



Twitter Users Oppose Repatriation of Former Islamic State Members from Indonesia

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Abstract. This study analyzed the public discourse on Twitter surrounding the repatriation of over a thousand Indonesian individuals who were previously associated with Islamic State and are now living in camps in Syria. Through sentiment analysis, network analysis, and text-mining, this research measured the opinions, interactions, and main topics of discussion on Twitter. The analysis revealed that most actors on Twitter have negative opinions about repatriating individuals associated with Islamic State due to security concerns about radicalization and terrorism. Network analysis showed that both government and non-governmental accounts were influential in the debate, and text-mining identified the most common topics of discussion, which included women, children, citizenship, and repatriation. The study’s results suggest that there is significant public attention and concern surrounding the repatriation of these individuals, and policymakers must consider the security implications and humanitarian concerns involved in making such a decision.

Keywords: Repatriation · Islamic State · Twitter · Sentiment analysis · Security concerns

1 Introduction

There are around 2,127 Indonesian nationals indicated as Foreign Terrorist Fighter in Iraq and Syria. In the aftermath of IS defeat in March 2019, upwards of 1000 Indonesian-originated refugee are being detained in prisons and camps such as Al Hol, Ainisa, and Al-Roj. The large number of prisoners and camp-dwellers creates a logistical problems for local authorities [1]. The lack of proper care and facilities resulted in sub-standard living conditions, especially for children [2]. These conditions have prompted the local authority to called up other nations to repatriate their nationals currently living in the camp.

Although in Indonesia the term foreign-terrorist-fighter is often used indiscriminately to everyone who was involved in IS, this article refrains from doing so due to the fact that not everyone currently living in the camps have experienced combat training and actual combat. As such, the term former IS residents is used to denote people who previously lived in IS-occupied regions.

This issue is a controversial one in Indonesia, among elites as well as in social media. Those who are against repatriation, often use security as the main argument. Ex-combatant possesses the ability to fight a war. In a standardized army, this is a good skill to have; among radicalized individuals, this poses threat for both the state and its citizens. Those who are for repatriation, often cited humanitarian reasons. A significant number of camp-dwellers are women and children, most have not experienced combat nor obtained training. Some were in conflict-area due to coercion by their husbands and fathers. In such a case, to call these people foreign terrorist “fighter” would be too far-fetched.

Currently, Indonesian government have decided not to repatriate former IS residents originated from Indonesia, except for those under ten-years old. However, this will also be judged on a case-by-case basis. The pandemic, however, prevented the measure from being operational. Currently, the technicalities of such action are still far from being concluded. In addition to the pandemic, the conflicting discourses among the people also contributes to the indecision. Although the government has responded to the overwhelming resistance to repatriation by refusing to do so, there is an indication they also try to take the humanitarian considerable into account.

One platform in which the conflicting discourse take place is on Twitter. Twitter is chosen because in recent years, it has become a competing arena of ideas. At 24.34 million account, 77% of which is active, Indonesia is among the top-five countries with most Twitter users. As such, data from Twitter is an important barometer of public perception. Data from twitter are collected using API and then processed using sentiment analysis to identify the positive and negative sentiments propagated on twitter regarding the issue. Furthermore, topics will be extracted using Latent Dirichlott analysis for both the tweets with positive and negative sentiments.

2 Methods

This research uses both qualitative and quantitative method using data collected from Twitter using R software utilising academic twitterR package [3]. The data is analyzed quantitatively, but final interpretation is done qualitatively. Tweets are collected from 1 February 2019 up to 10 August 2022 and limited to tweets using Bahasa Indonesia. Initially, the plan was to collect as many tweets as possible, but only 219,245 tweets actually matched the search query. The Tweets are first cleaned and pre-processed. The cleaning process involves removing urls, mentions, and hashtags. Then, stopwords are removed as well; stopwords are words that frequently occur in an article but has no real meaning such as prepositions, and modal verb [4]. The removal of stopwords is an important step to make sure that subsequent analysis is as accurate as possible.

The problems with the data is the fact that many collected tweets are not actually relevant to the issue. Since these Tweets can actually hampers the accuracy of the analysis, they need to be removed. After several considerations, removal was conducted using clustering methods. Basically, the tweets are clustered based on user interactions. Users that interact often are grouped together. The clustering utilised Louvain Clustering method. This method was developed by a team of data scientist from the Université catholique de Louvain [5]. This method uses frequency of interaction as the basis for



Fig. 1. Wordcloud of Positive Tweets

separation; put simply, accounts that interact often is put into the same group. While those that interact sparingly is divided into separate groups. This method was chosen due to its ability to efficiently identify communities in a large number of data. Of all identified communities, only those with more than one thousand members are examined. Communities with fewer members are unlikely to have a measurable impact on the whole network. The communities were then examined qualitatively to find which contain relevant tweets and which do not. Only tweets from relevant communities are processed into the next phase of analysis.

The tweets are then analyzed using lexicon-based sentiment analysis [6]. Lexicon-based sentiment analysis analyze the sentiment of a tweet based on the words used. Put simply, each word has a pre-assigned positive and negative score and the sentiment score of a tweet is the average score of all the words within the tweets. The lexicon used in this analysis is The tweets are then separated into two groups. One group consists of tweets whose positive score outweighs the negative one, and the other group consists of tweets with higher negative score. The tweets in each group is then analysed to find the narratives.

3 Results and Discussion

The word mapping (word cloud) above results from data processing generated from positive sentiment towards the issue of repatriating former IS citizens in Indonesia. From Fig. 1, it can be seen that the most positive sentiments that arise are related to the words Indonesia, Government, Indonesian Citizen, Ex, Child, President, Repatriation, repatriation, and others. But when examined more deeply, the results of the positive sentiment data collected contain more negative discourses. In a positive context, the discourses that appeared in several tweets focused on repatriation efforts made by the government

related to the repatriation of former IS citizens. One of the tweets that emerged from the positive sentiment was that cooperation related to human rights issues at the regional level must continue to be strengthened. Indonesia and ASEAN countries must also try to help prepare for safe and dignified repatriation. In addition, in particular, repatriation efforts related to the repatriation of former IS citizens must be based on mature readiness. The government is drafting two decisions regarding foreign terrorist fighters (FTF). Two alternatives are being made, namely, the decision to repatriate or not to repatriate the FTFs. Meanwhile, in his tweet, Mahfud MD stated that the government had not yet confirmed the return of 660 Indonesian citizens who were former IS members. This is also in line with tweets that focus on seeing how BNPT responds to this issue. BNPT is still discussing the best policy in overcoming the problem of repatriating former IS citizens in the interparliamentary. According to the Deputy for International Cooperation of the BNPT, his party already has the tools to accept the return of former IS combatants in Syria through laws and deradicalization programs. However, until now, there has been no decision from the BNPT regarding the repatriation of former IS citizens. This is what is still being debated to this day, both among the elite and the public.

In addition, positive sentiment also focuses on radicalism itself. In several tweets, he saw that the ideology of radicalism could change colour and form. Radicalism can spread everywhere, knowingly or unknowingly, and the ideology is developing in society at large. Thus, the public should be able to learn more and increase literacy about the caliphate, radicalism, and IS and how these groups recruit cadres from various countries. Some tweets see that the IS issue is not a religious issue, but a purely national defence and security issue. The tweet indicates that the government can indeed repatriate if it is ready in terms of defence and security to deal with threats that might arise from the repatriation of former IS citizens.

In negative sentiment, most tweets that have been netted still reject the repatriation of former IS citizens. Although the issue of humanity has also become one of the pro-repatriation discourses, there have been tweets stating that repatriating Indonesian citizens who are IS citizens is humanitarian, but not repatriating them is a much greater humanitarian act. This is because by not repatriating Indonesian citizens who are IS citizens, the government has saved many of its citizens from the threat of greater exposure to radicalism. Several tweets take lessons learned from the events in the Netherlands in 2018, where an IS woman was successfully repatriated with her two children. Still, the children managed to influence her grandparents to join IS, and even her grandfather became a combatant in Syria. Many of these tweets were retweeted, and most of the responses were refusing to repatriate Indonesian citizens of former IS citizens to Indonesia. The discourse that emerged was that the repatriation of IS sympathizers to Indonesia could be part of IS' big agenda to relocate its headquarters to Indonesia. Thus, there was a tweet stating that instead of isolating the 2000s former IS, which would require significant effort, attention and expense, it would be more appropriate for the government to pay attention to the other 260 million Indonesians. Because when it comes to human rights, the question arises is whose human rights are protected? What about the human rights of the other 260 million Indonesians who are not exposed to radicalism? So, the negative sentiment is still focused on seeing former IS citizens as a threat that can expose radicalism among the community when they are repatriated. The tweets that

influence of their radicalism. So, from the existing tweets, it is not agreed that children and women are considered for repatriation to Indonesia because they can also be a threat.

What was later also highlighted in several tweets was the issue of citizenship, where the burning of passports was also carried out by children and women. Many Twitter user responses support Prof Hikmahanto Juwono's statement, which states that 600 Indonesian citizens who are members of IS have lost their citizenship. Twitter users respond that Indonesian citizens who are IS sympathizers are traitors to the state, so they should lose their citizenship. Plus, most of them also burned their passports. So, it is considered disloyal to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. Responses against the repatriation of former IS citizens from Indonesia can also be seen from the support of Twitter users towards Governor Ganjar Pranowo's stance that he firmly rejects the repatriation of former IS citizens. In his upload on Twitter, Ganjar Pranowo stated that he firmly rejected the discourse of repatriating Indonesian citizens (WNI) ex-IS to Indonesia, especially those from Central Java Province. From the tweet, the majority of the responses supported Ganjar Pranowo's stance. This further confirms that the Indonesian people refuse to accept the repatriation of former IS citizens from Indonesia. From the description above, it is clear that the discourse that still dominates Twitter users is the rejection of the repatriation of former IS citizens. The majority of tweets that were netted were dominated by negative sentiment. In fact, in the grouping of positive sentiments, there are still many negative discourses that dominate. Thus, in the debate in the elite and the public sphere, the negative sentiment still dominates this issue.

4 Conclusion

In general, Twitter users are against the repatriation of former IS-residence. The main discourse is confirmed to be security. Former IS-residence are considered threats against Indonesian citizens. An important finding is the fact that the words "anak" and "perempuan" are actually widely used to reject the repatriation. Those who are against the repatriation often compared children of former IS-residence with children of Indonesian citizens and claim that more attention should be given towards children in Indonesia. They also claim that simply being children and women are not a guarantee that they were not radicals and combatant.

The discourses that suggest the need to repatriate former IS-residence are not very popular on Twitter. The fact that most tweets are against repatriation suggest that either the idea was not brought to twitter by a prominent individual in the first place, or it could very well be that notions that are considered 'soft' towards former IS-residence are simply not retweeted. A further research to examine the interactions in regards to these 'unpopular' ideas on Twitter should be in order. Such a research will not only provide a more nuanced picture about the whole discourse of former IS-residents repatriation, but also about the dynamics of 'unpopular' idea in Twitter.

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