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In Curhat We Unite (and Divide): *Scalable Affective Sociality, Algorithmic Politics, and Social Media in Indonesia*

Merlyna Lim

Introduction

On August 16, 2023, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) began his annual State of the Nation address to the parliament with an emotional outpouring, known in Indonesia as *curhat*. He expressed frustration over the intense scrutiny, public outrage, and slander he claimed he had faced, including being labeled as stupid, or *plonga-plongo*, on social media.¹ Jokowi also voiced dissatisfaction with being depicted as the enigmatic *Pak Lurah*,² allegedly orchestrating the 2024 presidential election to extend his power,³ and as a “Pharaoh,” a term associated with tyranny.

¹ Humas, “Pidato Presiden Ri Pada Sidang Tahunan MPR Ri Dan Sidang Bersama DPR Ri Dan DPD Ri Dalam Rangka Hut Ke-78 Proklamasi Kemerdekaan Ri, Di Gedung Nusantara MPR/DPR/DPD RI, Senayan, Provinsi DKI Jakarta, 16 Agustus 2023,” Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, August 16, 2023, <https://setkab.go.id/pidato-presiden-ri-pada-sidang-tahunan-mpr-ri-dan-sidang-bersama-dpr-ri-dan-dpd-ri-dalam-rangka-hut-ke-78-proklamasi-kemerdekaan-ri-di-gedung-nusantara-mpr-dpr-dpd-ri-senayan-provinsi-dki-jakarta>.

² *Pak Lurah*, which translates to village headman in Indonesia, holds significant authority at the village level. Beyond its literal meaning, the term symbolizes a leader with central control who uses soft power and navigates politics through patronage, negotiation, and personal networks, reflecting Javanese hierarchical governance.

³ Shortly after, Constitutional Court Chief Justice Anwar Usman, Jokowi’s brother-in-law, revised the election law. The amendment allowed presidential and vice-presidential candidates under forty to run if they had previously led a sub-national government. This conveniently made Jokowi’s thirty-six-year-old son, Gibran Rangkabumi, eligible to run for vice president, as he had served as mayor of Solo in central Java, a position once held by his father. This incident strongly suggests that Jokowi was indeed orchestrating a political dynasty in Indonesia.

The address garnered significant media attention, with headlines such as “Annual Parliamentary Assembly Turns into a *Curhat* Venue,”⁴ “*Curhat* First, State Address Later,”⁵ and “Jokowi *Curhat* About Frequent Insults of ‘Stupid’ and ‘Plonga Plongo.’”⁶ These headlines highlighted the *curhat* aspect of the speech, although Jokowi later covered other topics. Reactions on social media were polarized: some saw Jokowi’s *curhat* as a relatable, humanizing moment, while others criticized it as inappropriate, arguing that it misused a state address and lacked substance. In *curhat*, social media users unite and divide.

This division reflects the broader polarization that has defined Indonesian political discourse since the 2014 presidential election, where support or opposition to Jokowi has become a dividing line.⁷ Political polarization is rising globally, with scholars partly attributing it to social media’s influence.⁸ Central to this is the filter bubble thesis, which suggests that personalized algorithms create echo chambers that reinforce biases and ideological divisions.⁹

Upon closer examination, however, the division within Indonesia cannot simply be reduced to the filter bubble thesis. Studies on social media polarization in Indonesia reveal a nuanced understanding. Research indicates that polarized discourse, especially during elections, is also driven by the political elites’ utilization of the “campaign industry,” where buzzers (paid online campaigners), paid influencers, and micro-celebrities manipulate public discourse through disinformation.¹⁰ This industry perpetuates the proliferation of populist narratives centered on personality politics, dividing voters into supporters of strong leaders valued more for their traits than their policies.¹¹

⁴ Muhammad Idris, “Saat Sidang Tahunan MPR Jadi Luapan *Curhat* Jokowi: Julukan Plonga-plongo hingga Kritik Jalan Tol,” *Kompas*, August 17, 2023, <https://money.kompas.com/read/2023/08/17/111940126/saat-sidang-tahunan-mpr-jadi-luapan-curhat-jokowi-julukan-plonga-plongo-hingga?page=all>.

⁵ Administrator, “*Curhat* Dahulu Pidato Kenegaraan Kemudian,” *Media Indonesia*, August 16, 2023, https://mediaindonesia.com/editorials/detail_editorials/3122-curhat-dahulu-pidato-kenegaraan-kemudian.

⁶ Irianto Susilo, “Jokowi *Curhat* Kerap Disebut Bodoh dan Plonga Plongo, Warganet Sampaikan Ragam Komentar,” *TVOne News*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.tvonenews.com/berita/nasional/145586-jokowi-curhat-kerap-disebut-bodoh-dan-plonga-plongo-warganet-sampaikan-ragam-komentar>.

⁷ Jennifer Yang Hui, “Social Media and the 2019 Indonesian Elections: Hoax Takes Centre Stage,” in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2020*, edited by Malcolm Cook and Daljit Singh (ISEAS Publishing, 2020), 155–72; Merlyna Lim, “Freedom to Hate: Social Media, Algorithmic Enclaves, and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia,” *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 411–27; Eve Warburton, “Deepening Polarization and Democratic Decline in Indonesia,” in *Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia*, edited by Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), 25–39.

⁸ Dominic Spohr, “Fake News and Ideological Polarization: Filter Bubbles and Selective Exposure on Social Media,” *Business Information Review* 34, no. 3 (2017): 150–60; Cass R. Sunstein, “Is Social Media Good or Bad for Democracy,” *Sur: International Journal of Human Rights* 15 (2018): 83–89.

⁹ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (Penguin, 2011).

¹⁰ Saraswati, Muningsari Sri, “The Political Campaign Industry and the Rise of Disinformation in Indonesia,” in *From Grassroots Activism to Disinformation: Social Media in Southeast Asia*, edited by Aim Sinpeng and Ross Tapsell (ISEAS, 2021), 43–62; Ross Tapsell, “Social Media and Elections in Southeast Asia: The Emergence of Subversive, Underground Campaigning,” *Asian Studies Review* 45, no. 1 (2021): 117–34.

¹¹ Inaya Rakhmani and Muningsari Sri Saraswati, “Authoritarian Populism in Indonesia: The Role of the Political Campaign Industry in Engineering Consent and Coercion,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 40, no. 3 (2021): 436–60; Emma Baulch, Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández, and Fiona Suwana, “Memetic Persuasion and WhatsAppification in Indonesia’s 2019 Presidential Election,” *New Media & Society* 26, no. 5 (2024): 2473–91; Lim, “Freedom to Hate.”

Existing studies also show that social media platforms are not neutral.¹² Inaya Rakhmani argues that social media's algorithmic logic automates the construction of Islamic identity, facilitating politicians to use religious markers to manipulate public discourse and fragment the community of (Islamic) believers.¹³ My previous research on Facebook and Twitter (now X) demonstrates that algorithms do not simply dictate user behavior; instead, they engage with users, creating a form of co-agency that shapes public discourse through the formation of "algorithmic enclaves."¹⁴ These enclaves are discursive spaces where users voluntarily create affective communities built on a perceived shared online identity to defend their beliefs and resources from perceived threats, often fostering exclusivity.¹⁵ Emma Baulch et al. further argue that this dynamic extended to WhatsApp within private family, religious, and community groups, as paid campaigners and volunteers exploit the platform's dynamics to disseminate campaign messages, including disinformation.¹⁶

In this article, I am concerned about the role of affect within these dynamics, particularly how affective *curhat* fits into the context. On social media, ideology is not the primary driver of polarization but remains resilient and can be reignited by populist narratives¹⁷ that appeal more to emotions rather than rationality.¹⁸ In other words, while ideology forms the foundation of polarization, its emergence, expansion, and intensification on social media are largely driven by affect. Here, I use the term affect as a broader concept encompassing all types of emotional experiences, from specific emotions to more general feelings and mood states.¹⁹ Meanwhile, emotion refers to distinct, often intense, and relatively short-lived experiences that arise in response to specific events.²⁰

On many issues, users tend to align themselves affectively, in a binary manner, by supporting or opposing a persona or taking contrasting stances.²¹ This dynamic is evident in the case of Jokowi's *curhat*, which catalyzed binary networks of pro- and anti- and exacerbated existing divisions. This raises questions about how *curhat* shapes political discourse and is implicated in citizens' political engagement in Indonesia. These questions are at the heart of this article, which explores the phenomenon of *curhat* and its broader influence on political discourse.

The analysis draws on two primary sources. The first is a targeted subset of *curhat* data from a broader, longitudinal study I conducted on the evolution of social media

¹² Baulch et. al., "Memetic Persuasion"; Lim, "Freedom to Hate"; Inaya Rakhmani, "Understanding the Floating Ummah in Neoliberal Indonesia," *Contemporary Politics* 30, no. 2 (2024): 157–76.

¹³ Rakhmani, "Understanding the Floating Ummah."

¹⁴ Lim, "Freedom to Hate."

¹⁵ Merlyna Lim, "Algorithmic Enclaves: Affective Politics and Algorithms in the Neoliberal Social Media Landscape," in *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means*, edited by M. Boler and E. Davis (Routledge, 2021), 194.

¹⁶ Baulch et. al., "Memetic Persuasion."

¹⁷ Afrimadona, "Revisiting Political Polarisation in Indonesia: A Case Study of Jakarta's Electorate," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 40, no. 2 (2021): 315–39.

¹⁸ Lim, "Freedom to Hate."

¹⁹ Vera Shuman and Klaus R. Scherer, "Concepts and Structures of Emotions," in *International Handbook of Emotions in Education*, edited by Reinhard Pekrun and Lisa Linnenbrink-Garcia (Routledge, 2014), 15.

²⁰ Shuman and Scherer, "Concepts and Structures of Emotions."

²¹ Rakhmani and Saraswati, "Authoritarian Populism in Indonesia"; Lim, "Freedom to Hate."

and politics in Indonesia. This study covers the period from the mid-2000s, beginning with blogging platforms like Blogspot, WordPress, and Multiply, through the rise of Facebook and Twitter in the late 2000s and 2010s, and into the present era, dominated by Instagram and TikTok. During this time, I collected extensive observational notes and archives of online texts.

The second source focuses on identifying the most viral political *curhat* incidents that sparked collective action on social media and sustained engagement beyond a single news cycle between 2009 and 2023. This data was collected from Indonesia's top three news outlets (*Detik*, *TribunNews*, and *Kompas*).²² Out of thirty-eight viral events, I selected six for deeper analysis by examining social media data from platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok (for events after 2020), using relevant hashtags and keywords.²³ I also applied this method to three illustrative cases—Jokowi's *curhat*, the #ReformasiDikorupsi, and #KPKTaliban cases—to explore *curhat* networks and algorithmic politics in action. From these sources, I identified recurring themes, discourse patterns, and shifts in political engagement, allowing me to construct a historical narrative of *curhat* in the digital media age and analyze its implications on Indonesians' sociopolitical engagement on social media.

In the following sections, I will begin my analysis by tracing the origin and evolution of *curhat*, then situating it within the broader contexts of sociality and emotional capitalism that shape social media and affective political communication in Indonesia. I will examine how politicians utilize *curhat* in social media interactions and how it has become integral to everyday political discourse. I will also discuss how *curhat* networks drive social media activism and how political elites exploit these networks through algorithmic politics. The article will conclude with final remarks.

Overall, the article makes two key contributions. First, through the lens of *curhat*, it critically integrates analysis of affect, emotion, and sociality, particularly the concepts of affective sociality and emotional capitalism, into the study of social media and politics in Indonesia, offering a fresh analytical perspective. Second, it enriches our understanding of developments in this field, particularly the changes in the quality of political discourse that have evolved alongside the proliferation of social media in the country.

Origin and Evolution of *Curhat*

Curhat, a portmanteau of *curahan* and *hati*, translates to “pouring out one's heart.” Popular among young urbanites of Jakarta and Bandung in the late 1990s, it spread across Indonesia by the early 2000s as part of *bahasa gaul*, the informal language of sociability influenced by the Jakarta dialect. This style playfully ignored the formal rules of the Indonesian language, distancing itself from the rigidity of “Bahasa Indonesia yang baik dan benar” (the good and correct Indonesian) promoted by the authoritarian New

²² Over the past decade, these news portals have consistently been among Indonesia's most visited, according to SimilarWeb.

²³ I used computational tools like Google API, Netlytics, Commanalytic, and custom social media scrapers developed with Carleton University's Computing Services for data collection.

Order regime.²⁴ Emphasizing flexibility and informality, it reflects the inclusive spirit of the post-authoritarian *reformasi* era.²⁵ Initially, *curhat* involved sharing personal matters privately, primarily within female circles.²⁶ Unlike *rumpi*, which translates as gossip, typically associated with women's gatherings like *arisan*,²⁷ *curhat* carries no negative connotations. It is considered a benign self-expression, focusing on disclosing inner thoughts to a receptive audience.

In the early 2000s, with the rise of Internet-based communication, digital platforms became popular venues for *curhat*. Slama's research on Internet usage among students in Yogyakarta revealed that online *curhat* allowed young people to exercise their "agency of the heart" privately, away from older generations' scrutiny.²⁸ At that time, online *curhat* predominantly occurred in the private cubicles of *warnet*, Indonesian cybercafes, where users interacted via chatrooms on platforms like IRC, MIRC, and ICQ.²⁹

With the emergence of blogging in the mid-2000s, *curhat* gradually shifted from a one-to-one form of communication to a one-to-many format as Indonesian bloggers began sharing their *curhat* with a broader audience on free platforms such as WordPress, Blogspot, and Multiply. With approximately 2.3 million users, Indonesians were particularly dominant on Multiply, a clustered blogging platform with over 11 million registered users in 2010, ranking third behind Americans and Filipinos.³⁰ On Multiply, Indonesians not only shared their *curhat* individually but also created a *curhat* network, linking their blogs to a more extensive web. The many-to-many communication led to *curhat berjamaah* or "congregational *curhat*," where one person's *curhat* is followed by others on the same theme or where users collectively share their *curhat*. The term *berjamaah* traditionally refers to a communal act in religious contexts, such as *sholat berjamaah*, a communal prayer in Islam.³¹

In the late 2000s, as social media gained traction, *curhat* practices transitioned to platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and later to Instagram and TikTok. *Curhat* content became widespread, often prompting responses from other users. This generative phenomenon led to the emergence of *curcol*, a blend of *curhat* and *colongan* (stolen *curhat*).³² *Curcol* typically involves sharing personal feelings or grievances concisely,

²⁴ Nancy J. Smith-Hefner, "Youth Language, *Gaul* Sociability, and the New Indonesian Middle Class," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (2007): 186.

²⁵ Smith-Hefner, "Youth Language," 184.

²⁶ Martin Slama, "The Agency of the Heart: Internet Chatting as Youth Culture in Indonesia," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 18, no. 3 (2010): 316–30.

²⁷ *Arisan*, a prevalent social practice in Indonesia, is a routine gathering that involves the regular collection of savings from each member of the group that are then lent out to members in a rotating fashion.

²⁸ Slama, "The Agency of the Heart."

²⁹ Merlyna Lim, "Dis/Connection: The Co-Evolution of Sociocultural and Material Infrastructures of the Internet in Indonesia," *Indonesia* 105 (2018): 155–72.

³⁰ These statistical data were collected and documented by the author from a now-defunct platform, Multiply.com, in September 2010.

³¹ Abu Abdirrahman Adil, "Salat Berjamaah," in *Ensiklopedi Salat*, edited by Umar Mujtahid (Ummul Qura, 2018).

³² Tri Indah Rezeki and Rakhmat Wahyudin Sagala, "Slang Words Used by Millennial Generation in Instagram," *Jurnal Serunai Bahasa Inggris* 11, no. 2 (2019): 74–81; also see Rengganis Citra Cenderamata and Agus Nero Sofyan, "Abreviasi Dalam Percakapan Sehari-hari di Media Sosial: Suatu Kajian Morfologi," *Kajian Linguistik dan Sastra* 4, no. 2 (2019): 154–63. The rise of shortened forms such as *curcol* stems for the need

reflecting the brevity typical of mobile social media. The term often describes *curhat* comments made in response to a *curhat* post, essentially tagging along with the original sharing. Sometimes, it also refers to *curhat* that occurs in a non-*curhat* context.

In the social media era, *curhat* evolved from a gendered, primarily female practice in private settings into a widely accepted behavior for all genders. It has become a prevalent online practice and plays a crucial role in communication and interaction among Indonesians on public and semi-public platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, as well as in private and semi-private spaces such as Messenger and WhatsApp.

Locating *Curhat* as “Scalable Affective Sociality” in the Indonesian Context

What is particularly intriguing about public *curhat*, primarily when performed by prominent public figures, is its ability to trigger a cascade of *curhat* across social media. In the case of Jokowi’s state address, his *curhat* led to a proliferation of public *curhat* posts online. On TikTok, various accounts shared video excerpts from Jokowi’s address, notably the *curhat* part, which promptly generated comments, some of which included personal *curhat* on Jokowi’s *curhat*. On platforms like Facebook, public *curhat* posts were followed by additional *curhat* in the form of comments and shares, further fueling political chatters. This communal *curhat* or *curhat berjamaah* not only unfolded in public settings but also extended to private groups on Telegram and WhatsApp. As a result, across many social media platforms, both public and private, a vast and intricate cascade of *curhat* stemming from Jokowi’s *curhat* emerged.

The phenomenon of public *curhat*, as illustrated in the case above, can be situated within two primary contexts: first, the broader context of the social media landscape, where sociality and emotional capitalism are essential to users’ interactions, and second, more specifically, the Indonesian context, where political communication has historically fostered affective relationships.

Curhat as “Scalable Affective Sociality” in the Landscape of Emotional Capitalism

Social media platforms were not designed to foster healthy democratic discourse. Instead, they align with what Nick Srnicek calls “platform capitalism”—a model where digital platforms act as intermediaries, connecting consumers, producers, and advertisers within a digital ecosystem.³³ The core of platform capitalism is the acquisition and monetization of user data. Rather than creating a truly democratic public sphere, social media functions within the capitalist system, promoting consumer culture and operating under the logic of “communicative capitalism.”³⁴ This fusion of communication technologies with capitalist principles reinforces capitalist structures and shapes public discourse.

to make typing quicker and speech easier. In their analysis of 101 “new” Indonesian social media terms, Cenderamata and Sofyan identify three types of abbreviations: acronyms, abbreviations, and excerpts. The most common are two-word acronyms, typically formed by keeping the first few letters of each word, often focusing on vowels.

³³ Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (John Wiley & Sons, 2017).

³⁴ Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Duke University Press, 2009).

At the core of communicative capitalism is “emotional capitalism,” where emotional and economic relationships shape one another.³⁵ Social media platforms are prime sites for this dynamic, where emotions are continuously produced and regulated, connecting users in complex, affect-driven networks.³⁶ These networks, exemplified by practices like *curhat*, go beyond mere connections between accounts; they thrive on affect. This affect is embedded in reciprocal interactions—posting, reposting, sharing, commenting, friending, and unfriending. It manifests through affective content like *curhat* and reactions to such content, expressed via “like” buttons, emoticons, and GIFs. In the social media landscape, as seen in *curcol* and *curhat berjamaah*, affect becomes the currency that drives engagement and interaction.

However, *curhat* is more than just an affective practice; it is also a social one. It blends individual experiences with shared ones, as each *curhat* is inherently connected to collective dynamics. In *curhat*, the personal and social intersect, providing a distinctive perspective into political communication and the formation of affective networks. This intricate interplay between the personal, social, and political has turned *curhat* into a flexible and adaptable entity, capable of being mobilized from intimate, private settings to large-scale public arenas.

In other words, *curhat* dynamics represent what I term “scalable affective sociality.” Here, I build on the concept of “scalable sociality” developed by Daniel Miller et al.,³⁷ which describes the scalable nature of online social interactions taking place on social media. “Scalable affective sociality” refers to the adaptable and expansive nature of social interactions driven by affect, particularly on social media platforms. This concept highlights how affective contents easily transition from private, intimate exchanges to widespread public engagement, facilitated by the platform’s structure and emphasis on affective connections. Hence, I argue that virality is made feasible through the utilization of “scalable affective sociality,” which allows affective content such as *curhat* to move seamlessly across different scales and contexts.

Locating Curhat within the Indonesian Historical Context

Research on political communication emphasizes the significance of affect in rallying public support.³⁸ Globally, politicians have long employed emotional appeals—such as fear, anger, and hope—drawing on time-honored rhetorical traditions.³⁹ Indonesia is no exception. Here, I do not argue that political *curhat* is a uniquely Indonesian phenomenon. Instead, I see the importance of locating political *curhat* within Indonesia’s historical context, where affect has been a pivotal element in public political speeches and rhetoric.

³⁵ Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Polity, 2007).

³⁶ Lim, “Algorithmic Enclaves,” 188.

³⁷ Daniel Miller, Jolynna Sinanan, Xinyuan Wang, Tom McDonald, Nell Haynes, Elisabetta Costa, Juliano Spyer, Shriram Venkatraman, and Razvan Nicolescu, *How the World Changed Social Media* (UCL Press, 2016).

³⁸ Ted Brader, *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds: How Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work* (University of Chicago Press, 2020); Krista De Castella, Craig McGarty, and Luke Musgrove, “Fear Appeals in Political Rhetoric About Terrorism: An Analysis of Speeches by Australian Prime Minister Howard,” *Political Psychology* 30, no. 1 (2009): 1–26.

³⁹ Gabriella Szabó, “Emotional Communication and Participation in Politics,” *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* 6, no. 2 (2020): 6.

Since the struggle for independence, leaders like Sukarno and Bung Tomo skillfully used affective rhetoric to unite and inspire the people against colonial powers.⁴⁰ Anderson stated that the Indonesian Revolution infused the language with emotionally charged words like *merdeka* (freedom), *perjuangan* (struggle), *semangat* (spirit), and *revolusi* (revolution), which became central to Indonesia's cultural identity.⁴¹ These words, born out of the intense emotions and aspirations of the revolutionary era, are deeply linked to the struggle and violence of that time, carrying strong political and heroic connotations.⁴²

In the post-independence era, emotions continued to be powerful tools in political communication. Suharto's New Order maintained control by manipulating feelings like fear (the horror of Communist resurgence) while suppressing dissent.⁴³ However, underground networks and interpersonal channels, such as political texts circulated by prisoners and student dissidents in 1990s Indonesia, allowed people to discreetly express grievances and share personal stories—similar to modern-day *curhat*—alongside their political ideas.⁴⁴ *Curhat* on social media, therefore, carries forward a historical legacy of affective resonance in political communication, acting as a catalyst for collective action and activism.

Further, as indicated in the term *curhat berjamaah*, *curhat* in political communication can be compared to the affective practices of *dakwah* (religious outreach) by popular religious leaders like Aa Gym, a renowned Islamic teacher known for integrating emotion into his teachings. Aa Gym's approach centers on the concept of the "heart" (*qolbu*), derived from the Arabic term *qalb*, reflecting the trend of Arabization in Indonesian discourse.⁴⁵ In a *curhat*-like mode, he offers personal advice and shares life anecdotes, often portraying himself as an elder brother figure.⁴⁶ By branding his style as heart-centric *qolbugrafi*, Aa Gym demonstrates how affective connection is central to his religious authority.⁴⁷ Similarly, when political figures like Jokowi engage in public *curhat*, they may, intentionally or unintentionally, lead netizens into *curhat berjamaah*, akin to how preachers connect with their *jamaah*.

Politicians and Public Political *Curhat*

In 2023, 77 percent of Indonesia's total population was online, and nearly 80 percent of adults over eighteen were on social media.⁴⁸ Consequently, social media has become an integral part of daily life in Indonesia, including the political sphere. Hence, *curhat* is becoming increasingly embedded in everyday political communication.

⁴⁰ Justus M. Van der Kroef, "Sukarno, the Ideologue." *Pacific Affairs* 41, no. 2 (1968): 245–61; S. U. Nababan and Ben Anderson, "Surabaya," *Indonesia* 5 (1968): 1–28.

⁴¹ Ben Anderson, "The Languages of Indonesian Politics," *Indonesia* 1 (1966): 89–116.

⁴² Anderson, "The Languages of Indonesian Politics," 105.

⁴³ Geoff Simons, *Indonesia: The Long Oppression* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 170.

⁴⁴ Doreen Lee, "Dissident Writing and the Intimacy of the Archive in Authoritarian Indonesia," in *The Intimate Life of Dissent: Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by Tobias Kelly (UCL Press, 2020), 172.

⁴⁵ James Bourk Hoesterey, *Rebranding Islam: Piety, Prosperity, and a Self-Help Guru* (Stanford University Press, 2020).

⁴⁶ Hoesterey, *Rebranding Islam*.

⁴⁷ Hoesterey, *Rebranding Islam*.

⁴⁸ Sofia Maddalena, "Digital 2024," *We Are Social Indonesia*, January 31, 2024, <https://wearesocial.com/id/blog/2024/01/digital-2024/>.

Political *curhat* on Indonesian social media spans a wide array of issues and is utilized by high-ranking politicians, public figures, celebrities, and regular users of all ages. Politicians commonly embrace *curhat* as part of their public engagements to connect personally with the public and bridge the gap between political elites and citizens. Publicly engaging in *curhat* may seek to convey authenticity, yet the dynamics are complex. The relationship between *curhat* and its performer can be ambiguous. *Curhat* can be a genuine expression or a strategic diversion, potentially misleading the audience. Even when performed authentically, *curhat* may be perceived as insincere or not taken seriously due to its perceived performative nature. This ambiguity in performing and perceiving *curhat* can contribute to divisiveness among the audience.

Beyond the case previously discussed, President Jokowi has frequently engaged in *curhat* about various challenges faced both as a president and as an individual. However, Jokowi was not the first president to engage in public *curhat*. Former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, often called SBY, was the first president to frequently partake in this activity, earning him the nickname “President who loves to *curhat*” (*Presiden hobby curhat*).⁴⁹ Through consistent *curhat* sessions, SBY normalized the practice for public figures and politicians. Even after his presidency, SBY continues utilizing his social media accounts to employ *curhat* as his mode of public communication.

Among the myriad *curhat* shared by SBY on Twitter, a series of tweets from 2017 emerged as a compelling illustration of how one *curhat* begets another, forming a cascade that ultimately satirizes the initial *curhat*. In January of that year, following his recent press conference where he passionately criticized the government’s alleged wiretapping of his phone conversations (despite the government’s denial of such actions), SBY turned to Twitter to express his dismay over student protesters rallying outside his residence in Mega Kuningan. He composed a series of five tweets, all of which garnered substantial attention with approximately 2,000–4,200 replies each. He started with this tweet:

Brothers and sisters who care about law and justice, now my home in Kuningan is being descended upon by hundreds of people. They keep shouting.⁵⁰

The response of netizens to SBY’s tweets varied greatly, with the most prominent meme sparked by the former president’s tweet being #SayaBertanya (#IAsk)—stemming from his query, “I ask the president and the police chief, don’t I have the rights to live peacefully in my own country?”⁵¹ This hashtag prompted netizens to pose various humorous inquiries to the president and police chief, such as the tweets below:⁵²

⁴⁹ Slay Widiyabuana, “Facebooker: Obama Hobi Ngecat Rambut SBY Hobi Curhat,” *TribunNews*, January 22, 2011, <https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2011/01/22/facebooker-obama-hobi-ngecat-rambut-sby-hobi-curhat>.

⁵⁰ S. B. Yudhoyono (@SBYudhoyono), “Saudara-saudaraku yg mencintai hukum & keadilan, saat ini rumah saya di Kuningan ‘digrudug’ ratusan orang. Mereka berteriak-teriak. *SBY*,” Twitter (now X), February 6, 2017, <https://twitter.com/SBYudhoyono/status/828514864897200129>.

⁵¹ S. B. Yudhoyono (@SBYudhoyono), “Saya Bertanya Kpd Bapak Presiden & Kapolri, Apakah Saya Tidak Memiliki Hak Utk Tinggal Di Negeri Sendiri,Dgn Hak Asasi Yg Saya Miliki? *SBY*,” Twitter (now X), February 6, 2017, <https://twitter.com/SBYudhoyono/status/828516393549074433>.

⁵² “#SayaBertanya How Former President SBY’s Twitter Rant about a Student Protest Inspired a Hilarious Viral Meme,” *Coconuts Jakarta*, February 7, 2017, <https://coconuts.co/jakarta/news/sayabertanya-how-former-president-sbys-twitter-rant-about-student-protest-inspired/>.

#IAsk the president and the police chief, why my girlfriend claims to be sleeping but her WhatsApp status remains online?

#IAsk the president and the police chief, why is the question “when will you catch up?” only heard at weddings and not funerals?

#IAsk the president and the police chief, is it my fault that I was born handsome, so my wife won’t let me go anywhere alone?

In the last decade, Ridwan Kamil, the former governor of West Java province and mayor of Bandung, has emerged as a popular political figure and has a significant presence on social media platforms. Claiming that he is “a Twitter kid who became a mayor”⁵³ and identifying himself as “the broadcaster of daily happiness,”⁵⁴ he regularly engages in *curhat*, accompanied by various photos, often selfies. In this mode, Ridwan Kamil seamlessly weaves official political matters like budgets and government initiatives with personal reflections on love, marriage, heartbreak, and parenthood. For instance, on one occasion, he shared a throwback photograph of his younger self, accompanied by a brief narrative about heartbreak.⁵⁵

Singapore, 1994.

Thirty years ago, I was a student exchange at NUS Singapore.

After four months in Singapore, I returned home only to be left by my first love, who got married.

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

Wishing everyone a great weekend.

Thank you.

#ridwankamil

On another occasion, Kamil asked, “Are young Indonesians too lazy to marry?” and invited his followers to *curhat* about the topic. The post garnered over twenty thousand comments, many of which were *curhat*. Kamil’s *curhat* sessions have significantly contributed to his popularity, portraying him as a relatable, charismatic, and attractive political figure.

Meanwhile, Prabowo Subianto, a former general from the New Order regime and a presidential candidate in the 2014, 2019, and 2024 elections, utilized *curhat* to deflect accusations of human rights violations. Prabowo vented, “Every five years, whenever

⁵³ Nieke Indrietta Baiduri, “Ridwan Kamil: Saya Anak Twitter Jadi Walikota,” *Tempo*, February 22, 2015, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/644294/ridwan-kamil-saya-anak-twitter-jadi-wali-kota>.

⁵⁴ “Ridwan Kamil (@ridwankamil) • Instagram Profile,” accessed September 1, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/ridwankamil/>.

⁵⁵ Ridwan Kamil, “Ridwan Kamil on Instagram: ‘Singapura 1994, Saya Di 30 Tahun Yang Lalu, Sebagai Mahasiswa Pertukaran Di NUS Singapura. 4 Bulan Di Singapura, Pulang-Pulang Diputusi Cinta Pertama Ditinggal Kawin. ‘What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Stronger’ Selamat Berakhir Pekan Untuk Semua. Hatur Nuhun. #ridwankamil,’” Instagram, March 22, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C41eRGCyiTH/>.

my polling improves, that issue comes to the forefront.”⁵⁶ In this *curhat*, he positioned himself as a victim, portraying these allegations as targeted assaults on his character conveniently resurfacing every electoral cycle, particularly when his popularity in the polls is on the ascent. Additionally, by addressing such a violation through *curhat* rather than formal discourse, Prabowo downplayed an otherwise grave and significant violation.

Unlike the pursuit of solutions or resolutions, *curhat* lacks a definitive objective; at times, it serves as an end in itself. When a political issue transitions into a *curhat* topic, it follows the natural flow of personal expression, devoid of a predetermined conclusion. By framing political discussions as *curhat*, politics becomes personalized and infused with affect, blending seamlessly into the fabric of the everyday. Everyday politics is civic and populist, rooted in people’s experiences rather than orchestrated by governments or political parties.⁵⁷ It transcends formal structures and mainstream media, taking on an informal nature. In this context, I contend that comprehending everyday political discourse in Indonesia requires an examination of political *curhat* on social media. While *curhat* does not encompass all aspects of everyday politics, it represents a prevailing form of political communication shaping the Indonesian landscape of everyday politics, where political discourse often takes an informal nature.

Social Media Activism as Affective *Curhat* Networks

For many Indonesian social media users, *curhat* often disperses and diminishes political matters into personal feelings. However, at times, it can spark collective reactions and actions, both uniting and dividing people. This section examines how *curhat* transitions into social media activism, analyzing the processes that drive this shift. As noted in the introduction, thirty-eight such events were identified from 2009 to 2023. For this analysis, I have selected six cases,⁵⁸ focusing specifically on corruption and defamation under the ITE law, to identify patterns in how personal stories and emotions conveyed through *curhat* can mobilize the public. The ITE law here refers specifically to defamation and hate speech clauses of the *Informasi Transaksi Elektronik* (ITE), or Electronic Information and Transaction Electronic law, that have been misused by powerful parties, including the government, to silence critics.

⁵⁶ “Prabowo Curhat Diserang Isu Pelanggaran HAM Setiap 5 Tahun Sekali,” CNN Indonesia, December 12, 2023, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20231212214905-617-1036436/prabowo-curhat-diserang-isu-pelanggaran-ham-setiap-5-tahun-sekali>.

⁵⁷ Harry C. Boyte, *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Tim Highfield, *Social Media and Everyday Politics* (Polity, 2017).

⁵⁸ By selecting three cases each from issues of corruption and the ITE Law, I conducted a focused analysis that provided an in-depth comparative examination of key dynamics within these contexts. This strategy captures the complexity of the issues without overwhelming the study with excessive data. The six strategically chosen cases enable a detailed exploration of how these issues function within the broader dataset, ensuring relevance and analytical depth. This balanced selection also allows for direct comparisons, revealing commonalities and divergences in how they went viral—insights that may not emerge from a larger dataset. Overall, this approach maintains clarity while drawing meaningful insights from the broader collection of thirty-eight cases.

Cases	Main platforms	Issue	Brief description + <i>curhat</i> element
Coin for Prita ^a	Blogs, Facebook, Twitter	ITE	2009: Prita Mulyasari faced a defamation lawsuit under ITE law after her critical email about a hospital went viral, leading to nationwide outrage. This resulted in a successful social media campaign where people donated coins to cover her legal fees. Her charge, however, was never dropped, and she still had to pay the fine.
Gecko vs crocodile ^b #SaveKPK 1	Facebook, Twitter	Corruption	2009: The case began with the <i>curcol</i> of Susno Duedji of the National Indonesian Police (Polri), comparing the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) to a “gecko” challenging the mighty “crocodile” of the police, leading to a viral social media movement that symbolized the struggle of a smaller entity against a larger adversary and spurred nationwide protests.
<i>Curhat</i> Novel Baswedan ^c #SaveKPK 2	Facebook, Twitter, Change.org	Corruption	2012: A major dispute arose between Polri and the KPK over a corrupt driving license simulator project, leading to the arrest of KPK investigator Novel Baswedan in retaliation for the detention of Chief Inspector General Djoko Susilo. The KPK’s reputation as a people’s hero and Baswedan’s Facebook <i>curhat</i> about the scapegoating of the KPK sparked widespread public support and online petition (on Change.org), forcing the police to back down and resulting in Susilo’s conviction.
Curhat Florence ^d	Path, Facebook, Twitter, Change.org	ITE	2014: Florence Sihombing’s viral <i>curhat</i> on Path criticizing the city of Yogyakarta sparked widespread anger among residents, led to police reports by NGOs, and resulted in her being charged under the ITE Law, which in turn ignited a viral protest and online petition demanding her release.
Curhatan TikToker Bima ^e	TikTok, Instagram, Twitter	ITE	2023: Indonesian student Bima Yudho Saputro faced ITE Law charges for defamation after criticizing the city of Lampung’s public infrastructure in a viral <i>curhat</i> video, but widespread public support and intervention from figures like lawyer HP Hutapea and civil society organizations led to the charges being dropped.
Curhatan Husein ^f	TikTok, Instagram, Twitter	Corruption	2023: Husein Ali Rafsanjani, a young teacher from Pangandaran, West Java, used TikTok <i>curhat</i> to expose a bribery incident related to a government training program, which led to significant online support, including from former Minister Susi Pudjiastuti, and eventually prompted Governor Ridwan Kamil to temporarily suspend the regency’s civil servant office head.

^a “Supporters Collect Rp 650 Million in Coins for Prita,” *Jakarta Post*, December 19, 2009, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/12/19/supporters-collect-rp-650-million-coins-prita.html>; Hamideh Molaie, “Discursive Opportunity Structure and the Contribution of Social Media to the Success of Social Movements in Indonesia,” *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 94–108; Lim, “Many Clicks.”

^b Editor, “Gecko, Crocodile, Godzilla and the Politics of Brute Force—Sun, November 8, 2009,” *Jakarta Post*, November 8, 2009, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/11/08/gecko-crocodile-godzilla-and-politics-brute-force.html>; Lim, “Many Clicks”; Molaie, “Discursive Opportunity Structure.”

^c Anjar Wulandari, “Kompil Novel Baswedan Curhat di Facebook,” *Banjarmasinpost.co.id*, October 8, 2012, <https://banjarmasin.tribunnews.com/2012/10/08/kompil-novel-baswedan-curhat-di-facebook>; Achmad Jamil and Caturida Meiwanto Doktoralina, “The Save KPK Movement: A Framing Analysis of Coverage in Indonesian News Media Surrounding the KPK and Police Dispute,” *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 7, no. 3 (2016): S1.

^d Kompas Cyber Media, “Liputan Khusus Kisah Florence dan Warga Yogya Halaman 1,” *Kompas.com*, March 16, 2015, <https://www.kompas.com/topik-pilihan/list/3214/kisah-florence-dan-warga-yogya>.

^e Liputan6.com, “8 Fakta Viral TikToker Bima Yudho Saputro yang Jadi Sorotan Usai Kritik Jalan Rusak di Lampung,” *Liputan6.com*, April 17, 2023, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/5263587/8-fakta-viral-tiktoker-bima-yudho-saputro-yang-jadi-sorotan-usai-kritik-jalan-rusak-di-lampung>.

^f “Husein Guru ASN Pangandaran Yang Curhat Pungli Akhirnya Batal Mundur,” *Detik.com*, May 11, 2023, <https://www.detik.com/jateng/berita/d-6716089/husein-guru-asn-pangandaran-yang-curhat-pungli-akhirnya-batal-mundur>.

The six cases showcase the intersection of social media, *curhat*, and critical societal issues such as defamation, corruption, and public accountability in Indonesia. These cases span different years and platforms—ranging from Facebook and blogs in the earlier cases to TikTok in more recent ones—highlighting how platforms evolve, but the core issues persist. Three cases focus on violations under Indonesia’s ITE Law, where individuals, including Prita Mulyasari and Bima Yudho Saputro, faced legal action for public criticism. The other three involve corruption scandals, such as the viral #SaveKPK movements sparked by *curhat* from Susno Duadji and Novel Baswedan, symbolizing the public’s support for Indonesia’s Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK).

My analysis of these six cases reveals several findings. First, these cases demonstrate the utilization of *curhat* as a form of “scalable affective sociality,” effectively mobilizing viral activism. *Curhat* is an affective practice, and affect has been recognized as a crucial component in political action.⁵⁹ Scholars in collective action and social movement research have long acknowledged the significance of affect, commonly referred to as emotions, within the dynamics of protest.⁶⁰ They view emotions as a potent catalyst influencing the formation of group identity, the process of mobilization, and the overall stages of protests.⁶¹ In essence, collective activism involves mobilizing affect as much as mobilizing political messages.

Second, the personal narrative of victimhood plays a crucial role in these cases. Hashtags like #SaveKPK in the “Gecko vs. Crocodile” case not only mark relevant discussions but also enable users to participate in broader conversations, express solidarity, and sometimes share their own experiences of victimhood. Figures like Prita Mulyasari, “the gecko,” Novel Baswedan, Bima Yudho Saputro, and Husein Ali Rafsanjani were portrayed as absolute victims, symbolizing ordinary, everyday individuals—one of “us,” “the people”—who were victimized by the misuse of the ITE law or by acts of corruption carried out by “the powerful elites.” Although the #SaveKPK campaigns of 2009, 2012, and 2015 presented themselves as anti-corruption movements, my analysis of social media data shows that users primarily rallied around the persona of the KPK (and its commissioners), who were seen as victims in these situations.

In this context, the *curcol* of Susno Duadji, a member of the national police, was not perceived as representing the victim. It was seen as an act of bullying, prompting social media users to rally behind his target, the KPK. *Curhat* is often seen as legitimate when expressed by a perceived victim. Meanwhile, when Florence Sihombing posted her *curhat* criticizing the city of Yogyakarta, she was not initially viewed as an absolute victim, which led to mixed reactions. Aware that Florence was an outsider, Yogyakarta residents united to defend their beloved city and its locals (“we”) against the outsider (“they”). However, when Florence was later charged with defamation under the ITE law, her status shifted to that of a victim. In all cases, the solidarity and sense of victimhood drive users to support those seen as victims of powerful elites, framed within a populist

⁵⁹ Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, eds., *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁶⁰ James M. Jasper, “Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 37 (2011): 285–303.

⁶¹ Jasper, “Emotions and Social Movements,” 286.

binary of “the people” versus “the corrupt elites.”⁶² Here, populism is understood as a political logic and discourse that contrasts a morally upright “we” against a corrupt “they,” rather than a specific ideology.⁶³

Third, I discern that social media activism mirrors traditional offline collective action by mobilizing crowds to express outrage over an event before coalescing and self-organizing into a mass protest. However, social media activism has transformed this process in three important aspects. First is the scale aspect. Social media allows far more people to communicate with each other and potentially form *curhat* networks, thus expanding the scale of mobilization. For instance, the “Gecko vs. Crocodile” case involved a leading Facebook group with over a million members, a scale hard to achieve offline. Second, the frequency of interactions has dramatically increased. Mobile social media enables constant connectivity and allows users to be online and connected at all times, increasing the frequency of users’ interactions and the likelihood of *curhat* leading to the formation of *curhat* cascades. Finally, the scope of these interactions has expanded. The boundaries between private and public spheres have blurred, merging personal *curhat* with political discourse. The increased publicity and visibility of these micro-level interactions, accessible to both external observers and participants, accelerate the formation of collective activism on social media.⁶⁴

The transformation of *curhat*-based networks into social media activism aligns with Fauzanafi’s notion of “digital affective citizenship,” a political subjectivity that blends emotions and a sense of powerlessness to challenge the ruling elites.⁶⁵ Political *curhat*, thus, can be seen as a form of citizenship practice and political subjectivity, where citizens express their claims and concerns to gain recognition from authorities.⁶⁶ Further, in the social media landscape, there is a shift from identity-building politics to visibility politics.⁶⁷ Users no longer need to forge a unified group identity through deliberation and action. Instead, they unite through collective visibility, where interpersonal exchanges within the “scalable affective sociality” framework take precedence. The visibility and publicity of *curhat* within these networks enhance the virality of social media activism. When political issues are highlighted through popular *curhat*, such as those by Prita Mulyasari or Novel Baswedan, they can drive engagement and mobilization. However, this mobilization is often brief, dissipating once the issue is resolved, and tends to focus on individual cases rather than underlying problems. The issue often reemerges with subsequent viral *curhat* on similar topics.

⁶² Cas Mudde, “Europe’s Populist Surge: A Long Time in the Making,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 6 (2016): 25–30.

⁶³ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005).

⁶⁴ Stefania Milan, “Mobilizing in Times of Social Media. From a Politics of Identity to a Politics of Visibility,” in *Critical Perspectives on Social Media and Protest*, edited by Lina Dencik and Oliver Leistert (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 53–71.

⁶⁵ M. Z. Fauzanafi, “Digital Affective Citizenship: @ The Nexus of on-Line and Off-Line Anti-Corruption Activism in Banten, Indonesia” (PhD diss., Universiteit Leiden, 2024).

⁶⁶ Kristine Krause and Katharina Schramm, “Thinking through Political Subjectivity,” *African Diaspora* 4, no. 2 (2011): 115–34.

⁶⁷ Krause and Schramm, “Thinking through Political Subjectivity.”

Algorithmic Politics and the Manipulation of *Curhat* Networks

In the aforementioned cases, the main driving force behind mass support and solidarity for the victim was the extreme emotion, notably anger, directed toward the perceived corrupt elites. This anger, fueled by feelings of victimization and injustice, drove users to engage within the *curhat* networks. Scholars have contended that the initial spark that ignites a collective movement is often a morally distressing event or a moral shock, which disrupts people's emotions and triggers extreme feelings.⁶⁸ Anger is considered the "sanctioning emotion" that allows individuals to express their dissatisfaction with adversaries and motivates new members to join collective actions.⁶⁹ In Indonesia, historically, *amok*, a manifestation of violent rage, was utilized as a rallying cry or battle fervor for mobilizing collective, organized resistance before the establishment of the modern colonial state.⁷⁰ In today's Indonesia, *curhat*, at times, can evoke collective anger, which serves as a focal point in social media activism, whether progressive or regressive activism.

However, research shows that intense emotions like anger, anxiety, and fear are particularly vulnerable to manipulation.⁷¹ Politicians and interest groups often exploit this by framing issues to provoke anger, directing it toward specific targets, such as political rivals, social groups, or institutions. Social media has made this manipulation even more effective. Central to this dynamic is the role of social media algorithms. The rise of social media in politics has given rise to "algorithmic politics," a form of politics that operates by strategically manipulating algorithms to dominate media spheres and shape public opinion.⁷² This approach exploits existing algorithmic biases to influence public sentiment, not just during elections but also in routine political and policy discussions.⁷³ I argue that the exploitation of affect through algorithmic politics, notably via *curhat* networks, is crucial to the manipulation tactics of political elites and the campaign industry. This strategy becomes even more powerful when combined with the politicization of religion.

In Indonesia, no political leader has more experience in algorithmic politics than Jokowi, who first leveraged social media campaigns during the 2012 Jakarta

⁶⁸ Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, eds., *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); George E. Marcus, W. Russell Neuman, and Michael MacKuen, *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment* (University of Chicago Press, 2000); Kathleen Rodgers, "'Anger Is Why We're All Here': Mobilizing and Managing Emotions in A Professional Activist Organization," *Social Movement Studies* 9, no. 3 (2010): 273–91.

⁶⁹ Helena Flam and Debra King, *Emotions and Social Movements* (Routledge, 2007), 20.

⁷⁰ David Kloos, "A Crazy State: Violence, Psychiatry, and Colonialism in Aceh, Indonesia, ca. 1910–1942." *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 170, no. 1 (2014): 25–65.

⁷¹ Brian E. Weeks, "Emotions, Partisanship, and Misperceptions: How Anger and Anxiety Moderate the Effect of Partisan Bias on Susceptibility to Political Misinformation," *Journal of Communication* 65, no. 4 (2015): 699–719.

⁷² Merlyna Lim, "From Activist Media to Algorithmic Politics: The Internet, Social Media, and Civil Society in Southeast Asia," in *Routledge Handbook of Civil and Uncivil Society in Southeast Asia*, edited by Meredith Weiss and Eva Hansson (Routledge, 2023), 39.

⁷³ Tapsell, "Social Media and Elections"; Merlyna Lim, *Social Media and Politics in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

gubernatorial election. In both the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, Jokowi and his rival, Prabowo Subianto, embraced algorithmic politics by combining grassroots support with paid campaigners, trolls, and online influencers.⁷⁴ In 2014, Jokowi used social media campaigns to craft a populist image as a humble, “anti-corruption outsider” and a “commoner,”⁷⁵ while Prabowo emphasized his nationalistic and strongman persona. In this election, Islam was politicized in the algorithmic political battlegrounds where Jokowi was framed by social media smear campaigns as anti-Islam or even communist, while Prabowo Subianto aligned with Islamist groups, positioning himself as the protector of the faith. By 2017, the dynamics intensified as Islamists gained significant political influence by mobilizing hundreds of thousands to oust Jakarta’s then-governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), a Chinese-Christian accused of blasphemy,⁷⁶ leading to the formation of *Aksi 212* (see Salma, this issue), the coalition movement of various conservative and Islamists groups. The movement unsettled the Jokowi government, raising concerns that Islamists, after decades of fragmentation, were poised to shape national politics. Responding to this, in 2019, Jokowi selected prominent cleric Ma’ruf Amin as his running mate to enhance his Islamic credibility, while Prabowo embraced Islamist populism by aligning with groups like *Aksi 212*. Both candidates harnessed social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook to stir up religious sentiment, manipulating voters’ emotions through narratives that cast doubt on their opponents’ Islamic credentials.

Employing “repressive pluralism,”⁷⁷ the Jokowi administration promoted a brand of moderate nationalist Islam called *Islam Nusantara*, framing it in opposition to “radical” groups, especially the Islamists, whom it portrayed as unpatriotic and hostile to pluralism. These groups were labeled as anti-*Pancasila*,⁷⁸ anti-*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*,⁷⁹ and anti-NKRI,⁸⁰ a characterization that persisted throughout Jokowi’s presidency. Beyond elections, the Jokowi administration continued to exploit affective manipulation, using algorithmic politics to promote its policies while suppressing dissent, particularly targeting Islamist critics and branding dissenters as “Islamist.” This strategy polarized Indonesians by categorizing social media users as either “moderates” or “Islamists,” creating a binary framework that influenced everyday *curhat* on political issues and leaving no space for nuances and complexities. As illustrated in the following cases, this approach was also effective in manipulating public opinion to support the administration’s policies.

⁷⁴ Saraswati, “The Political Campaign Industry.”

⁷⁵ Saraswati, “The Political Campaign Industry.”

⁷⁶ Lim, “Freedom to Hate”; Rakhmani, “Understanding the Floating Ummah.”

⁷⁷ Greg Fealy, “Jokowi in the Covid-19 Era: Repressive Pluralism, Dynasticism and the Overbearing State.” *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 56, no. 3 (2020): 313. Here, the term “repressive pluralism” describes large-scale social engineering aimed at discouraging conservative Islamic lifestyles and Islamist political goals, pressuring Islamists to abandon their positions or beliefs.

⁷⁸ *Pancasila* is the philosophical foundation of the Indonesian state, consisting of five principles that emphasize belief in one God, human rights, national unity, democracy through consensus, and social justice for all Indonesians.

⁷⁹ *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, meaning “Unity in Diversity,” is Indonesia’s national motto, emphasizing harmony among the country’s diverse cultures, ethnicities, and religions while promoting a shared national identity.

⁸⁰ NKRI stands for *Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia*, it translates to “The Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.”

In late September 2019, students across Indonesia took to both social media and the streets to protest the Corruption Eradication Commission Revision Bill (RUU KPK), which was viewed as undermining the efficacy of KPK, and the Criminal Code Revision Bill, which threatened people's rights.⁸¹ The street protests unfolded alongside the viral #ReformasiDikorupsi social media campaign, where political discussions were intertwined with a flood of *curhat*. Gen-Z, whose online and offline lives are inseparable, brought *curhat* to the streets with playful posters mixed in with activism signs. Some standout Gen-Z *curhat* slogans, emerging online and on the streets, include "Paused from watching Korean dramas because there's more drama in parliament,"⁸² "I've seen smarter cabinets at IKEA," "The country is in crisis, forcing the introvert to join a demonstration,"⁸³ and "My hobby is couch potato-ing, but I ended up taking to the streets."⁸⁴

In response, the Jokowi administration deployed riot police, resulting in arrests and violent crackdowns. Simultaneously, algorithmic politics was utilized to shape online public discourse. To counter the #ReformasiDikorupsi movement, which featured hashtags like #DiperkosaNegara and #TurunkanJokowi, pro-government campaign networks were activated on social media to promote the controversial bills.⁸⁵ The Indonesian digital spaces were flooded with pro-government propaganda and astroturfed⁸⁶ *curhat* networks, using opposing hashtags such as #SayaBersamaJokowi, #JokowiMendengarRakyat, #PercayaLangkahJokowi, and #KitaDukungJokowi. This networked pro-government activism falsely framed the student movement as part of a conspiracy against Jokowi, even linking it to the so-called Islamist agenda aimed at undermining his leadership.

Earlier that month, as detailed in Wijayanto, Ward Berenschot, and Fiona Suwana's article (this issue), a strikingly similar strategy was deployed to sway public opinion against KPK. Responding to the RUU-KPK, a network of pro-KPK voices emerged online, raising alarms over what was seen as a government attempt to weaken the watchdog's grip on corrupt politicians under hashtags such as #SaveKPK, #TolakRevisiUUKPK (Reject RUU-KPK), and #CicakBuaya (Gecko vs. Crocodile). But within mere days, the social media conversation took a sudden, bewildering turn toward the narrative of "KPK and Taliban." With the help of paid influencers and buzzers, social media was flooded with conspiratorial posts under the hashtag #KPKTaliban and its variations, implying that the KPK needed to be reined in due to alleged infiltration by radical Muslims.⁸⁷ Despite the absurdity of this claim, the hashtag quickly gained traction on Twitter.

⁸¹ Wendy Otieno, "#ReformasiDikorupsi: Uphold the Rights of Indonesian Civil Society!" Voice.Global, November 11, 2019, <https://voice.global/reformasidikorupsi-uphold-the-rights-of-indonesian-civil-society/>.

⁸² *Cuti nonton drakor (Drama Korea), karena di DPR lebih banyak drama.*

⁸³ *Negara sudah darurat sampai introvert rela ikut demo.*

⁸⁴ *Padahal hobiku rebahan tapi jadi turun ke jalan.*

⁸⁵ Lim, *Social Media and Politics*, 76.

⁸⁶ Astroturfing is a term used to describe the practice of creating a fake impression of grassroots support or opposition, see Edward T. Walker and Andrew N. Le, "Poisoning the Well: How Astroturfing Harms Trust in Advocacy Organizations," *Social Currents* 10, no. 2 (April 1, 2023): 184–202.

⁸⁷ Lim, *Social Media and Politics*, 76; Wijayanto and Albanik Maizar, "Cyber Mercenaries vs the KPK," *Inside Indonesia*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.insideindonesia.org/editions/edition-146-oct-dec-2021/cyber-mercenaries-versus-the-kpk>.

Beyond Twitter, two pro-Jokowi YouTube channels, Cokro TV and 2025 TV, amplified this baseless narrative, claiming that Novel Baswedan and other KPK investigators were Taliban members. The narrative gained such virality that mainstream news outlets were compelled to cover the story. This association made it difficult for the public to defend the KPK, as it shifted from being seen as a victim to an enemy of the people, supposedly betraying both Indonesian nationalism and moderate Islam. Following the legislative revisions, public opinion polls revealed a decline in support for the KPK.⁸⁸

In both the #ReformasiDiKorupsi and #KPKTaliban cases, the public was pushed into binary opposition, forming exclusionary algorithmic enclaves where social media users clustered around negative sentiments toward their adversaries. In these instances, along with other similar cases not covered here, pro-Jokowi campaign networks emerged en masse, framing any criticism of the Jokowi administration as a threat not just to the government but also to Indonesia and Islam, contrasting these critics with the vision of *Islam Nusantara* and the nationalist ideal encapsulated in the slogan *NKRI harga mati*.⁸⁹ For example, in the #KPKTaliban case, KPK supporters risked being linked to radical Muslims, complicating their ability to defend the KPK. Any expression of *curhat* or *curcol* in defense of the KPK, or even a mere questioning of the prevailing narrative, could lead to accusations of being a radical, extremist, Taliban member, or sympathizer. Consequently, many retreated from public discourse, shifting their *curhat* practices into hidden enclaves like private WhatsApp groups and other closed spaces.

These examples illustrate how algorithmic politics have significantly transformed how Indonesians interact on social media, giving rise to algorithmic enclaves in both public and private spheres. As discussed in the introduction, these enclaves are often exclusionary, emerging around a shared antagonist.⁹⁰ Within these spaces, individuals engage in *curhat berjamaah*, expressing extreme affects—such as anger, hate, and fear—that serve as the glue binding them together against “the Others.” In these enclaves, tribalism manifests as users assert and validate their own versions of nationalism and/or religiosity, justifying their extreme negative affect toward “the Others” while denying their rights.⁹¹

Conclusions: In *Curhat* We Unite and Divide

In this article, I explore the phenomenon of *curhat* and its broader influence on political discourse. By analyzing *curhat* through the lenses of communicative and emotional capitalism, I offer insights into how it influences personal connections, social dynamics, and political communities. This analysis reveals the fluid nature of *curhat*, illustrating how it evolves from private, intimate expressions into large-scale public engagements within the framework of “scalable affective sociality.”

⁸⁸ Journalist IBP, “Public Trust on KPK Declines Post-Legal Revision | INSIDER,” *Indonesia Business Post* (blog), May 14, 2024, <https://indonesiabusinesspost.com/insider/public-trust-on-kpk-declines-post-legal-revision/>.

⁸⁹ *NKRI harga mati* (NKRI is final, absolutely nonnegotiable) is a nationalist mantra often used to suppress ideologies and movements perceived as outside the bounds of “true” Indonesia. The rigidity of such nationalist meta-narratives makes it challenging to mobilize any issues that could be linked to an anti-NKRI stance. See Lim, “Many Clicks,” 650.

⁹⁰ Lim, “Algorithmic Enclaves,” 194.

⁹¹ Lim, “Freedom to Hate”; Rakhmani, “Understanding the Floating Ummah.”

The article highlights that in Indonesia, the rise of *curhat* signifies a shift from identity-building-based politics to visibility-based politics, where collective visibility and interpersonal exchanges take center stage. The prominence and publicity of *curhat* within scalable socio-affective networks are key drivers of social media activism's virality. However, these *curhat* networks are susceptible to manipulation through "algorithmic politics," where political elites exploit algorithms and extreme affects to shape public opinion for their own gain. This further intensifies polarization through "algorithmic enclaves" and discourages the public from engaging in nuanced and complex discussions.

The article demonstrates that *curhat* has become a fixture in everyday political conversations, offering a cathartic outlet for political issues and integrating emotions into daily life. It can provoke collective responses that either unite or divide, influencing how political matters are personalized and mobilized. *Curhat* shapes affective and social constellations, highlighting the tensions between "the people" and politics, and plays a role in organizing or disrupting political engagement. This "scalable affective sociality" influences not only the affective landscape of Indonesian politics but also the quality and trajectory of political conversations and public discourse in the country.