

# Struggle against Fake News & Post-truth Politics

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Indonesia's struggle against the spread of fake news has been ongoing for several years, but 2017 has undoubtedly seen the nation's biggest challenges so far in terms of overcoming the rise of post-truth politics. The limitless power that technological development continues to offer, combined with consistently low levels of digital literacy, has allowed for the remarkable ease of false information dissemination throughout the society – and the nation has witnessed firsthand the dire consequences of it. From rising societal tensions among ethnic fault lines, to the rising number of persecutions and hate-speech against political minorities, it has not become a rare sight to witness Indonesian news headlines feature one of 2017's most popular buzzwords: “*hoax*”.

## Fake News in 2017: Ethnic Tensions & Rising Persecutions

The end of 2016 had already seen the direct effect of fake news towards the increase of religious & ethnic tensions within the society, as rhetoric of ‘anti-communism’ fueled racist hatred towards Christian citizens and Chinese descendants. Communism has long been the historic ‘boogeyman’ for the Indonesian society due to the 1965 purge of several high-ranking military officials by the Communist Party and the social unrest that followed. This eventually led to the government’s prohibition of any communist-related propaganda and organizations, resulting in today’s society remaining to view the ideology with much dread and distaste – often correlating its ‘resurgence’ with the rising presence of Chinese citizens. Anti-communism and anti-Chinese rhetoric has therefore been used as a political tool to defame certain figures in Indonesia, most notably Jakarta’s former governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or popularly known as Ahok.

The real consequences of this only became apparent in early 2017 where the Christian & ethnically Chinese governor was finally ousted from his position through a gubernatorial election, of which many saw as a challenge towards Indonesia’s multiethnic tolerance due to its heavy emphasis on identity politics. Ahok’s candidacy within the election was strongly opposed by Indonesia’s hard-line religion groups who had previously already succeeded in pressurizing authorities to put him on trial for blasphemy.<sup>[i]</sup> His ethnicity then put him at a severe disadvantage within the election where he became a continuous victim of fake news throughout the campaign period. There were false claims that the country had been invaded by 10 million Chinese workers, inciting fear among Indonesians who viewed this as a threat to the availability of job opportunities, along with speculations that the government’s new design of currency notes resembled “Chinese” money.<sup>[ii]</sup> News also spread that Ahok’s free vaccine program would result in infertility – accusing his program was a part of the ‘Chinese plan’ to hamper the growth of the Indonesian population.<sup>[iii]</sup> The low levels of digital literacy within the Indonesian society along with its historically latent distaste towards Chinese descendants allowed such fake news to spread, crippling Ahok’s chances of winning the gubernatorial election and ultimately resulting in his loss to a Muslim candidate.

The country faced another consequence of fake news later in September when false information regarding events at the Jakarta Legal Aid Institute (LBH) incited hateful protests and demonstrations. The institute was holding a festival event to discuss the 1965 purge, which remains to be a highly controversial historical topic in Indonesia, but false information regarding the event quickly spread – accusing the activists of being supporters of communism and suspecting them to be members of the now forbidden Indonesian Communist Party. The festival was then framed as a ‘communist meeting’ to revive the illegal party, and instructions to attack the institute were spread ‘systematically and extensively’ throughout conservative groups within the society.<sup>[iv]</sup> This eventually led to a clash between the police force and the anti-communist mob outside of the institute. Efforts to reassure the protesters that the event did not contain pro-communist propaganda did not succeed, and activists were eventually forced to remain inside the institute until the following morning.

Meanwhile earlier in August, the severity of Indonesia’s fake news situation was further underlined by the discovery of the so-called Saracen syndicate – a group of profit-oriented fake-news generators who exploited ethnic, racial and religious differences for economic gain. The group had been linked to the spread of damaging false information which targeted former governor Ahok and the current national government under President Jokowi. Police investigators found that the group received payments of up to 100 million IDR a month, accepting orders from political parties and candidates to produce defamatory and controversial online content.<sup>[v]</sup>

### **Indonesia’s Future Predicament of Fake News in 2018**

Although ethnic tensions within the Indonesian society have started to ease by the end of the year and the country’s largest fake-news generator has now been uncovered and convicted, it is apparent that false information will continue to highlight Indonesia’s political and social situation within the upcoming months of 2018. The run-up towards the nationwide presidential election due in April 2019 will be an interesting point of focus for academics and analysts next year, who predict that the classic ‘anti-communist’ and ‘anti-Chinese’ rhetoric will once again be in full swing as they will be used for political agendas to disown certain parties. Previous actors who had successfully harnessed the potential of fake news propaganda to not only topple Ahok from his gubernatorial position but also to incarcerate him will be likely to reuse similar tactics. Although current president Jokowi does not share Ahok’s widely disregarded ethnic or religious traits, he has however been accused as being an apologist for communists and as being too economically diplomatic with China.

Preceding the presidential election in 2019 will be the regional elections of 17 provinces & 171 cities in June 2018. Previously, the influence of ethnic, racial and religious propaganda in regional elections have tended to be less significant than what is found in their national presidential counterpart, but Ahok’s loss in the 2017 gubernatorial election may now convince political actors to emphasize more on such aspects. Thus what remains likely is that fake news will once again be utilized along the fault lines of ethnic and ideological differences to construct negative public perceptions of political figures. Due to this, Indonesians can expect an unfortunate resurgence of hate-speech and ethnic tension within the public domain, where fake news will regain the limelight and potentially hamper the nation’s democratically tolerant values.

Nonetheless, on a more positive note, the government and the society have indeed carried out efforts to eradicate the pandemic of fake news. In early 2017, the national press council had already started the implementation of a 'barcode verification' mechanism to check the legitimacy and trustworthiness of online media outlets. This was then followed by a community-supported 'anti-hoax' campaign dubbed 'Turn Back Hoax', a reference to the national police force's slogan 'Turn Back Crime'. Civilians are also growing increasingly aware of the danger that fake news pose, as both printed and digital media have continued to highlight the issue throughout the year, and the society is currently in the process of learning to become critical of the information that they receive through social media and messaging applications.

However, these hopeful developments will not be of much significance if digital media literacy remains to be unevenly spread throughout the nation, which is magnified by the poorly-reformed education systems that have deprived a major part of the Indonesian society from the critical technological skills required in the modern day. The government must also initiate strict legal implementation of the already existing laws that prohibit the spread of fake news, and if such laws prove to be ineffective, then systemic reforms and overhauls must be carried out promptly. But until such measures are taken, and as long as ethnic and religious differences continue to characterize the society's latent social tensions, then fake news will remain to be one of Indonesia's weak spots that will require increasing attention from the government in 2018.

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[i] Y. Kwok, 'Where Memes Could Kill: Indonesia's Worsening Problem of Fake News', *TIME* (online), January 6 2017, <<http://time.com/4620419/indonesia-fake-news-ahok-chinese-christian-islam/>>

[ii] Kwok, 'Where Memes Could Kill: Indonesia's Worsening Problem of Fake News'.

[iii] Kwok, 'Where Memes Could Kill: Indonesia's Worsening Problem of Fake News'.

[iv] K. Varagur, "'Fake News' Remains a Problem in Indonesia', *VOA News* (online), 21 September 2017, <<https://www.voanews.com/a/fake-news-indonesia/4038139.html>>.

[v] 'Editorial: Monetizing fake news', *The Jakarta Post* (online), 27 September 2017, < EDITORIAL: Monetizing fake news>.