

# Gazing Homeland Politics: A Case Study of The Political Engagement of The Indonesian Diaspora Group Manila

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## ABSTRACT:

As per the data provided by KPU, the 2019 Election witnessed the participation of 2,058,191 voters amongst the Indonesian Diaspora. This number marks an increase of 19,480 voters from the previous Presidential Election held in 2014, wherein 2,038,711 registered voters across 130 Indonesian representatives abroad had cast their votes. The surge in Indonesian Diaspora voters indicates their significant role in election contests. The involvement of the Indonesian Diaspora in homeland politics is significantly impacted by their ability to stay informed about current events and maintain solid familial ties with their home country. Online platforms and social media play an essential role in keeping the Diaspora apprised of political developments and expanding their understanding of the issues. This article explores the political engagement of Indonesian diaspora communities residing in Metro Manila, Philippines, in the lead-up to the 2019 elections. The research centers on a church member group in ICF Makati, which is conventionally regarded as a non-political organization. The study employs a blend of observations and interviews to investigate how the Indonesian diaspora community participates in political affairs. Specifically, the research scrutinizes how they deliberate on topics concerning their homeland's politics and exchange their perspectives on current political events. Findings indicate that the Indonesian Diaspora is becoming more discerning of the political landscape in their homeland. This is primarily due to the widespread political discourse taking place online. Social media platforms have made it effortless for people to remain actively informed about political developments in their home country. Additionally, the Indonesian Diaspora has demonstrated a heightened interest in homeland politics, particularly in the lead-up to elections, to express their imagined nationalism

**Keywords:** *Diaspora group, Presidential Election 2019, Political Engagement, Social Media usage*

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout 2019, Indonesians experienced a year marked by political tension due to the implementation of Elections Law Number 7 of 2017, and the campaign period started from September 23, 2018, to April 13, 2019 (Tirto. id, 2018). In anticipation of the presidential election,

candidates and their respective teams utilized a variety of mass media channels to convey their profiles and campaign promises. Political discussions were frequently heard on media talk shows and news segments, emphasizing issues pertinent to the 2019 election. Additionally, social media served as a platform for supporters of each campaign team to engage in discourse. The presidential election 2019 has become a subject of great public interest in Indonesia. The direct presidential election 2004 marked a significant milestone in the country's democratization process following the reform era. However, this progress has also resulted in the polarization of supporters who express their opinions through social media activism. Despite this, there seems to be a lack of political discourse and campaign activities within the Indonesian diaspora community, which is regrettable.

The electoral process is centered on acquiring the maximum votes from eligible citizens. The General Elections Commission (KPU) has recorded 2,025,344 registered Indonesian diaspora voters for the 2019 Election (Tirto. id, 2018). However, despite being a crucial voter group, diaspora communities often lack sufficient information about Indonesia's electoral system. It is noteworthy that foreign media outlets do not dedicate adequate attention to these political events, while local media in the host country tend to portray them as international news. Consequently, the level of media engagement among the diaspora community is crucial to their political participation in the election.

This study examines the involvement of the Indonesian Diaspora, a group of Indonesian citizens residing abroad, in homeland politics despite their physical separation from their country of origin. Therefore, the research delves into case studies of church members' experiences, which offer valuable insights into the magnitude of diaspora involvement in the political affairs of their respective home countries.

### **Diaspora and the homeland politics**

Sorensen (2014) pointed out that "diaspora" generally refers to immigrants, guest workers, alien residents, political refugees, and ethnic minorities in a homeland other than their original countries. Diaspora has a variety of meanings, depending on the perspective of the study.

Broadly, Diaspora deals with three keywords: forced departures/transfers, settlements in several locations, and their ancestral lands.

On the other hand, the Diaspora refers to communities formed due to displacements, such as refugees in Canada, displacement of Armenians, Palestinian refugees, and African refugees (Clifford 1994; Safran 1991; Li, 2010). In the case of Indonesia, the displacement of Chinese people, displacement of Indonesians (Moluccas) in the Netherlands in 1952 for refusing to join the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, and Javanese who migrated as laborers (coolies) by the Dutch colonial government to Suriname in the period 1890-1916 (Mardiani, 2014). In other words, historically, the formation of diasporas in Indonesia began with forced migration, more due to colonial projects.

Further developments, namely, when various nations carry out voluntary migration globally, diaspora typologies are also increasingly widespread. Diaspora no longer only refers to communities that decided to leave/move from their home countries and their descendants but also includes those who live in the destination country for migration (voluntary) based on various reasons: employment, education, affiliation (family), cultural, political, and others. Voluntary international migration includes permanent and temporary transfers (for example, workers who are contract-bound for a certain period, diplomats and their family members, and students).

According to the state, the diaspora distribution data is available from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in collaboration with Agence Francaise de Development (AFD). However, this data source is limited to the Diaspora in the organization's member countries (OECD, 2012). Unfortunately, the Indonesian Diaspora was unavailable in the OECD data sources or the American Society Survey 2011. It illustrates that the number of Indonesian Diaspora in OECD countries and the United States is only a few and not included in the countries related to published diaspora data. Finding the Indonesian Diaspora number and distribution is available in the Indonesia Diaspora Network-IDN office or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This condition shows that the lack of Diaspora data is an essential weakness for analyzing the Diaspora and the various consequences, both in the destination country and the ancestors' origin.

The transnational practice within migration implies that diasporas can act as actual or potential bridges between the recipient country and the country of origin (Sorensen, 2014). In destination countries, some immigrants from networks with fellow immigrants and countries of origin realize a prosperous economic, social, cultural, and political life and live a transnational life. This immigrant community is the root of the diaspora community. Many diaspora contributions are channeled through intermediaries toward projects and initiatives in their home country. They are intended to provide opportunities for individual donors to channel donations to their communities of origin. Intermediaries include hometown and community-based associations, Internet-based platforms, and faith-based institutions (Sorensen, 2014). Diaspora's contributions to their country of origin, mostly found through diaspora institutions, include remittances, business investment, advocacy, skills transfer, and political influence. For Indonesia, diaspora contributions are still limited to remittance, not to the contribution of capital and financial, technical, and professional resources (themarketer.com, 2013).

Diaspora connectivity with the country of origin is usually more of sociocultural activities centered on embassy offices in destination countries, including the election. In the presidential election in Indonesia, Indonesian society abroad is one of the voter groups' targets. Based on the 2014 elections, Indonesian citizens' participation abroad was only 33 percent of 2,038,711 voters (Tempo.co, 2018). The low participation of voters abroad is due to Indonesians often moving so that voters' data synchronization is constrained. Voters abroad have also not become separate electoral districts in holding elections.

The National Election Commission has established representative offices in 130 countries to facilitate the participation of overseas voters in the upcoming 2019 presidential election. The overseas voting period is scheduled from April 8 to April 14, 2019, allowing eligible voters to cast their ballots before the Indonesian polls on April 17, 2019. To exercise their right to vote, overseas voters have three options: visit the polling station at the embassy or consulate general of Indonesia, use the 'dropbox' method with election officers coming to them, or send their ballots by post. By taking advantage of these options, overseas voters can rest assured that their votes will be counted and their voices will be heard in the presidential election (Matamatapolitik.Com,

2018). Expanding voting rights for citizens residing abroad is a progressive move towards inclusivity and representation. However, it is essential to consider the potential risks associated with such a measure, such as the possibility of monitoring or control. For instance, expatriate citizens may be encouraged to register with their embassy to participate in the voting process in countries with authoritarian regimes. In this scenario, the primary concern is how the Diaspora group can maintain their connection with their homeland's political landscape. It is crucial to carefully weigh the benefits and drawbacks of expanding voting rights for citizens residing abroad while ensuring that the process remains fair, transparent, and free from external influence.

In our rapidly globalizing world, digital media has become essential for migrant communities to maintain connections across various platforms. As Dayan (1999) has noted, media, including personal communication methods such as telephone calls, letters, and family videos, are critical for the cohesion of diasporas, not just traditional mass media. Additionally, Diminescu (2008) has introduced the concept of a "connected migrant," emphasizing how the Internet and mobile phones have revolutionized how migrants interact and remain in contact with their families and communities.

As technological advancements progress, individuals increasingly utilize various digital tools to remain connected with their loved ones and interests, such as Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP), email, and music downloads from their respective home countries. The Internet and social media have significantly transformed the political landscape, facilitating new transnational connections and politics through high global connectivity and instantaneous communication. It has enabled members of diaspora communities to remain abreast of their homeland's political developments in real-time, with information disseminated rapidly and transcending geographical boundaries. As a result, cyberspace has emerged as a new public sphere, cultivating a broader political consciousness and identity shifts that empower individuals to engage and participate more actively in homeland politics. Consistent use of these technological tools has brought about a greater sense of connection and involvement within communities across the globe.

### Political engagement and social media usage

During the political transition to democracy in Indonesia, the Internet played a notably significant role in the country's political landscape (Sen & Hill, 2007). In 1999, Indonesia conducted its first "online election," during which politicians used the Internet to campaign and organize, while the public used it to review the election results (Hill, 2011). Although the Internet did not significantly impact political discourse or voter turnout at the time, it did ensure the transparency and credibility of the election. It was especially crucial during the Suharto regime, where the government controlled the communication infrastructure, including the radio network transmitting voting tally information. Consequently, the government could easily predict the election's outcome and determine the percentage of votes required to defeat the opposition (Hill, 2011).

In Indonesia today, the Internet plays a much more significant role in politics than it did during the Suharto era. As reported by the Association of Indonesian Internet Providers in November 2016 (APJII, 2016), 119.6 million Internet users in Indonesia rely on monthly data subscriptions, with 69.9% accessing the Internet through mobile devices. Indonesia's internet users have increased, reaching 132.7 million, or over 51% of the population. Among these users, 106 million are active on social media, which accounts for 40% of the population. In contrast, We Are Social (2017) reported that 92 million people used mobile connections in 2017, comprising 35% of the population. This surge in social media usage is consistent with the global trend of digital expansion, and Indonesians are enthusiastic social media users.

Technological advancements have played a pivotal role in encouraging citizens to engage more actively in politics. As per Lim's (2013) research, social media movements in Indonesia have the potential to effect change, given certain conditions. However, Lim also observes that social media activism in Indonesia is just a tiny part of a larger media framework. While social media users can raise awareness about specific concerns, they may lack the ability to manage or sway the media's priorities. Furthermore, Nisbet (2010) notes that social media has enabled ordinary people to become involved in generating, commenting on, arranging, and preserving digital news material. Han (2014) posits that the advent of new media platforms has widened the scope of

political discourse by allowing media organizations to communicate with their audiences. As a result, this development has spurred greater audience participation. Han further notes that the Internet's growing ubiquity has enabled individuals to directly voice their concerns regarding political issues to policymakers and the government.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This qualitative research approach is oriented towards individual experiences (phenomenological) awareness. Phenomenological research explores personal experiences associated with a particular concept or phenomenon. This approach emphasizes intentionality and seeks to comprehend the importance of conscious processes and their relationship with the objects under scrutiny. This study primarily focuses on the Indonesian Diaspora's experiences, who lived outside the home country and related to homeland politics during the presidential election. The political engagement of the diaspora group has been noted to be relatively low. This research study utilizes the methodology of participant observation and in-depth interviews within the church community in Makati. The church is an institution that focuses exclusively on religious activities, including the observance of God and the implementation of sacred ceremonies and maintains a non-political stance. However, upon initial conversations with church members, it was observed that politics is a topic of interest and frequently discussed among the congregants.

ICF Makati, a church catering to Indonesian citizens residing in Metro Manila, boasts a diverse membership comprising individuals from various racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Most members are either students or professional workers. The church was established in 2002 by Pastor Samuel Oei to provide Sunday services in Bahasa to the Indonesian community. Since 2008, the church has been under the leadership of Pastor Redy Stevanus, who has effectively expanded its membership and initiated various service activities. This community was created based on religious similarities and provides a sanctuary for the Indonesian Diaspora. As Johnson (2007) notes, congregating for worship can cultivate a stronger sense of national identity and belonging to the worldwide community of believers.

This study examines the perspectives of four informants who are both registered church members and presidential election voters. It is essential to highlight that these individuals share

a mutual understanding of the importance of voting in the election. Moreover, they share knowledge as a minority group based on their political experiences. Below, we present short profiles of each informant for context:

**Table 1. The Profile of Participants**

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Status/Position</b>
<b>A</b>	Female	34	Balinese	Single/ Graduate Student
<b>B</b>	Male	24	Chinese	Single/ Worker
<b>C</b>	Male	40	Manadonese	Married/Worker
<b>D</b>	Female	26	Javanese	Single/ Graduate Student

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Relating to homeland politics: social media uses**

Media and communication technologies are rapidly expanding, with various platforms providing diverse content for sharing and consumption (Georgiou, 2013). Social media has emerged as a potent tool to disseminate political information, enabling rapid and interactive spread. Therefore, it is not unexpected that political actors have employed social media as a vital component of their campaign strategies for the 2019 presidential election. Political parties in Indonesia utilize social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and official websites, to engage with their audience. In addition, individual politicians have their own social media accounts and fan pages to promote their campaigns and themselves. As Plaza and Below (2014) have noted, the advent of social media, including Facebook, YouTube, and Skype, has facilitated transnational connections among the Diaspora and events in their homeland. In the case of the Indonesian Diaspora, social media amplifies the passive consumption of political news and involvement in politics-related activities.

Individuals who provide information regarding homeland politics in this research tend to rely on social media and national news sites as their primary sources of information. Fortunately, these individuals can access credible and relevant media outlets catering to their informational

needs. Despite the prevalence of false news and misleading material, these individuals can distinguish and filter out untrustworthy news sources.

Informant C revealed that he regularly peruses online news sites to stay abreast of political news and the 2019 election. Being employed by a social media company, he naturally uses social media as his primary source of information, which he can access at any time. In a similar vein, informant A shared that she regularly spends 4-5 hours keeping tabs on political news and actively engaging on social media, as she believes it is crucial to stay informed about the current political climate in Indonesia. Both informants consider staying current with the latest information, particularly regarding politics and current affairs, essential to their information needs.

Social media has become a primary source for accessing Indonesian political news. The accessibility of social media on mobile phones has particularly encouraged the Indonesian Diaspora to engage in political discourse online. This convenience is a significant contributing factor to why social media is a preferred medium for the Diaspora, as it offers a more streamlined way to consume political content compared to other avenues.

Informants B and D stay informed about national news by accessing trusted news sites such as Detik.com and Kompas.com, as well as social media. Informant B is particularly interested in Indonesia's political progress and regularly participates in political discussions with fellow Indonesians. On the other hand, Informant D accesses political information to ensure that she stays properly informed and is not left behind. She stated that she regularly Googles to keep up with the latest news.

The informant's keen interest in staying abreast of the latest homeland politics news has led them to seek out online media. Being registered voters, they actively seek to learn about the trending topics surrounding the election, including public debates. As Facebook is a prevalent social media platform in the Philippines, the Diaspora group tends to utilize it more for engagement.

Mobile phones have become an essential tool for members of the Indonesian Diaspora residing in the Philippines to access various media content. In the current era of smartphones, displaced Indonesians rely heavily on their mobile phones to carry out daily activities. Unlike in

the past, where mobile phones were primarily used for voice calls and texting, individuals of the Indonesian Diaspora can now fully recreate their transnational connections with their homeland while on the go.

Furthermore, sharing content amongst peers is a prevalent practice amongst the Indonesian Diaspora. It is common for individuals to showcase their mobile phone screens to fellow Indonesians and share diverse content while utilizing their phones. With a sense of familiarity amongst one another, there is no hesitation in sharing content. This way, the Indonesian Diaspora can stay connected with their family and friends while staying informed about current events in Indonesia, regardless of any time or geographical constraints.

### **Political conversation as the representation of self-expression**

The Livestreaming feature on television has facilitated the Indonesian Diaspora's engagement in their home country's current political affairs. This media utilization has resulted in greater accessibility to Indonesian news channels, with political updates being disseminated by the native media. When discussing politics related to Indonesia on TV, the Indonesian Diaspora often watches the news together instead of separately. These discussions do not always have to be severe and can even involve gossip about the political situation in their home country.

While viewing homeland television programs, the diasporic audience shifts from passive viewers to active discussants. They participate by commenting, predicting, speculating, and even condemning the political content shown on television. It makes accessing political news from Indonesia through homeland media a way for the Indonesian Diaspora to participate in international politics actively. The audience's discussion of homeland political issues provided by the media is a form of active involvement rather than just consuming information.

The wealth of information regarding domestic politics cannot be denied. The informants who seek homeland politics knowledge often use it as a foundation for political discussions, whether in private circles or public gatherings. Regarding the debate on current political issues, there are two main channels: online and offline. These avenues offer different benefits and drawbacks that must be considered when engaging in political discourse.

Offline space can refer to informal get-togethers among church members, like the post-Sunday service meal and conversation. Weekly fellowships also offer an opportunity for such gatherings, which may include political discussions. Our interviews showed that people are keenly interested in engaging in political conversations, especially with the upcoming presidential election.

During conversations, informants often discuss the performance of the current government, the profiles of political candidates, and controversies surrounding the candidates' supporters. For example, the Prabowo campaign controversy utilized hate speeches towards a particular ethnic group to practice identity politics. These discussions reveal a common belief that mass polarization in Indonesia is increasing due to politicians and supporters practicing identity politics. Unfortunately, supporters' immaturity in responding to debates often leads to religious and racial issues. According to Informant C, political debates in Indonesia still revolve around ethnicity and religion and use these fundamental principles. For instance, Jokowi has a support group based on his faith. However, the critical thinking of supporters in responding to political debates is often shallow.

Informants A and C have reported that they regularly participate in political discussions within the comments section of social media. Informant A shared an encounter where she found a comment discrediting the government without supporting evidence. Despite her attempts to correct the misinformation, the conversation only escalated. She also observed that language use among netizens can be unpredictable, with some responding harshly even when she used polite language. This highlights the challenges of engaging in political conversations on social media, which are often polarized and embedded in everyday life, making it difficult to avoid. When communicating online, people often express intense emotions, personal sentiments, and significant aspects of their identity (Dean, 2009). For the Indonesian Diaspora, social media has facilitated access to political content from their homeland, fostering a sense of community with fellow citizens irrespective of their physical whereabouts. These displaced nationals could stay connected with contemporary political conditions in Indonesia by contributing to political content on Facebook.

Many informants conveyed their political views via social media status updates and comments. The advent of networked communication has allowed for greater participation and amplification of voices. The informants are highly aware of current events and news and are regularly exposed to a wealth of information. When discussing politics, they do so as empowered citizens utilizing their distinct language and style. However, the informant's communicative action in internet activity, including social media, contributes to the circulation of effect and opinion and thus involves a profound passivity, interconnected, linked, but passive nonetheless (Dean, 2009). This trend is followed by the Indonesian Diaspora, a minority audience group, mainly due to their more robust sense of community than the general audience.

Many Indonesian Diaspora share political news to connect with their compatriots at home and abroad. Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* elucidates how print media fostered a sense of community among readers. This communal experience of consuming media content can foster a shared identity and foster nationalism.

This research found that individuals access Indonesian political content through various media platforms for many reasons. Some utilize it to remain connected with current events and individuals within their homeland, express and uphold their national identity, or evoke nostalgia for their country of origin. Others engage with such content due to their political beliefs and principles. The rationales for accessing Indonesian political content through media are also intertwined with individuals' preexisting attitudes toward politics in their homeland. It is imperative for individuals to regularly and adequately consume media content to ensure they are well-informed and up-to-date. Individuals who have shown a keen interest in Indonesian politics have demonstrated a propensity to stay updated on the political developments in their country of origin, even after living in the Philippines for a considerable period. In essence, the Internet has become a virtual platform that provides both a sense of connection and the ability to act. These individuals have sustained a sense of proximity to the events in their homeland due to regularly keeping up with the news and media from their native country.

As per the testimonies of informants B and C, their physical displacement did not hinder them from keeping themselves abreast of the latest news regarding national politics in their home country. On the other hand, informants A and D, who were abroad for their postgraduate studies, only monitored political developments to remain informed about their compatriots. It is discernible from the gathered information that, despite being physically distant, all informants could access news from their homeland regularly. However, their level of interest and involvement varied depending on their circumstances.

## CONCLUSION

The Indonesian Diaspora has exhibited exceptional media conduct by utilizing contemporary media platforms such as social media and instant messaging, which are conveniently accessible via smartphones. As a result, they have been able to participate in the politics of their homeland actively. Their engagement with Indonesian politics primarily centers around regularly consuming political news through these media channels. Specifically, homeland media is crucial in fostering the Indonesian Diaspora's involvement in the Indonesian political landscape.

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