

Social media a political fuel to social conflicts: A comparative case of Zimbabwe and Indonesia in de-escalation of conflicts in future elections.

Newman Sango¹, Ichsan Malik², I Gede Sumertha KY³

^{1, 2&3} *Peace and Conflict Resolution, Faculty of National Security, Indonesia Defense University*

ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the impact of social media in fuelling political conflicts. Measures to de-escalate political violence in the coming elections are also covered. A qualitative research approach is used and documentary analysis is used for data gathering. Theories and concepts are used to analyze how social media fuels political violence and reduction measures are also deduced for the upcoming elections in Zimbabwe and Indonesia. The results show that the use of social media increased during the election period in both countries, though the increase was more noticeable in Zimbabwe. Social media laws should be enacted in the two countries as one of the control measures before the next elections.*

KEYWORDS: *conflict, elections, Indonesia, social media, Zimbabwe.*

I. Introduction

This article looks at the issue of how social media fuelling political conflicts in Indonesia and Zimbabwe. The major focus is put on the previous elections in Zimbabwe which were held in the year 2018 and in Indonesia, which were held in the year 2019. This historical analysis of how social media fueled the previous elections will assist both governments in finding ways to de-escalate violence in the upcoming elections.

Elections are usually associated with political violence. The cases of political violence seem they have increased due to the increase in the use of social media platforms. This paper focuses on the impact of social media in causing political violence and the measures that can be put in place to reduce these outbreaks. The writer focuses on two countries Indonesia and Zimbabwe. These two countries last held their general elections as follows; According to Dzirutwe, (2018), Zimbabwe, held its general elections on the 30th of July 2018, to elect the president and members of parliament. On 3rd August 2018, President Emmerson Mnangagwa won Zimbabwe's presidential election, according to announced results, in a poll marred by deadly violence as the opposition parties alleged vote-rigging (Mohamed, 2018).

In another scenario, Indonesia held its general elections on the 17th of April 2019 (Zunita, 2019). President Joko Widodo and his deputy Ma'ruf Amin were declared winners of this 2019 election (Tajuk, 2019). The main opposition camp also refused to accept the results, as they claimed that there was vote-rigging and this again sparked violence in Jakarta. The political violence occurred on 21-22 May 2019 after one of the opposition leaders refused to accept the 2019 general election results (Chan, 2019).

These two countries had almost similar scenarios in their previous elections that were marred by political violence, and they both blamed social media for the escalation of this political violence. Russel, (2019) stated that the Indonesian government had to block Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram for three days after the

22 May 2019 political violence in Jakarta. This was done as a measure to de-escalate the hoaxes spreading about the general election fake results and also to limit mobilization messages from spreading (Yankoski et al., 2020). In Zimbabwe also just after the casting of votes, on the 30th of July 2018, political violence erupted. The government had to block social media platforms throughout the country which included; Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp messaging applications for four days amid a crackdown on violent protests (BBC, 2019).

A. Political conflicts and social media.

Zimbabwe and Indonesia should learn from what happened to the Arab nations during the Arab spring and formulate their political strategies accordingly. History offers us the chance to learn from others' past mistakes. It helps us apprehend the many motives why human beings can also behave the way they do. As a result, it helps human beings become more impartial as decision-makers.

Political conflicts result from variations in political understanding these conflicts normally cause wars and destabilization in many nations (Romli, 2018). The political conflict which befell Arab springs started on social media platforms. The "Arab Spring" refers to the wave of democratic uprisings that commenced in Tunisia and spread across the Arab countries (Yang, 2018). Eventually, social media-induced violent protests led to the elimination of constitutional governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and other countries (Liaropoulos, 2013). Social media is now another tool that activists are using in opposition to suppressive regimes (Yang, 2018). Citizens in these nations had for a long time been denied their freedom of expression of their will, the traditional media used to be controlled by these oppressors. Whilst social media played a tremendous position in the Arab Spring uprising, it is vital to notice that residents have been already agitated by the regimes' terrible governance and human rights violations.

Social media's capability of facilitating riotous protests was once additionally evident at some point in the London riots of 2011, where rioters reportedly used Facebook and Twitter to organize and motivate protests (Pandalai, 2016). Social media was also used to coordinate looting, defy police and arrange flash mobs throughout these London riots (Pandalai, 2016). Social media has also led to a rise in the spread of fake news. Given the quantity and velocity with which news spread on social media platforms, checking the fact of the records has become a hard task. Social media has brought a lot of changes which include freedom of expression that now and again spills into infringing the rights of others (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021). Information is spread very quickly from point A to point B and this is the greatest advantage of social media in contrast to traditional media (Mugari & Chisuvi, 2021). Fake information via social media increases anger amongst activists which is likely to cause political conflicts (Romli, 2018).

On another note, many researchers have researched the effectiveness of social media platforms in facilitating the sharing of pictures, videos, and information. In fighting for democracy those who were suppressed by the dictators find their way out through the use of social media platforms (Marchant & Stremlau, 2019). Due to social media now all users are journalists they can produce, edit, and send the news to fellow users. According to Yang, (2018), Tunisian protestors utilized social media, including Facebook and Twitter, as their primary tool to communicate and organize the protests.

The Tunisian government responded with expanded efforts to control the Internet by blocking numerous websites covering the protests and recording users' Facebook passwords to delete Tunisian activists' protest pages (Schmuziger et al., 2019). Social media proved to be high quality because activists in these Arab spring nations managed to attain their objectives regardless of all these switching-off of the internet. According to Liaropoulos, (2013), these activists utilized social media, in the planning and implementation of protest activities, such as information about transportation, turnout, police presence, violence, medical services, and legal aid additions, social media platforms facilitated the exchange of emotional and motivational contents in support of and opposition to protest activity, such as messages emphasizing anger, social identification, crew efficacy, and issues about fairness, justice, and deprivation as well as explicitly ideological themes.

B. Forthcoming general elections.

Indonesia and Zimbabwe are looking forward to another phase of the general elections again. On the 25th of January 2022, the President of the Republic of Indonesia announced that the general elections are to be held on the 14th of February, 2024, and the elections for governors, mayors, and regents are to be held on 27 November, 2024 (Suhenda, 2022). On another note the president of Zimbabwe, Cde Emmerson Mnangagwa announced that general elections are due in the year 2023 and the actual date is to be announced. The Zimbabwean general elections include presidential, parliamentary, senatorial, and local authorities. All these elections are going to be conducted on a day that is to be agreed upon by the president of the Republic of Zimbabwe (Kubatana, 2022).

As these two countries are about to enter into the same general elections period that previously caused many cases of political conflicts resulting in the deaths and injuries of innocent souls and also the destruction of properties. This paper analyses the conflicts that emanated from political differences through social media. Theories and conflict models are to be used to identify indicators and factors to these political conflicts in these two countries then lastly suggestion of possible issues to de-escalate these political conflicts in future elections.

II. Methodology

A qualitative research methodology is to be used. The researcher focused on secondary research design and this involves the summary, collation, and synthesis of existing research (Creswel, 2013). The information was collected from previous scientific studies, newspapers, and textbooks, on issues concerning the current topic. The obtained information was deeply analysed with conflict resolution theories and models to find out the contributions of social media to political conflict in Indonesia and Zimbabwe. Secondary research is distinguished from primary research in that primary research involves the use of data from the source, whereas secondary research uses primary research sources as a source of data for analysis (Moen & Middelthun, 2015).

III. Discussion

a) Social conflict theory

Social media platforms are being used for the communication and mobilization of political activists. Most social conflicts nowadays start on the social media platform groups then by the time they appear physical the conflict would have escalated to another level (Zeitoff, 2017). Haralambos & Holborn, (2007) stated that social conflict theory according to Marx said that society mostly interacts based on conflict rather than consensus. Politics, according to this Marxist theory comprises two groups, the rich and the poor (Haralambos & Holborn, 2007). Mostly Politicians create societal divisions, between us and them. Usually, opposition political parties see the ruling party as the rich and need to be removed from power by all means.

According to The Straits Times newspaper, in Jakarta, an ambulance which was labelled Gerindra was impounded by police following a serious political conflict during the 2019 election disputes the Tasik malaya ambulance had many envelopes of money and stones intended to be distributed to protesters (Chan, 2019). These unethical mobilizations cannot be archived during official rally meetings but are done through social media platforms (Kumar, et al, 2018). In both Zimbabwe and Indonesia, according to their respective laws police organizations should provide coverage of all political rallies, this makes it difficult for any other illegal mobilization like public violence incitement or illegal mass demonstration. They prefer to utilize social media platforms. The poor opposition protestors were given envelopes with money so that they become motivated to engage in serious conflict with the ruling party members.

Conflict theorists view conflict as an engine of exchange because war produces contradictions that are now and again resolved, developing new conflicts and contradictions in an ongoing dialectic. In the classic example of historic materialism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued that all human records are the result of combat between classes, which developed over time by adjustments in society's skill of assembly of its material needs, i.e. modifications in society's mode of production (Haralambos & Holborn, 2007).

b) Conflict escalation/de-escalation model

There are stages of the conflict that should be known to prevent or de-escalate conflict and these stages are applicable in both Indonesia and Zimbabwe. These stages can be analyzed using the conflict escalation/de-escalation model which was propounded by Eric Brahm in 2003. The model suggests and scrutinizes the levels of conflict. Latent conflict is the first stage of the conflict. At this stage, there is potential for conflict because in general people have different values, needs, and interests. In this scenario, both Indonesia and Zimbabwe are democratic nations and allow people to select the president of choice and also to join a political party of choice. Differing in need and interest is the grassroots of conflict. At this stage, the conflict is still hidden until there is a triggering event (Zeitzoff, 2017). For example, the possible battle that exists as humans waiting for the announcement of election results.

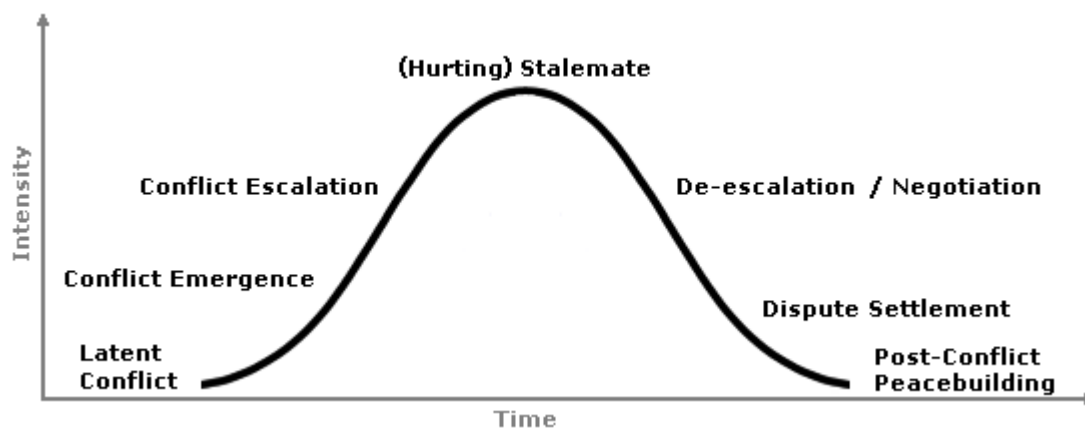


Figure: 1. Stages of Conflict

Source: Brahm, (2005)

The second stage is the conflict emergence. This stage is the beginning of a conflict that can be recognized by the other party. Conflict starts to resurface, i.e. provocative messages, hoaxes, and mobilization start circulating. This stage also known as the confrontational that erupts all issues that have been boiling in the latent stage. Although the conflict at this stage is still low-level (Brahm, 2005).

The third stage is conflict escalation. Escalation describes a rise in a conflict's intensity and the severity of the methods used to resolve it. At this stage, the actors have managed to mobilize their members using tools like social media platforms. When a conflict enters the escalation stage, identities, concerns, motives, and tactics frequently change in ways that worsen the conflict and make it more damaging (Kriesberg, 2007). The conflict itself creates new grievances among members of each side as the rivals harm one another, destruction of property, and even kill each other. In addition, long-forgotten injustices and grievances are brought to light, and the current adversary is held accountable. Many agents, including political, academic, and religious figures, play important parts in stirring up complaints and pointing out injustices that have occurred and those accountable.

A conflict can institutionalize and perpetuate itself through a variety of mechanisms once it begins to get out of hand. As a conflict drags on, people on one side start to perceive opponents as foes who have undesirable traits like being rude and unreliable. Such indoctrination increases a conflict's intractability. Mutual anxiety increases when people on both sides become concerned about their vulnerability if they yield. One side might see another request for justice as a request for retaliation (Lacomba, et al 2014).

The de-escalation stage is putting modalities in place to control human behavior to prevent the escalation of conflicts. As discussed in the introduction both, Indonesia and Zimbabwe had to switch off the internet to de-escalate the political violence in their previous elections police officers were heavily deployed. Andrew Bell stated that de-escalation tactics include putting security at the scenes with conflict and attempting

to communicate with parties involved in the conflict. De-escalation can occur once or as part of a larger pattern leading to agreement or resolution. Escalation could also lead to a deadlock in which neither side can prevail. The parties are in what Zartman refers to as a "hurting stalemate" when the costs of prolonging the conflict outweigh the costs of maintaining the confrontation, which is frequently an ideal time for dialogue and a potential resolution. Last but not least, peace-building initiatives aim to mend broken bridges with the long-term objective of bringing back former enemies if and when an agreement is reached (Zartman, 1989).

IV. Results and Recommendations

The graphs in fig.2 and fig.3 are showing the usage of social mediums, in Indonesia and Zimbabwe (GlobalStat, 2022). The results from the Stat Counter Global stats for Zimbabwe show that amongst the social media used Facebook was one of the major platforms between June 2018 and January 2019. Many protesters used the Facebook platform to communicate about the delayed election results and violence erupted. The political violence lasted for about 2 weeks and then the security forces reacted mercilessly tore store order in the country. Elections in Zimbabwe were conducted in August 2018 during that period there was high use of the Facebook platform. According to Stat Counter graph below indicate sa sudden drop in the use of Facebook from September 2018 to December 2018(GlobalStat, 2022).

There were politically motivated protests which erupted in Zimbabwe on 14 January 2019 in response to the government of Emmerson Mnangagwa's decision to raise petrol prices by 130 percent. Thousands of Zimbabweans demonstrated against the price hike, as well as rising poverty, a deteriorating economy, and falling living conditions. Hundreds of people were arrested and many people died as a result of the government's concerted crackdown. After three days of protests, businesses began to reopen on January 17th, as the protests concluded (Dzirutwe, 2019). During this period there is an increase in the use of the Facebook platform again.

The government of Zimbabwe managed social media use in both politically motivated conflicts by shutting down the internet completely. The government faced a lot of criticism from the international community siting that they were infringing the human rights of its people by denying them freedom of expression via social media (BBC, 2019).

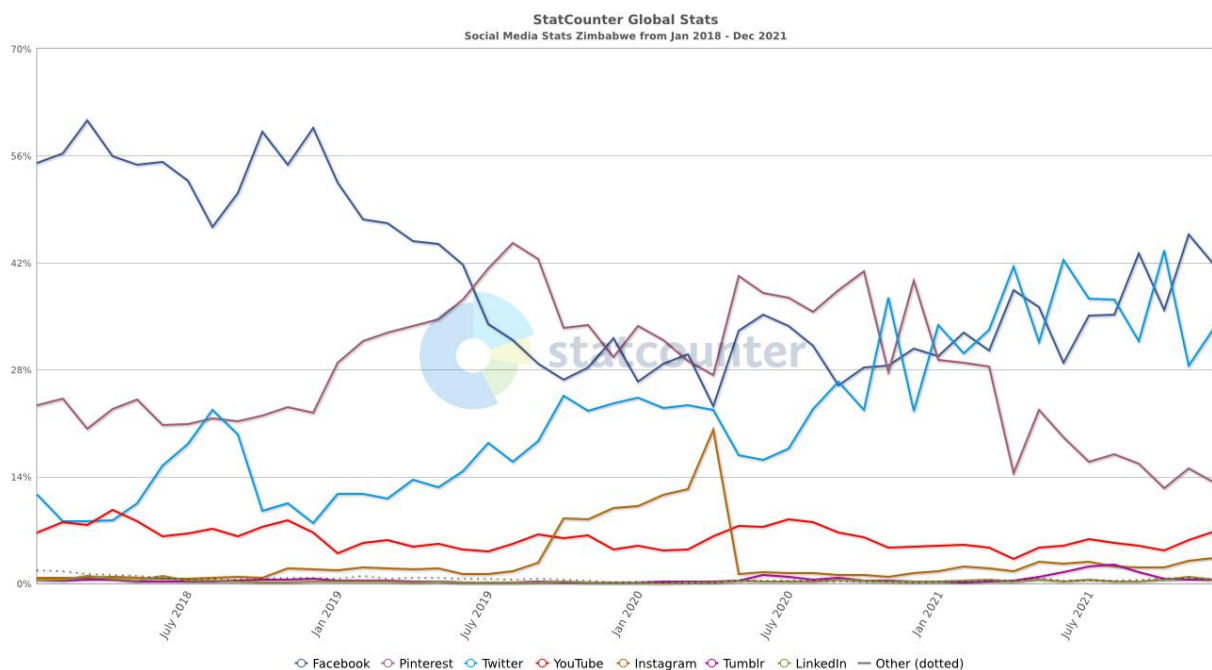


Figure 2. Social Media Stats, Zimbabwe from Jan 2018-Dec 2021

Source: StatCounter Global Stats (2022).

Indonesia held its previous elections on the 17th of April 2019 there was again an increase in the use Facebook platform as indicated by the graph below. In Indonesia, there was politically motivated violence during post-elections but the magnitude was lower compared to that of Zimbabwe. Indonesia is more developed than Zimbabwe so now it uses more social media platforms other than Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp.

The cultural differences between the two countries and the issue of religion have an impact on political violence in a country. Again Indonesia has got a clear Pancasila philosophy that is now helping to unite its people, this may be the reason why their previous elections were not as violent as those held in Zimbabwe. In preparation for the upcoming election, Indonesia should be done with its laws that will control the internet and social media platforms.

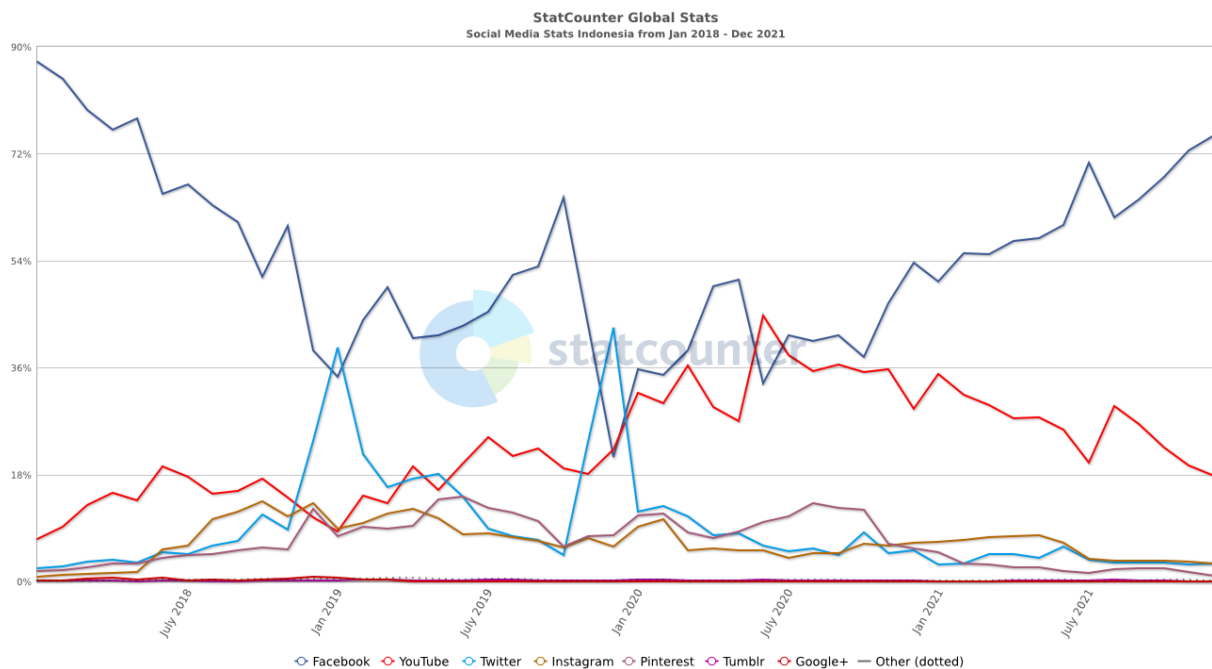


Figure: 3. Social Media Stats, Indonesia from Jan 2018-Dec 2021
Source: StatCounter Global Stats (2022).

As indicated by Zeitzoff, (2017) that many social conflicts nowadays start from social media platforms at a latent phase and then escalate. Measures should be put in place by the two governments to put order to the social media platforms to reduce these politically motivated crimes before the coming elections. If the governments do not take action in controlling the use of social media then it's likely that the cases of political violence will increase as the number using these platforms is increasing on daily bases.

Education and training by the election bodies and other volunteer bodies to the political parties and the public in general. People commit crimes through ignorance so education and training become vital. Members of the public should be trained to be responsible for what to forward on social media. Religious leaders and village heads should be roped in to assist in educating local people on how bad it is to mobilize for violence during the election period. According to Eric Brahm, the conflict stages model at latent stage conflict can be within the community for a long time before escalation starts during the election period (Brahm, 2005). Various election organizers and the governments of the two countries should try and engage in conflict resolution before the election period. They have to identify through investigations the parties who cause political conflicts during the election period and then deal with them well outside the election time.

V. Conclusion

In the previous election both in Zimbabwe and Indonesia, there was post-election violence which was motivated by the use of social media platforms. Documentary analysis indicated that Zimbabwe had the largest use of social media during post-election conflicts. Social media and internet use laws should be finalized before the next watershed election. The social conflict theory indicates that politicians are the rich ones in society and the poor are mere card-carrying members who are used to achieve the goals of the politicians.

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