

Local Political Elites' Contestation Ahead of the Southeast Sulawesi Governor Election on Facebook

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Abstract. Officially, Indonesia's 2024 election campaign period is set for November 28, 2023 to February 10, 2024. But before that time, local elites have already appeared in public spaces to attract the attention of voters. In the context of the gubernatorial election in Southeast Sulawesi province, at least three gubernatorial candidates have shown themselves early in social media spaces such as Facebook. It is important to examine how each candidate contested, especially in relation to the issues they raised in presenting themselves and responding to other competitors. It can be argued that what they build in the digital space contributes to the tendency of voters to evaluate local elites who want to contest elections. To this purpose, the study was conducted using qualitative research methods by interviewing four informants and observing the official Facebook content of three candidates who have declared that they will run in the 2024 gubernatorial election. The research concluded that the candidates used three techniques to contest issues through Facebook. First, the elites use visual and verbal techniques to attract attention. Second, political experience, bureaucracy and fieldwork are elements that support their self-image—in addition to personal characteristics. Third, when it comes to responding to political opponents, elites use euphemisms to frontal ways to show their competence.

Keywords: political contestation; social media; Facebook.

1 Introduction

Initially, Southeast Sulawesi was not a province of national concern. The situation changed after the development of massive nickel mining and the placement of a number of National Strategic Programs here: nickel mining is located in Konawe and North Konawe districts (Kolaka is also present). Apart from nickel, a container port is also being developed in the Bungkutoko area (Kendari) with a budget of IDR 1.2 trillion (Harianto, 2021). These are some of the reasons why Southeast Sulawesi's political elites are likely to have high bargaining power at the national level.

Ahead of the 2024 elections, local political elites have begun steps to attract voters' attention in public and digital spaces, one of which is Facebook. Officially, Indonesia's 2024 election campaign period is set for November 28, 2023 to February 10, 2024. However, it is common, at the local to national level, for elites to present themselves to the public long beforehand. This elite behavior marks the political dynamics in a region, and Southeast Sulawesi is no exception.

The choice of Facebook as a space for contestation is very reasonable. Data published by advertising resource Meta shows that Facebook had 119.9 million users in Indonesia in early 2023 (Kemp, 2023). Meta is an American multinational technology company based in Menlo

Park, California. The company was previously called Facebook Inc. Currently, Meta owns and operates social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and WhatsApp, among others.

Confirming the data presented by Kemp (2023) earlier, the trend of using Facebook is also corroborated by the survey results of the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII). Their survey showed that 60.24 percent of internet users frequently use Facebook. With internet penetration in Southeast Sulawesi reaching 73.92 percent, it is understandable why political elites use Facebook as their political platform. In addition, nationally, political, social, legal and human rights topics are among the top five topics searched by internet users (APJII, 2023).

A number of studies have shown that social media is a space that can increase public participation. A study by Saud and Margono (2021) concluded that through digital platforms, young Indonesians participate in various political activities. The digital realm is believed to be a new space for people to voice their aspirations. On a more specific level, a study conducted by Jandevi (2019) states that information and communication technology is no longer a solution for public participation, but has become a tool for democracy in Indonesia.

However, social media such as Facebook is not without its problems. A survey conducted during and after the 2017 general election in Jakarta (Indonesia) showed that Facebook was not an enlightening sphere for political debate. Only a few social media users were comfortable with the opportunity to debate on social media. The rest of the respondents expressed disappointment and boredom with the political content and atmosphere on their Facebook timelines (Sukmayadi & Effendi, 2018).

The implications of the polarization of supporters of election contestants on Facebook were also present in the 2019 Indonesian presidential election. An analysis conducted by Haryanto et al. (2019) found that positive and negative sentiments clashed in the Facebook comment sections of three national news accounts. The focus of the study was on the news of the two candidates for president and vice president at that time. The research shows that the quantitatively dominant discourse on social media does not reflect positive sentiment towards the candidate. Although 59.48 percent of comments discussed the Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno pair, they received more negative sentiment (75.79%). Facebook is a space for the expression of public opinions and political attitudes with emotional value.

In addition to quantitative studies, a qualitative approach was also taken to examine the use of Facebook in the political sphere. Dwinarko (2019) found polarization but in the form of labeling. Six months before the election day - which was held on April 17, 2019, even after the determination of the winning pair by the General Election Commission (KPU), the online feud continued. Jokowi-Amin supporters were labeled "tadpoles". Meanwhile, supporters of Prabowo-Sandi were named "shucks". Dwinarko (2019) sees this phenomenon as a form of democracy that displays political communication drama, through the presence of texts of political actors and their supporters. Social media becomes a space that accommodates public supporters of candidate pairs to attack and criticize each other.

Previously, Amanullah and Dwisusilo (2018) described this situation as a post-truth and echo chamber phenomenon. They found dozens of Facebook groups affiliated with Jokowi and Prabowo supporters as echo chambers for their members. Each group is known to have a high

vulnerability to being infiltrated by other parties. The messages exchanged in the groups were dominated by topics of propaganda, criticism, hate speech, and negative campaigns against each figure.

However, it can't be denied that social media does provide a shortcut to connect the public and the elite. Without gatekeepers, communication between political elites and the public can occur directly and simultaneously. The digital age provides more mediums to carry messages from the public, and more opportunities for politicians to hear and respond to their constituents' complaints (Rohlinger, 2019).

Citizen groups can also organize political communications that allow thousands of concerned voters to email, comment on social media, and petition politicians directly. Likewise, political elites don't have to wait for opinion polls to find out what people think about an issue. They can follow hashtags to see what citizens are saying, search for groups on Facebook talking about the issue, and use online surveys to quickly find out what the public cares about most.

The implication of the nature of this technology is that it opens up great contestation opportunities in the digital space to the elites. The goal is to attract public attention, gain their sympathy and support. Political contestation is basically an activity related to competition between two or more entities. At a certain level, this competition aims to change, maintain the status quo, or reorganize the balance of power in society. Gerring and Veenendaal (2020: 184) explain that contestation refers to the level of electoral competition in a political community. If there are no elections, then there is no contestation. The intertwining of political contestation and general elections proposed by Gerring and Veenendaal is the conceptual reference for this research.

The level of contestation is determined by the presence or absence of opposition groups or political groups that differ from the status quo. The more political groups that differ from the status quo, the higher the contestation. Vice versa, if only a few opposition groups are organized in a contestation, the lower the level of political contestation. Political scientists agree that contestation is an important element of electoral democracy because it is through contestation that political elites gain approval from voters in elections. The contestation index thus provides an important signal about the health of electoral democracy. In this case, some scholars consider contestation and alternation of power as a necessary test or sine qua non for democracy (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020: 184).

In the sphere of social media, political contestation can be reflected in the discourse or issues displayed by each candidate. Helfert (2018: 1-13) calls this issue important for at least three reasons. First, issues are used by political elites to attract attention and persuade voters. Second, elites use issues to portray themselves. Third, issues displayed by elites can become ammunition for the public or political opponents to attack them.

Back to the contestation of political elites in Southeast Sulawesi ahead of the gubernatorial election in early 2024, it is important to know the issues they display to build their self-image and respond to their political opponents. This discourse contestation can be a benchmark of democratic maturity, especially in the sphere of Facebook social media.

2 Method

This research uses a qualitative approach by interviewing informants who are political actors and social media teams (Facebook) of elites who will contest. The interviews were conducted in the first quarter of 2022. This moment was chosen because the consolidation of the elites had begun to be institutionalized. There are three elites who first appeared to the public, namely: Abdurrahman Shaleh (ASR), Lukman Abunawas (LA) and Kery Saiful Konggoasa (KSK). Abdurrahman Shaleh is the Chairman of the Regional House of Representatives of Southeast Sulawesi Province. Lukman Abunawas is the Vice Governor of Southeast Sulawesi who ends his term of service in September 2023. Meanwhile, Kery Saiful Konggoasa is the Regent of Konawe who will also finish his term in September 2023.

To complement the data collected through interviews, observations were also made by observing each candidate's publications on Facebook. Coding was conducted on the findings to group the data into key themes relevant to the research purpose. This process was not linear. Throughout the research, the process of categorizing themes was ongoing. Analysis of the findings did not occur at the end, but throughout the data collection process (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022).

3 Result and Discussion

In a political contestation, the profiles of actors or elites become clues and information that can be used to explain some of their political communication behavior. There are three elites who directly present themselves on Facebook. First, Abdurrahman Shaleh (ARS). He is a politician from the National Mandate Party (PAN) who has the most seats in the Southeast Sulawesi DPRD in the 2019-2024 period. Before becoming Chairman of the DPRD for two periods, Abdurrahman Shaleh was a member of the Kendari City Council. In the management structure of the PAN Southeast Sulawesi Regional Representative Council for the 2020-2025 period, he is the Head of the Daily Board. Abdurrahman Shaleh's political career began in PAN in 1998, when he became one of the party's declarators in Southeast Sulawesi.

Second, Lukman Abunawas (LA). He served as Vice Governor of Southeast Sulawesi for the 2018-2023 period. Prior to that, he held many important positions, including as Head of the Kendari District Education and Culture Office in 1998 and as Regent of Kendari for two terms from 2003 to 2013 -before the district was divided into Kendari City and Konawe Regency. Lukman was also the Regional Secretary of Southeast Sulawesi Province for the 2014-2018 period. Apart from pursuing a bureaucratic career, in politics Lukman Abunawas was a member of the Golkar Party and held strategic positions, before finally moving to the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) and becoming Chairman of the Southeast Sulawesi PDIP Regional Leadership in 2020.

Third, Kery Saiful Konggoasa (KSK). He was the Regent of Konawe for two periods, 2013-2018 and 2018-2023. His political career began at PAN since 2000. In the management of the PAN Southeast Sulawesi Regional Leadership Council for the 2020-2025 period, Kery Saiful Konggoasa occupies the position of Chairman of the Party Advisory Council. In September 2022, Kery decided to leave PAN and join the NasDem Party. In front of the public, Kery emphasized that he wanted to compete for the Governor of Southeast Sulawesi through the NasDem Party (Iswinarno, 2022).

When examining the political party background of each elite, there will be at least three major parties contesting, namely PAN, PDIP and NasDem. Referring to Gerring and Veenendaal (2020), these three forces indicate a higher level of contestation than if there were only two political parties competing. As an illustration of the context of the results of each party's seat acquisition in the 2018 elections, PAN received the most votes, namely 8 seats, while PDIP and NasDem each received 5 seats.

Until the end of 2023, not a single elite from the Golkar party has publicly declared themselves to contest, even though in the last election they obtained 7 seats (or the second most after PAN). Apart from Golkar, elites from the Democratic party have also not presented themselves even though they previously won 5 seats in the Southeast Sulawesi Provincial DPRD. It is possible that this contestation will escalate further when these two major parties also enter the race for candidates for governor and vice governor.

The contestation discourse on social media began to be enlivened by KSK's statement which was interpreted as an attack aimed directly at LA as published on the *Telisik.id* news site: According to him, currently none of the figures he counts as his competitors later, including the Deputy Governor of Southeast Sulawesi, Lukman Abunawas. "I don't count that one (Lukman Abunawas, ed)," explained the Konawe Regent. When the media crew asked the reason why he did not take LA into account in the Southeast Sulawesi Gubernatorial Election, Kery only said that he had done smart political work (Azis, 2020).

At least three other local news sites (*Inilah Sultra*, *Media Kendari*, and *Detik Sultra*) also published KSK's statement. In the sphere of Facebook, these news stories later became a reference for every statement and attack from each side.

The *Suara Andalas* Facebook account (July 29, 2020) said that what KSK did was an attempt to steal public attention. This account quotes the statement of the Chairman of the Kolaka PDIP Branch Leadership Council, KSK is said to be using a way to increase his popularity to approach LA's big name - as Chairman of the PDIP Regional Leadership Council and Vice Governor of Southeast Sulawesi.

On another occasion, KSK also showed his attitude that he wanted to continue to run as a candidate for governor even though he was not carried by his own party (PAN). The results of the Regional Conference V determined ARS by acclamation to lead PAN in Southeast Sulawesi for the 2020-2025 period. On one occasion, ARS stated that in the party's internal mechanism, the priority to be nominated as a candidate for governor "is the party chairman" (interview March 18, 2022).

This statement was also emphasized by Muhammad Adam Rasyid Sakoya, who is one of the PAN administrators:

What we expect now is how we will not only be the winner of the 2024 elections, but how we can carry the PAN party's priority governor candidate who is the Chairman of our Party, Mr. Abdurrahman Shaleh or ARS. To attract the attention of the people of Southeast Sulawesi in order to increase the electability of our gubernatorial candidate towards the 2024 elections (interview, March 18, 2022).

Responding to his party's decision, in front of reporters KSK stated that he had prepared steps long beforehand by building communication to other parties to get support to advance as a candidate for governor. On September 23, 2022, KSK officially joined the NasDem Party.

LA and ARS' responses to KSK's stance and statement were not found in Facebook posts, but in the form of news published on local news sites. For example, published by *Rightnewskendari.com* with the title *Disturbed by Kerry's Statement, Chairman of DPC PDIP Kendari: Kery Is Not Level with Mr. Lukman Abunawas* (Akbar, 2020). This news contains Ishak Ismail's statement that said KSK was actually the one who was not on the same level when compared to LA from knowledge and political experience.

Similarly, ARS's response to KSK appeared on the local news website: *'Not My Level' Says PAN Southeast Sulawesi Chairman Abdurrahman About Kery Saiful Konggoasa Moving to Nasdem* (Ari, 2022). For ARS, KSK's decision to move is a normal thing. There is no need to get an explanation from him. Moreover, ARS straightforwardly stated that he also wanted to run as a candidate for governor. Before KSK decided to move to the NasDem Party, these two political elites (ARS and KSK) competed to make PAN their political vehicle.

On Facebook, neither LA nor ARS directly showed any meaningful reaction to KSK's behavior and political statements. Each of them seems to focus more on image building. Nevertheless, everything they do still targets other candidates. For example, the Facebook account *Silaturahmi* (January 25, 2022) mentions that LA is an "experienced governor candidate". Indirectly directed at ARS and KSK whose bureaucratic and political careers are younger. A photo shows LA exercising by the beach, showing his fitness and readiness to be a leader.

In contrast to LA, the Facebook account *ABDURRAHMAN SHALEH* (April 16, 2022) features a photo of ARS in a suit with the words: "Visionary, Young, Humanist, Religious, Experienced, Tested and Measured, Powerful Networking. Governor of Southeast Sulawesi 2024". From the seven claims contained in the image on this Facebook content, ARS also wants to position himself in a different way from LA and KSK. Religious is one of the claims that can be said not to be easily rivaled by other elites. ARS often appears in religious activities, making this claim difficult for other elites to debate. His consistency in displaying messages and pictures of his official activities almost every week, also strengthens the seven claims. This is the distinguishing aspect between ARS and the other two candidates.

ARS sees Facebook as one of several supporting elements that can be used as a political education instrument, not for political image building alone. For him, Facebook is necessary to show his performance and display his figure as a whole but not as a means of determining victory:

Victory is determined by several things. First, the mass base of supporters. Second, your networking. Third, logistics. Fourth, strategy. The number of followers does not mean that they like someone. It is a sign that the public ... wants to see someone's figure and their performance (interview, March 18, 2022).

For this reason, ARS's supporting media team continuously publicizes personal activities - such as speeches, sports, community meetings, even Islamic speeches, as well as activities in the context of his candidacy for the governor election. ARS personally states that people should

know the background of each of their prospective leaders. Therefore, displaying ARS's personal track record as well as as Chairman of the DPRD, is an essential point that is always uploaded. The effort to highlight this aspect is institutionalized and part of the PAN Central Executive Board's program on cyber and public communication.

ARS also puts special emphasis on issues that are directly related to the community. The photo displayed by *Taufiq Saleh's* account (November 19, 2021) shows ARS walking with several people, shopping at a traditional market in Muna Regency. In the photo, he mingles with residents and sits down to have a meal together. The caption of the picture reads: "Bismillah, the next Governor of Southeast Sulawesi. Young, Capable, Popular, and Smart". Informant Muhammad Adam Rasyid Sakoya on one interview occasion (March 18, 2022) conveyed the enthusiastic acceptance of the community towards ARS. Especially when ARS visited residents from house to house. He stated that the community response was "very good to ARS". Their target is to "catch the public's attention and increase electability towards the 2024 gubernatorial election".

The LA election team considers Facebook as a tool to record the public's voice. Aristarcus R., a member of the team, stated:

... the pattern of our approach is to see what the community wants, what their needs are, then we communicate how we can do what the community needs. Facebook social media is very helpful in absorbing aspirations from the community so that without going door to door we can see their complaints in this media (interview, March 19, 2022).

However, their emphasis remains on LA's profile with his bureaucratic experience: Two periods as Regent of Konawe and Regional Secretary of Southeast Sulawesi Province, including his previous duties as Vice Governor of Southeast Sulawesi for the 2018-2023 period. For LA's winning team, it is very important for people to see the positive side of the elite they support.

The *LA CENTER SULTRA* Facebook account (January 13, 2021) uploaded a picture that wrote "I am ready to run in the next governor election. By becoming Governor, the chance to work for the welfare of the community opens wider. ... being a leader is working for the welfare of the people." Meanwhile, the *Silaturahmi* account (January 25, 2022) also displayed a picture of LA taking a step. He is dressed in white with a red headband. The picture reads: "Stepping With Certainty, Towards the True Future, Serving the Country, Doing with Heart. Unlimited Devotion, Lukman Abunawas, For Golden Southeast".

Informant Aristarcus R. in an interview on 18 March 2022 realized that Facebook is a monitoring platform, a place for the public to see the candidates they want. Regardless of meeting them in person, voters can see LA's competence. Although he admits, it is possible for the public to find false or misleading information about LA, his track record in the bureaucracy is undoubted. Facebook also does not rule out the possibility of being used as a means of exploring coalitions from community organizations and parties.

However, not all positive things can appear on Facebook. *Ning Behel Unaaha's* account (February 21, 2022) shared information taken from a news site entitled *Often Labeled 'Naughty' Kery Saiful Konggoasa Doesn't Take Care, Ready to Fight in 2024 Southeast Sulawesi Gubernatorial Election*. In general, this news contains KSK's statement about the competence of leaders who should look more to the future. Whether people are good or bad in the past or

present, let God judge. According to him, what is needed by prospective leaders today is their vision in bringing Southeast Sulawesi.

Muharam Capricorn's account (March 7, 2022) also shared a photo of his visit at KSK's house. This account provides a picture caption that reads: "Private residence, he is a simple figure. Mr. Kery Saiful Konggoasa, Regent of Konawe who is God willing, Governor of Southeast Sulawesi 2024. Amiiin...". In the photo KSK is discussing with six young people. He is wearing a t-shirt and sarong.

KSK's daily life that mingles with the community and his daily activities are the main focus that wants to be highlighted on Facebook. The aim is to shape KSK's self-image as a humble figure. Dias Abimayu Yusuf, a member of the KSK Sympathizer Team said:

What we do first is to create content about the figure of KSK to the public so that they get to know the figure of KSK more closely, publish what his vision and mission and ideals are if God willing, he becomes the Governor of Southeast Sulawesi later (interview, March 18, 2022).

In the post, the KSK team wanted to capture all categories of voters from different age ranges, ethnicities, and class backgrounds. In addition, before becoming a regent, KSK had served as Chairman of the Konawe People's Representative Council.

In addition to online work, the KSK campaign team also carried out offline activities to build political communication from house to house. They distributed KSK's banner stating that he was ready to run in the 2024 gubernatorial election. This team also shared things that the community needed to show KSK's seriousness in improving the welfare of the community.

Matrix
Issues Highlighted by Local Political Elites on Facebook

ELITES	ISSUE CATEGORY		
	ATTENTION	SELF	AMMUNITION
ARS	visual	political experience, populist	indirect verbal assault KSK & LA
LS	verbal	bureaucratic experience, goodwill	indirect verbal assault KSK & ARS
KSK	verbal	vision, fieldwork	direct verbal assault LA, indirect verbal assault ARS

Source: Primary Data (2022)

With referring to Helfert's (2018) categorization, local political elites in Southeast Sulawesi attract attention in different ways. ARS prioritizes visual appearance by uploading a

number of photos of himself to Facebook. Although the other two elites also do the same thing, ARS has the strength of his photogenic appearance. This is reinforced by the correspondence between the photo and the context in which it is set. The other two elites used verbal techniques with contradictory nuances. LA shows his success claim. Meanwhile, KSK makes his controversial statement.

When building self-image, ARS uses the issue of political maturity and his flexible and egalitarian personality to look different from the other two elites. LA puts more emphasis on his longer bureaucratic track record. This is what he claims as a form of dedication that he has and will give to the people. Meanwhile, KSK presents himself as a leader candidate who is ready to work with a vision and prove it with some initial work in the field when meeting with the community.

Each of these issues is used by each elite as ammunition to attack other elites and contest. KSK took a more frontal approach. Regardless of whether this will have implications for his electability or not, KSK did something that immediately caught the public's attention. His image as a fighter was immediately formed. In contrast to LA or ARS who prefer euphemisms when attacking each other. This technique can be understood because both are at the same level of the political stage (province). LA is the Deputy Governor while ARS is the Chairman of the Provincial House of Representatives. If they choose a frontal way, the impact will be great. Unlike KSK who has been on the district political stage. He must do something different and significant in order to rise to the provincial political stage.

4 Conclusion

This research concludes that local political elites in Southeast Sulawesi use three techniques to contest issues through Facebook. First, the elites use visual and verbal techniques to attract the attention of voters, especially netizens. Second, political experience, bureaucracy, and fieldwork are supporting elements of their self-image. Characteristics that are inherent and personal will only have meaning when associated with something that can be objectively assessed by the public. Third, when it comes to political opponents, the elite's background determines their behavior patterns. Elites at the provincial level prefer euphemisms when responding to attacks from their political opponents. While elites at the district level choose a more significant (and frontal) way to show their competence. The elites interpret Facebook as a space to give and show the best aspects of each elite. Some also saw Facebook as a space to receive public responses that would later be useful for improving the candidates' performance.

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