National), *Daerah* (Regional), *Election 09*, *Media Watch*, *Suara Internet* (Voices from the Internet), and *OOT* (Out of Topic). General observation of the website since it was established shows that the *Nasional* category appears to dominate, with more than half of the postings are about national issues.

During the election period, issues related to the elections such as the legislative candidates, the KPU, political parties, election mechanisms, campaigns, presidential candidates and their vice presidential hopefuls were central to the discussions and postings. However, many other issues were also being posted and adding some colour to the debates.

#### *1) Election Issues*

The election momentum is a big enough reason to spark discussion on politics and citizenship and the theme of the election is so strong it has even been included in the tag line of the website which reads, "The 2.0 Discussion of Indonesian Politics, Election".

In the Election 09 entry category, a total of 120 pages were found in Politikana. Discussion about the election is indeed widespread and lively, presumably because the election only come once in a five year and is the most obvious citizenship practice in a democratic society. As Indonesians have only been free from state repression for around 10 years, it would be reasonable to presume that people are still in a euphoric mindset about freedom of political expression.

Established to facilitate discussion about the election and raise awareness amongst citizens about their citizenship, Politikana can be said to be relatively successful. It has recorded a reasonably increasing membership and active discussion base. According to the official data, when Politikana was launched in April 2009 its users numbered around 1,000 and reached nearly 4,000 registered members as of 10 September 2009 (Nasution, 2009). The same data also shows that total visits reached 440,944 (between April 1 and September 11 2009) and that it has had quite a steady growth of visitors during that period, with a peak during the presidential election held on July 9, 2009. Presumably, it is prompted by the need to update information about what is going on during election time or to find out more information about the candidates.

**Table 1: Monthly Visits**

Monthly Period	Total Visits
Apr 1, 2009 – Apr 30, 2009	55,373
May 1, 2009 - May 31, 2009	80,611
Jun 1, 2009 – Jun 30, 2009	76,070
Jul 1, 2009 - Jul 31, 2009	105,702
Aug 1, 2009 - Aug 31, 2009	95,130
Apr 1, 2009 – Apr 30, 2009	55,373

*Source: Politikana official data*

Articles about the election vary, with discussions about the presidential candidates and their vice presidents are likely to be the most common, followed by posts about campaigns. Postings about SBY's candidacy of trying for a second term raised different kinds of responses. Some people praised his accomplishment during his presidency and supported his candidacy in the second round. During his leadership, the Indonesian economy was relatively stable and its record growth even survived the global financial crisis. His most

notable record however would be the political stability. Politikana's audience did not miss this and a few posts were made related to SBY's record. However, other people were concerned with SBY's lack of commitment to addressing the most challenging issues in the country such as corruption, Suharto's cronyism, and his relationships with high profile businessmen in the country. The management of the Lapindo mudflow disaster in the East Java town of Sidoarjo was seen as one of his flaws in dealing with business power, in this case with Bakrie family business which is linked to the Coordinating Minister for Social Welfare Aburizal Bakrie.

Discussion on Politikana also revolved around the people behind SBY, including his campaign team the Mallarangeng Brothers. Andi, Rizal and Zulkarnain Mallarangeng are involved with SBY in different areas, which triggered public criticism. Andi is one of President SBY's spokespersons, Rizal runs the political think tank Freedom Institute and Indonesia Survey Institute (LSI), while the youngest, Zulkarnain, is the main figure behind the political consultancy Fox Indonesia. They have become one of Politikana's topics of discussion because LSI has conducted some surveys related to the Presidential election, while Fox is the consultant for SBY's campaign.

Rusdi Mathari is one of the consistent critics of SBY. On one occasion he ran a series of articles about the Mallarangeng Brothers titled "*Lompatan Mallarangeng Bersaudara*" (Mallarangeng Brothers' Leap) series 1, 2 and 3 which were published on 9, 10 and 11 June 2009 respectively (Mathari 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). The articles were considered very informative, giving a comprehensive picture of what links them, their institutions, and SBY. Rusdi's posts gained a good response with two of them receiving more than 30 comments and the third article gaining 20, and being rated interesting (*menarik*) +10.

When SBY announced his choice for vice president as the current Governor of the Bank of Indonesia and former Coordinating Minister of Economics, Boediono, people also responded with both support and criticism. Boediono is not a politician. He was seen more as an economist, currently holding a position as the Central Bank Governor. He also assumed posts as Finance Minister and Coordinating Minister of Economics, and is a professor at one of the most prestigious universities in the country. Although he has a clean record and good credentials, some critics say that Boediono is a neoliberal due to his American education for a doctoral degree from Wharton School University of Pennsylvania, USA, in 1979. Neoliberalism became familiar to Indonesians when Suharto opened the country's market to foreign investment. To some degree, neoliberalism, which leaves the economy fully under the market's control, is blamed for the collapse of the Indonesian economy and the economic gaps that are omnipresent in the country.

Rusdi Mathari wrote a series of four articles about Boediono and his neoliberalism association which generated somewhat discursive talks about SBY's running mate (Mathari, 2009d, 2009e, 2009f, 2009g). Apart from whether the debates had any influence on the decision making of the

voters, people could at least learn about the term and its impact on the Indonesian economy.

Besides Mathari's articles, many posts were also made on this topic. A supporter of Boediono posted an article written by another economist Faisal Basrie that was published on *Kompas* online, titled *Pak Boed yang Saya Kenal* (Mr. Boed Whom I Know). Against most posting that focus on Boediono's neoliberalism, Basrie's article takes on another side of Boed's personality as a person with a good and clean reputation as well as the humble attitude despite his high profile post in the bureaucracy.

Politikana web discussions have also made the topic of another candidate, Megawati and her running mate Prabowo Soebijanto, a hot issue. Megawati's aim to secure the presidential seat raised negative responses and lot of doubt about her ability; some people said nothing and a few expressed their support. Enda's post on this topic is a very short intriguing article titled "Seriously, is there anyone who still wants Mega as President?" It received a rating of interesting +5 and 55 comments (Enda, 2009c).

Megawati's choice of Prabowo Soebijanto as her running mate is a controversial move, considering he was blamed as the man behind the kidnapping and killing of student activists during the reform movements between 1995 and 1998. He was then the commander of the Army's Special Forces (Kopassus). Also, Prabowo was formerly a son in-law of former president Suharto, Megawati's main political foe. Yet they agreed to build an alliance to compete with SBY-Boediono in the presidential race.

Indonesians forget quickly, but at least a few people still remember Prabowo's past. While he has bombarded the public with his personal advertising on the national television network portraying his charismatic figure, these few people are trying to remind the public about his past mistakes, including through the Politikana website. Mas Paman posted an article titled *Jangan Biarkan Penculik dan Pembunuh Memimpin Kita* (Don't Let Kidnapper and Murderer Lead Us) at 18.35, April 24 2009 (Paman, 2009). Rated interesting (*menarik*) +10 and receiving 32 comments, the article reminds people about Prabowo's past mistakes. People praised his courage to write this article which generated more discussion about the track record of the candidates for president and their running mates.

The last pair, JK and Wiranto also could not avoid being the target of criticism on Politikana. Indonesians remember Wiranto as one of Suharto's military men. He has been accused of being responsible for the shooting of Trisakti University students during a protest on May 13, 1998. The international community will also remember him as being largely responsible for the human rights abuses and organised violence in East Timor after the August 1999 referendum demanded independence from Indonesia. An article about the dilemma of choices for the presidential seat was posted by Herman Saksono at 14.12 on June 9 2009 (Saksono, 2009a). It received 68 comments and was rated inspirational (*inspiratif*) +7. Comments mostly spoke of a similar view on Wiranto's bad record due to human right violations in Suharto's era.

Issues of religion also affected the presidential candidates, particularly SBY-Boediono. They are Muslims, however they were not seen as Islamic figures but more as moderate ones. Neither of their wives wear veils (or *jilbab* in Indonesian), which raised public discussion during the campaign about whether they are actually Muslims. Ani Yudhoyono is a short name for Kristiani (*Kristen* is the literal translation for Christian in Indonesian), while Herawati Boediono is from Yogyakarta, renowned as the province where many catholic Javanese are from.

Jusuf Kalla is not a political favourite as he was seen as too pragmatic and business minded. However, he received a favourable response due to his personality that is straightforward and open as well as pragmatic. He is also benefited from the fact that he is not Javanese (he is from South Sulawesi), which raised the issue about equality of opportunity for different ethnic groups in Indonesian politics which so far is still considered to be dominated by the Javanese. Although only in a minor way, he has used his non-Javanese identity as one of his campaign strategies. It became more significant when one of the President's spokespersons Andi Mallarangeng made a blunder in his statement that it was "untimely" for people from South Sulawesi to be president of the country (Hajramurni, 2009).

As described above, Politikana, as opposed to the traditional media of print and television, has become an easier platform for people to talk and converse or exchanging ideas about all these sensitive matters. For example, users discuss about sensitive issues of religiosity and unveiled ladies as well as ethnicity, which is a major step toward political maturity in Indonesia. Discussion and debates about those issues reflect desire to understand assumption, cultural value and interest as well as the larger social context of the issues. To some degree, politikana has also provided useful information (as well as platform) that could prompt deeper political learning. Discussion in politikana can be seen as a constructive way can erase prejudice, inform people about what others think about issues that in turn could enable users to make better and more rational decision in the elections (Dutta-Bergman & Chung, 2007).

They also demonstrate the critical examination or reflexivity as Dahlberg called it (2001) over elections related topics. In discussion about vice president hopeful Boediono, some users also seem to make sincere efforts to understand the arguments and ideas from other sides, while at the same time throwing their own ideas. Discussion and debates that remains ongoing shows that participants respect differences and each others' perspective as required in online public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001). The process of exchanging information and opinion will only enrich their understanding about the Boediono and how he should be seen in the country's political arena.

## 2) National Issues

More than half of the postings on Politikana belong to the *Nasional* category. Amongst the hottest issues being posted on the web are the arrest of the chairman of the Corruption

Eradication Commission (KPK) due to a murder case, the hunt for terrorists following the bombing of two high profile hotels in Jakarta not long after the presidential election, and the recent *Pendet Dance* saga between Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as the Bank Century bail out. The first posting on the *Nasional* category was by Enda Nasution, the publisher of the website titled "*Ini adalah Posting Pertama*" (This is the First Post) that explains Politikana is created based on the vision for a "public space" that is warm, informative and smart. It aims to be a place for real discussion that does not end in "talk" but lead to some real actions. Enda's first posting was made at 10.58 am on Monday March 2 2009. It received 2 comments and was rated inspirational (*inspiratif*) +10. This chapter will look at a few major cases to demonstrate the political deliberation and expansion of public sphere in this website.

### (a) Long Fights against Corruption: KPK and Antasari Azhar's Arrest

The arrest of KPK's chairman Antasari Azhar was a big surprise for the public. He was arrested over a weekend in early May 2009 for alleged involvement in the murder of Nasruddin Zulkarnaen, the director of a state-owned company and a former KPK witness. Zulkarnaen was shot dead in the middle of the day outside a golf course in Tangerang, on the outskirts of Jakarta. Media speculation has related this killing to a suspicion of a love triangle involving the two men and a 22 year old female golf caddy who was also Zulkarnaen's wife number 3. Allegations that Azhar was the mastermind of the killing have thrown into turmoil the work of the KPK, which has claimed high-profile scalps and is considered one of Indonesia's few clean institutions.

Under Azhar's leadership, the KPK has rocked the graft-riddled legislature with a series of arrests of serving House members. This anti-graft body has also arrested and brought to court a State Prosecutor for receiving bribes. Another outstanding move by the KPK was its indictment of the former Bank of Indonesia Deputy Governor Aulia Pohan, the father-in-law of President SBY's eldest son, for misuse of BI funds. The announcement of Azhar's involvement came to public attention a couple of weeks after the KPK chief launched his latest case: an investigation into the procurement of electronic equipment used by the KPU, following the voter list fiasco in the recent legislative polls. The KPU, equipped with Rp 170 billion (US\$15.86 million) worth of software, promised to finish the vote count in two weeks (Sabarini, 2009). It had to close its electronic tabulation centre two weeks after the polls, despite having only counted 13 million of the estimated 125 million ballots cast. The KPU count gave President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Democratic Party the lead in the polls with 20.5 percent of votes.

How did Politikana users respond to this case? It was indeed a big topic, considering the whole situation around the arrest. One posting called for further investigation of Azhar's case, questioning whether the love triangle was too shallow a motive for Azhar's misbehaviour as showcased in the article "*Kasus Antasari: Surat Terbuka untuk Pak Polisi*" (Antasari's

Case: An Open Letter for Mr. Policeman) posted on May 6 at 10.31 (Teguh Usis, 2009a). This posting, which gathered 12 comments and is rated interesting (*menarik*) +6, mentioned that there may have been an effort to take revenge on KPK for its successful record in the high profile corruption cases involving those in the House of Representatives, AGO's office, and Bank of Indonesia. Comments also gave similar opinions, although some people were disappointed to learn about Azhar's flaws with women.

In an article titled "*Kasus Antasari, Scandal of the Year*" (Antasari's Case, the Scandal of the Year) which was posted in May, prior to his arrest, users praised KPK's move to suspend Azhar's chairmanship (Syaifuddin, 2009). It was considered a very clever move to maintain the institution's clean reputation. The writer also throws a triggering question on whether this scandal will leave a bad record at the end of the SBY-JK office, or instead is something that will move public attention to the parliamentary coalition between parties to "attack" before the election.

Amongst the comments was one from Heriyadi who said it was a good and critical piece of writing. He also mentioned the possibility of relating it to cases of the Deputy Governor of BI and DPR on May 2 at 5.26). Knalpot Putih at 5.53 said the posting was politically intriguing. More comments praised KPK's good work and offered support for Azhar. However, some commented that Azhar indeed had a bad reputation, including when he was in charge of Tommy Suharto's trial. He let former President Suharto's son escape from the law (Google May 2, 12.20). A user Doliharahap at 15.00 on the same day said that the KPK's chairman had been seen clubbing with "women", despite his good reputation with KPK in recent times.

When the media broadcast the issue of CCTV footage in a hotel in South Jakarta, where Azhar was suspected of having a meeting with Rani, the golf caddy, a post about privacy was made post by a tourist on May 7 at 17.55. This post prompted different debates on this issue of privacy, private space and the public domain. It also brought up discussion about how to create simple technology to disrupt the work of CCTV (Tourist, 2009).

The dynamic of the discussion shows a huge interest of this matter. Many comments were posted and people also have different ideas and understanding about what happened. Although not always rational and critical, postings were generally informative. Discussion and debates show exchange of information and critique, which some time triggered further discussion and learning on related issues, such as CCTV and privacy.

*(b) Prita Mulya Sari: More than Justice for a Housewife*

Housewife Prita Mulya Sari made a complaint about her dissatisfaction with the treatment for her fever by Omni hospital in Tangerang, northwest of Jakarta and sent it to her friends. The letter then spread to the Internet after her friends sending it to various email groups. The hospital's management could not accept the bad image caused by the email and filed a report about Prita for defamation. The Tangerang police then

put her in jail for 20 days. She was released later with a home detention status.

Prita's case received huge attention from Politikana's users and audience. A simple search by putting the key word "Prita" returns a result of 17 pages with an average of six postings per page. Thanks to social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter which are very powerful in bringing an issue into a mass scale, Prita's case gained attention from a wider audience and even caught the attention of the three president hopefuls who were aware of the political potential of the issue.

This case raised a public outcry for various reasons. Some people think that it is an act of tyranny when the strong beat the weak; the anti-socialists say that it is the fault of neoliberalism when the corporate sector can do whatever they want to financially weak ordinary citizens. Other groups see it is negligence by the authority that fails to protect its citizens, and more importantly it raised question about the function and effectiveness of the Law on Internet and Electronic Transaction (UU ITE) enacted the year before. The enactment of the Law has generated controversy, especially with Article No 27 that says "Anyone who deliberately and without any right to distribute and/or transmit and/or allow an access to an electronic information and/or electronic document containing a contempt and/or defamation, shall be imposed with a criminal sanction of six years' imprisonment and a maximum of Rp 1 billion fine" (Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) & International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), 2009)

Prita's case was so big that at that time many mainstream media sources also ran stories about it. This case also triggered "social activism" about unfair treatment of fellow citizens. A Facebook group was created to gain support for the housewife and seek her release from jail. It was a big success, with more than 64,000 members. The Twitter response and public outcry was also big and prompted several related organizations such as the Indonesian Lawyers Association (PBHI) and Indonesian Legal Aid Institute (LBH) to take action condemning the police move and asking them to release Prita. This is an example of what Enda said in his first posting on the website, that Politikana wanted to be a place for discussion that can lead to a real action.

One of the most notable articles in the Politikana forum is from Herman Saksono, which received 71 comments. The article, *UU ITE Menelan Korban Lagi* (UU ITE got Another Victim) points out the relevance of Prita's case to the UU ITE which was passed in the previous year (Saksono, 2009c). Herman explains that Prita's case is not only about the bad service of a hospital; moreover it was very relevant to the fact that the new law did not guarantee the citizen's freedom to express her opinion online. Enda responded with a posting encouraging people to create a movement called "Say No to OMNI Hospital", which obtained enthusiastic responses. Meanwhile Heriyadi recommended bloggers to boycott checking and writing, which he believed would affect the business of the Internet service provider.

Enda's email campaign post received the highest response of 137 comments and was rated important (*penting*) +10

(Enda, 2009b). Another article from Herman Saksono titled *Pengacara Omni: Trombosit 27.000 itu kabur dan ga jelas* (Omni's Lawyer: the thrombosis 27,000 is not clear) generated 85 comments and was rated important (*penting*) +10 (Saksono, 2009b).

Discursive characteristics are very evident in the conversation about Prita in Politikana and even after her release from jail, Politikana remained actively discussing the issue. But the most notable character of the discussion about Prita's case that demonstrates the public sphere's character is probably the rational-critical discourse which eventually forms a strong public opinion about how Prita should be treated before law. Politikana has functioned as "new public sphere and spaces for information, debate and participation.....and increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas" (Kellner, as cited in Dahlberg, 2001, p. 1) about freedom of expression online and justice for regular citizens.

Moreover, conversations in Politikana aimed at solving problems. Prita's case shows that the public want the government to take the necessary action to review the Internet and Electronic Translation Law (UU ITE) as well as enforce justice for an ordinary citizen. The other effects, thanks to Facebook and other social network sites as well as the traditional media, are that it caused a public outcry over the issue and forced the authorities to revise their treatment of Prita.

### (c) *The July Bombing and Terrorism*

Aside from the arrest of KPK's chairman which led to *Cicak-Buaya* (Gecko-Crocodile) fiasco between the anti-graft body with National Police and General Attorney Office, the recent bombing of two Jakarta luxury hotels was another big issue in the post-election period. Only a few days after the presidential election was smoothly run, Jakarta was once again attacked by terrorists. Two bombs exploded in the city's prestigious hotels, the JW Marriot and the Ritz Carlton, at around 7.50 am on Friday, July 17, 2009 killing at least nine and injuring 53 people. The action was said to be targeting a regular breakfast meeting which was attended by prominent business figures, many of them expatriates. The JW Marriot was the target of a previous bomb attack in 2003 which took at least 14 casualties and injured 156 people (Kompas.com, 2009).

Jemaah Islamiyah, a fundamental Islamic terrorist group under the Al Qaeda network, is suspected as the perpetrator behind the blasts. Noordin M. Top, a Malaysian-born leader of the network was blamed as the mastermind of the blasts. He was later shot dead in a police raid in Solo, Central Java in September, bringing relief for the Indonesian police, who had a long battle with him and the Al Qaeda network over many years.

These blasts were seen as a severe blow for President SBY, who was re-elected in a landslide victory, with approximately 60 percent of the votes. Many speculations were made about the blast. Controversy and criticism also resulted from the bombings and how the President responded. SBY's statement

in the press conference following the blasts resulted in a criticism that he was too melancholic and was to some extents using the incident for his personal campaign. He said that the blasts were planned and that his intelligence had previously reported to him that he was targeted to be murdered by some people who did not want to see him winning the election. The President showed his picture which, according to him and based on intelligence reports, was used for shooting exercises by some "dracula" who did not want to see him resume his seat for a second term. The "dracula" is interpreted as referring to Prabowo, the vice president hopeful of Megawati, who was held responsible for the blatant killing of student activists in 1998 when he was a commander for Kopassus (Chuan, 2009b).

A regular contributor Fadjoel Rachman..on July 17 at 17.12 (Rachman, 2009) posted an article from Rakyat Merdeka online where he was quoted as a commentator. Rachman criticized SBY, saying that his statement could lead to different interpretations by the people, encouraged prejudice about his political foes, and could be a source of conflict in society. This post received 38 comments and was rated as important (*penting*) +7.

Rusdi Mathari also posted a similar criticism, writing that President SBY should not use the occasion for his personal image building. His use of intelligence reports was not wise, and he should be more careful in using intelligence reports as they could be disadvantageous for his political strategy. Comments on Mathari's post on July 22, 2009 at 11.37 suggested that SBY should be calmer and did not have to be worried about his political enemies as he had already won the game (Mathari, 2009i) . It received 38 comments and was considered interesting (*menarik*) +7.

On a different topic, the immediate response of Indonesians to the July bombing is that they were very shocked and then angry with the terrorists. Many speculations were shared about who was behind the devilish action, which in the end came down to Jemaah Islamiyah that has been a police target due to previous bombings including in those in Bali, the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, and the JW Marriot Hotel Jakarta.

Rusdi Mathari's posting on July 17 at 10.50, titled "*Indonesia Aku Malu*" (Indonesia, I am Ashamed), was the first posting about the blast. It wrote that Mathari was embarrassed about being an Indonesian due to this irresponsible behaviour and narrow minded religious beliefs (Mathari, 2009j). Apart from being praised as the quickest posting following the incident, his article raised criticism about why he should be ashamed, including that it is not an act by an Indonesian and it is not reflecting Indonesian behaviour (Samsara, Harald Lukeson, Adhitya). Rusdi's post and other users' response show that exchanges and critique of criticisable moral-practical validity claims (Dahlberg, 2001) took place in politikana.

Another topic discussed following the blasts was about terrorism and Islam, the religion of around 90 percent of the country's population of 230 million. A posting by Warm titled "Muslim=Terrorist" was uploaded on August 21 at 7.30 (Warm, 2009). He slates the judgment of the people who

generalise that all Islam is equal to terrorism, and that all people with long beards are terrorists. This article gathered a reasonably good amount of 64 comments. The discussion developed into the topic of religion and religious values on terrorism, which was reasonably interesting. A post by The Crow at 14.21 included a comment that if (people) want to go to heaven they should not “create” hell in the world.

The conversation about terrorism remained vibrant and even gained intensity after the police special team *Densus 88* shot dead Noordin M. Top, the mastermind behind the bombings in early September 2009. Again, politikana has served as a space for users to exchange information which leads to further learning and understanding about the issue of terrorism and Islam. It becomes a space to channel opinions about the terrorism and Islam.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The case of Politikana provides an example on how an interactive website has become an accessible space for citizens to come together and discuss politics and other public matters during the period of March to September 2009. The five yearly general elections were the hot topic for most Indonesians over this period, including those who are engaged with the Internet. Discussion about politics and citizenship therefore became omnipresent, both offline and online, through informal conversation and formal media.

Politikana has also fulfilled the conditions of online public sphere set by Dahlberg (2001) and Schneider (1997). First, Politikana was established by civil society, not the state or big corporations. Although the management of the site has a partnership with the media organization *Tempo*, it has its own management team free from the control of *Tempo*.

Secondly, Politikana website has functioned as “associational space” for some citizens (with the internet access) to discuss public issues that matter to them. The website has developed into one of the public domains for individuals to talk and exchange opinions about elections issues, in one case justice for a housewife, that the law that can (or cannot) guarantee their freedom of expression online, that terrorism that has badly affected their country, and the issues of corruption and leadership in KPK.

Third, this paper also illustrated that Politikana applied equality for the participants, the first prerequisite for deliberation as proposed by Schneider (1997) as it is basically open to all “Indonesians”. The conversations in Politikana are also diverse, another dimension requested by Schneider (1997) and Dahlberg (2001). The platform in the website allows members to post on various issues under the category of National, Elections, Media Watch, Regional, and Picture, as well as Out of Topic to accommodate those whose views do not fit into other categories.

Fourth, the discussions on Politikana were vibrant and to some degree reflect reflexivity as some of the posts showed critical examination of their assumption and interest, giving a logical background before their opinion (Dahlberg, 2001). The discussions also reflect ideal role taking. Those who posted opinions and articles open to comments with differing views

and embrace dialogue despite differences of opinions that occurred.

It is difficult to assess the quality, another important conditions for online deliberation, of the dialogue in Politikana, however this paper argues that in general it can be considered as favourable with people respecting others’ opinion and the dialogue were mostly about issues of public concern.

Rational-critical discourse as required in an idealized public sphere is always hard to establish, even in a more mature democracy. Within the context of Indonesia, where democracy is still in its infancy following 30 years of authoritarian regime, rational-critical discourse amongst its citizens is still a novelty. Yet some discussions in Politikana were rational and critical.

Overall, this paper has demonstrated that user generated content such as Politikana has proven to be useful in generating an active discussion and becoming a vibrant public sphere during the 2009 election. It is however worth mentioning in this concluding chapter that the conditions might change in the future. Politikana is a new website that was only established at the end of March and opened to public since April 2009, hence the membership is still growing as many people do not know of the site. The growth of membership, the dynamics of politics, the media, social and economic circumstances as well as the development of technology, all contribute a large degree in generating a public sphere or promoting democracy in a country.

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