



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Weaponising social media in Indonesian politics

Description: In Indonesia, what's the relationship between growing dominance of social media, greater commitment to neoliberal economic policies, and increasing religious conservatism? Indonesia media analyst Dr Inaya Rakhmani discusses how Facebook and other social media are being harnessed for political gain in a system awash with fake news. Presented by Ali Moore. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

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Voiceover: The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

Ali Moore: Hello. I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Inaya Rakhmani: Buzzers professionally makes sure that certain sentiments become viral. They monitor the kind of conversations that exist, what kind of news spread that's talked about with fear or negative sentiment, positive sentiment. And they like throw balls and see which one bounces back. What we do know is that they do mobilize sentiments, they do mobilize or spin news in a certain way so that it creates a certain effect among voters.

Ali Moore: In this episode, Using Social Media to game Democracy in Indonesia. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

Indonesia has a population of close to 270 million people, and around 150 million of them are active on the internet and social media. Most of those are eligible to vote. It's no surprise that in Indonesia, as in many countries, social media looms large on the political landscape. Its powerful influence on Indonesian politics first stood out in 2016, when an edited video clip of a campaign speech by the then governor of Jakarta went viral, leading to massive protests calling for him to be tried, for blaspheming Islam.

Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known as, Ahok, is an ethnic Chinese and a Christian. In the wake of the social media storm, Ahok was officially charged, lost his bid for re-election, and eventually his court case and was imprisoned.

At the same time as the use of social media has grown in Indonesia, there's been a parallel rise in religious conservatism among Muslims, and an



increase in wealth disparity despite the dramatic growth of the nation's middle class.

What is the relationship between social media, economic policy, and the growing influence of religious conservatives in Indonesia? How do the vast array of political actors harness social media to serve their ends. And in a political system, awash with fake news designed to whip voters into a frenzy over one issue or another. What can be done to safeguard Indonesia's democracy?

Joining us in the studio to examine the complex connections between politics, religion, and social media in the archipelago, is Indonesian political scientist and media analyst, Dr. Inaya Rakhmani, of Universitas Indonesia, in Jakarta. Welcome back to Ear to Asia, Inaya.

Inaya Rakhmani: Thank you, Ali. Thank you for having me here again.

Ali Moore: Let's start by flashing out that picture of social media in Indonesia. Is it correct that Indonesians have the fourth highest rate of social media use in the world?

Inaya Rakhmani: Yes. Particularly for Facebook users, Indonesia is the fourth largest country in the world to adopt Facebook in their everyday communication. And actually Indonesia is also one of the largest democracies in the world. This number kind of mirror each other.

Ali Moore: Who's using Facebook and other forms of social media? Is it largely young people? Because of course, Indonesia has a very large young population.

Inaya Rakhmani: Yes. Most of them are young people, particularly digital natives. But numbers have continued to rise since 2010 in terms of internet adoption, and internet penetration throughout the islands. Reports have cited roughly 60 to 78% of the total population is already online now.

To say that young people dominate social media use in Indonesia is not fully correct. They are more expressive, yes. Because being digital natives, they produce content and consume content at the same time. But different demographics have showed different kinds of characteristics of communicating online.

Ali Moore: You talk about growth since 2010. What has sparked that growth? What's really behind that enormous take up of social media?

Inaya Rakhmani: The most obvious answer would be the internet infrastructure. The government of Indonesia since 2014 especially under Jokowi, and minister Rudiantara, have built large scale infrastructure projects, and most notably

in the remote islands. They are making sure that internet is accessible to the village level. That makes a difference in the rural areas because in the urban areas, especially in the largest, most urbanised industrialised cities, market-driven internet infrastructure development is already on the go.

But for rural areas, or for remote areas, especially the outer most parts of the regions in Indonesia, the government programmes have been quite consistent in the past five years.

Really, it's just a matter of availability?

Ali Moore: It is and accessibility.

What are people using it for? I suppose that's a strange question, because everyone uses social media in their own way. But do people have a particular preference for expressing political views? Is it largely very much about life and lifestyle? Is there anything that you can pull out that characterises social media use?

Inaya Rakhmani: Of course, as you said, different kinds of segments of internet users have different kinds of practices. But if you see it as a pattern or more, generally, I would say that people's political practice has now intermingled with economic practices, political practices, personal communication.

If I give you an illustration. A person who I trust online, who I may know or not know in real life, can have influence over how I determine my choices in the elections. And at the same time, when algorithms read that behaviour that I am following a certain figure online, then Twitter or Facebook or Instagram can begin reading my behaviour and then selling things to me on the election day.

For instance, if I show my purple finger, which is a kind of ink that we get after we vote, then I can get a discount to buy coffee on Starbucks or any local coffee shop.

Ali Moore: I'll look at the whole issue of how social media is used in the elections and also by the various political parties. But before we do that, let's have a closer look at the Ahok case. If you can just remind us of what happened there and just how key social media was.

Inaya Rakhmani: The Ahok case was prominent, because it triggered what was arguably the largest religiously driven mass demonstration in Jakarta, and perhaps Indonesia. A former lecturer named, Buni Yani, re-posted, re-edited a two hour video into a short video-

Ali Moore: Of a speech that Ahok had given?



Inaya Rakhmani: Of a speech that Ahok had given, which was originally posted in an official website. As governor, as a public official, one would travel regularly to regions within the administrative area. Buni Yani cut the video of that speech and then focused on a part where Ahok said, "Ladies and gentlemen, you have been lied to with a verse in the Qur'an saying that you cannot vote for a non-Muslim leader, or Kaffir leader or an infidel leader.

This short video was given the title, Information to Islam, and it spread very, very quickly like fire. Mainstream media picked it up and people were talking online and then hashtags about defending Islam emerged online. It's virtually impossible to pinpoint who pushed the video to become so extensively magnified and spread.

Ali Moore: And indeed the Ahok case is held up as the standard bearer of the increase in religious conservatism, isn't it?

Inaya Rakhmani: Yes, I would say so.

Ali Moore: Why do you think there is that increase in religious conservatism? What's driving that?

Inaya Rakhmani: Two scholars that I respect studied this. One is, Professor Vedi Hadiz, from University of Melbourne, who wrote a book on Islamic populism. The first scholar I think who talked about this was Professor Martin van Bruinessen in regarding the conservative Islamic turn.

Inaya Rakhmani: They say, especially van Bruinessen, said in early 2000s, that the repression of Islamic politics under the new order regime, the authoritarian regime caused a kind of backlash after Reformasi, and you have religious conflicts, you have militant, hard line Islamic groups becoming much more vocal.

I look at it from a different angle. I look at how neo-liberal policies, how industrialization have normalised Islamic practises in otherwise secular spaces.

Ali Moore: Can you explain that a bit?

Inaya Rakhmani: For instance, as an illustration, in many parts of the world, the state is becoming less and less present in the provision of social services, basic services. We can look at housing. We can look at health services, or education services. Because quality education, quality health care, quality housing is provided by private entities and not by the state. And not as a service that is accessible to any citizen just by virtue of being born in a place, or migrating to a certain place that you're rightful of a basic standard of living.

These services are provided by private corporations through market mechanisms, and because of this it creates a sense of insecurity, a sense of instability because the state is not there to make sure we don't fall through the cracks. In this increasingly volatile and precarious world, Indonesian Muslim middle class use Halal certificates, Sharia certified hospitals as a guide for them to consume their way into upward mobility, to make sure that there is more stability in this increasingly precarious world.

Ali Moore: In filling a space, that the government may have filled but doesn't, even though under Jokowi, things like health care, a lot of money has been spent and there has been quite significant change in health care. Is it just that there's not enough?

Inaya Rakhmani: I think in this political climate, during the elections, in general elections where there is a very fierce competition between elites and coalitions, the disinformation, the hoax is the fake news that is spreading to disrupt trust towards the government because you can't really make sure which information is true or false.

Even when there are promises to provide universal healthcare and universal social care, it's read as an empty promise by a political candidate trying to win the race. Even though empirically or factually, social and healthcare is getting better because more budget is thrown into it and the infrastructure of the BPJS, or the body that provides social healthcare, non-discriminatorily is strengthening.

Inaya Rakhmani: But because trust to public institutions has been gradually eroded because of new liberal policies, it takes a while until the trust is built again, especially under these times of high political pressure.

Ali Moore: It boils down to economic disparity in many ways, isn't it?

Inaya Rakhmani: Inequality. Exactly, yes.

Ali Moore: Let's focus on the elections and the political system. And of course Indonesia has just been to the polls. Do all parties embrace social media and how is it used by the political forces? Is it very much a push out one way direction of information, or do they use it to engage directly with voters?

Inaya Rakhmani: Different politicians and different political parties have different communication strategies. In my research, I look at it from the industry or the electrical campaign market. There are large players, they're not conglomerates, but polling agencies. Political consultants are working together or have a digital marketing division within their institution. Or they could also be working with big data analytics. They're also working with individual operators who analyse the survey datas and then re-package it into infographics or offline engagement.

And this is a very complex, very, very professional communication strategy. This has been on the rise since decentralisation and democratisation because the capital that goes into these campaigns trickle down to the regions.

Ali Moore: It's quite sophisticated?

Inaya Rakhmani: It's very, very sophisticated. Yes. And younger digital campaigners are now part of this. Some of them participate because they believe in the cause. Some participate because they don't have any job offers or it takes a while for them to go into the labour market. Some are still university students who are looking for pocket money, but they are digital natives. They know exactly how the swing voters, namely, the millennials – digital natives – communicate with each other online.

Ali Moore: Do they interact? Do they start conversations?

Inaya Rakhmani: It's divided. I would say the two dominant practices would be dissemination. You have influential figures, buzzers, disseminating information, and then you have those small communities in which there can be feedback coming from the public. But during times of elections, the most effective way is, effective, meaning it becomes a discourse that is cashed on by mainstream media. Is actually working with influencers and buzzers.

Ali Moore: What's a buzzer?

Inaya Rakhmani: A buzzer is a person who professionally makes sure that certain sentiments become viral. They monitor daily the kind of conversations that exist, and also what kind of news spread that's talked about with fear or sentiments. Negative sentiment, positive sentiment, and then they like throw balls and see which one bounces back.

Ali Moore: If we compare social media and digital media to traditional media, what was the sort of break up of the spin by the major camps on the latest election? Jokowi and Prabowo. Was it 50-50, or do they actually put more into the digital space?

Inaya Rakhmani: There is no exact data regarding how much of their campaign funding goes into social media. There is data regarding the amount of campaign funding that goes into their strategy, but the number-

Ali Moore: They don't break it down?

Inaya Rakhmani: They don't break it down.

Ali Moore: Do you have a sense though?



Inaya Rakhmani: That would be an un-educated guess. It won't be as large as the money that goes into mainstream media, because it's much more expensive to buy television advertising than it is to mobilise online sentiments.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore, and I'm joined by Indonesia political scientist, Dr. Inaya Rakhmani. We're discussing the influence of social media on Indonesian politics.

Let's look at that issue of fake news, which you've made the point. Indonesia is awash with fake news. How is it used by the political parties? And to what extent is it rogue forces versus almost institutional?

Inaya Rakhmani: There is an article at the Guardian talking about the Muslim Cyber Army and also those from Ahok's camp, who were hired as buzzers and to create fake news. But it can't be directly related to them because it's unknown whether or not they were hired or they did it voluntarily.

Ali Moore: They're sort of at arms length from the major parties, is that right?

Inaya Rakhmani: I don't have data to support that, but I think it's safe to say from the interviews that I did. People who invest or political parties or political candidates or actually investors who they don't know, some of them put in money to make sure that certain candidates win.

Some of it is difficult to prove and whether or not they did it voluntarily or they were hired professionally. What we do know is that they do mobilise sentiments. They do mobilise or spin news in a certain way, so that it creates a certain effect among voters.

Ali Moore: But there's a difference between swaying voters by presenting information in a particular way, and choosing what you present, and actually presenting false information. I mean, how much is fake news and how much is just a curating of the news to present a particular point of view?

Inaya Rakhmani: Yes. There's what they call black campaigning and white campaigning and grey campaigning. White campaigning you positively build the reputation of the political candidate you're working for. It's usually called political branding. And grey campaigning is what you just mentioned as curating, curating news. You kind of modify certain parts, so that it becomes more convincing or worse off for a certain candidate.

One person can have multiple false accounts, usually called dolls or bots, robots. What they do each day is have these accounts usually with profiles of women or unidentifiable names, and they talk to each other and talk about a certain topic. Sometimes these multiple accounts have the exact same content in them.



Ali Moore: The profiles of women are often attractive women to create attention?

Inaya Rakhmani: Yes. That was in the Guardian article and what we got from the interviews. It's to create an illusion that it's true, even though it's not. Because when people have been talking about it, it doesn't matter whether or not it's true, but everyone is talking about it.

Ali Moore: Then we talked about the buzzers, but you've also coined the term, engineering the Ummah. Tell me about that.

Inaya Rakhmani: The Ummah is an emerging Islamic community. It could be national, it could be Pan-Islamic or transnational. It could be local. But there's a sense that as a Muslim your imagining your fellow Muslims, women, men from different sections of society. From different ethnic groups, races, and then you feel that there is a sense of brotherhood. This is a term that is often used.

Some of the literature that I've read sees this as a social movement that has a strong social basis, and it fights against neo-liberal policies, this Ummah. Because it's about working with Islamic politics to create better social justice.

Engineering the Ummah, that I write about, wants to show that market forces and political forces uses this idea that there's a cross class alliance between Muslims in Indonesia, to side with a certain candidate. From the side of Prabowo, the engineered Ummah that is mobilised, or that is constructed by political campaigners, are those who wants to show his Islamic credentials that are stronger from Jokowi.

And on the side of Jokowi, his alliance with Ma'ruf Amin, from Nahdlatul Ulama, is mobilised or is worked through Islam Nusantara, or Indonesian Islam that is more plural, that is more diverse, heterogeneous and not at all close to the Middle Eastern version of Islam, that is often associated with Hizb ut Tahrir, the Islamic Defenders Front. These kinds of sentiment and symbols are what you can read online in everyday Twitter posts or Facebook posts.

Ali Moore: It's a captive online community in many ways?

Inaya Rakhmani: It's-

Ali Moore: That can be marketed to... that can be influenced.

Inaya Rakhmani: Yes. The thing with community, you know the person, but with an engineered Ummah, you can imagine it, but you can't really disprove or prove its existence. What is mobilises these sentiments and makes you feel a certain way. You may read the message for instance, "Don't eat this and this



food from this franchise because it has pork in it." Then it spreads online through small WhatsApp groups.

Ali Moore: Where would it have come from? Would it be identifiable as to the original source?

Inaya Rakhmani: If it's end to end encryption, like in WhatsApp, you can't identify the first source unless you work with WhatsApp, which they do not do because it's a private company who also monetize on the privacy of the messages.

Ali Moore: These things can spread like wildfire?

Inaya Rakhmani: It can, yes. And this was the reason why there was jamming on 22nd of May. The Jakarta riots after the announcement of the victory of Jokowi.

Ali Moore: Well, indeed the government actually shut down parts of social media. You couldn't share videos. It was a very interesting move. What prompted it from the government's point of view? Real concern about spread of the riots?

Inaya Rakhmani: The first announcement from the government about this jamming, it's like a sequential, or it's not a complete shutdown. There is a delay in you sending messages and getting messages. It was Security Minister Wiranto, that announced this jamming and it was reinforced by minister Rudiantara, Information Communication minister, that says, "This is to prevent the spread of hoax." The platforms that was jammed was Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Messenger-

Ali Moore: Not Twitter?

Inaya Rakhmani: No, Twitter was not jammed. Which we found was interesting because, when we looked at our interviews and then asked again, verify to our sources, Twitter was not jammed because the data is publicly available. Whereas, Facebook and WhatsApp you can't. You would have to contact the platform in order to-

Ali Moore: Find out where it came from?

Inaya Rakhmani: Exactly. You can't mine the data. Twitter you can mine the data. But what we thought was, if you're concerned about the spread of hoax, then Twitter would also be a platform that you would want to make sure that there is that sequential jamming so that it doesn't spread, but it wasn't.

Inaya Rakhmani: It means that the government also wants to watch, not only to make sure the spread of hoax doesn't happen, but also they want to watch what kind of fake news spread at what time.



- Ali Moore: What was the public response to that? Was it seen as necessary for public security, or was it seen as a thin edge of the wedge?
- Inaya Rakhmani: It's divided. People from civil society and proponents of civil liberty and human rights obviously think that this is a breach of privacy. That the government should not be able to trespass on personal communication. And then those who choose for a strong state because of these political times, would think that this was justified. Recent interviews on mainstream media with representatives from the ministry and the police, mentioned that patrols will be done by the police and these patrols, quote, unquote, are done online.
- They explained that this does not trespass personal communication. It would be like going through alleyways in which we don't go into houses, but we go into alleyways and see what happens on the roads.
- Ali Moore: That's a fine line though.
- Inaya Rakhmani: There is a fine line, yes. I would say that in democratic times, if we want to see a healthy democracy in which the public can express their opinion and put the government accountable. It would mean that you should increase the power of the public to express their opinion in a civil way, and not patrol their interactions or their personal communications because then people would go silent. And then-
- Ali Moore: Do you think that is a real risk now in Indonesia, even though it's so vibrant?
- Inaya Rakhmani: If this continues, our desire to have a strong state to make sure that there is social order, I think it is a bad precedent. I think the public should be able to put government officials accountable, and have these channels to talk about it without fear of it turning into fake news or hoaxes. I think the task of the government should be that.
- Ali Moore: It's typical-
- Inaya Rakhmani: And not patrolling on personal communication.
- Ali Moore: When public opinion is divided though, that is difficult. Is it more a sense that people are looking for that strong state and therefore prepared to put up with greater regulation and more online patrols? Or is it more a sense of, we are worried about democracy being eroded. Which has the greatest, I suppose power of public sentiment at the moment?
- Inaya Rakhmani: If you see the narratives of these two political candidates, Prabowo and Jokowi, all voters choose for a strong state. Even those working to push for greater civil liberty and who are pro democratic agenda. It's why these

narratives are so popular, and not only in Indonesia but all over the world. Because these are times of social and economic inequality, and it creates that sense of insecurity and you want voters desire for a strong figure to make sure that everything is okay, when in fact it's not.

Unfortunately, I think that precedents shows that the strong state is desired by most people. It's the task of I think journalists and academics to make sure that there is as wide a space for public opinion and mobilisation as possible.

Ali Moore: At the same time, I guess that as wide as possible a space for public opinion does raise the question about whether social media has really elevated the level of discussion and quality of political debate, and quality of democracy. Or it's worked to erode it because of the amount of fake news and curating of opinions.

Inaya Rakhmani: I would say the latter, unfortunately. Because market and political pressure, it is constant. It's constant and it's always there because there is the political campaign industry. People who are professional who do that for their living. Who actually practise it everyday in a much more consistent way, for diverse topics that align with each other and the political candidate they're supporting, or trying to destroy.

Ali Moore: Is there any move or any industry to try and debunk fake news? I mean is there fact checking? Is there a desire from people to try and assess the validity of various claims? As we see, we see in the US, we certainly see in Australia, where there are numerous fact checking units and a politician says something and then it is checked to the best of people's ability. Does that happen in Indonesia?

Inaya Rakhmani: Yes, it does. There are several really, really good civil society organisations that debunk. One is Turn Back Hoax, which I have talked to regarding this. But again, the speed with which they can go because they have to do it manually. They also have principles. These organisations have principles that they don't violate privacy. They don't embed themselves in the WhatsApp groups.

They wait for members of the public to report a certain hoax and then they verify it. They choose the news, and some of them are professional journalists. Some of them are NGO advocates, communication strategists, et cetera. But the speed with which they can run, especially with consideration for ethics, et cetera, in comparison to the industry. The speed with which these organisations can verify is much slower than those in which cyber armies can produce sentiments.

Ali Moore: Are you optimistic or not about social media and its future in the political debate in Indonesia? Do you think that eventually that the weight of



people's enthusiasm and genuine commentary will win out? Or do you think the forces of those who can manipulate are too great?

Inaya Rakhmani: My honest answer would be those who manipulate will have capital to do so because of the nature of our society. And this is all over the world, because there is a small number of political and economic elites who can always put in money to spin and curate to manipulate the public. But, I think that it's our responsibility, our social responsibility to make sure that we have done everything in our capacity.

If you're a journalist, then as a journalist. If you're an academic then as an academic. Through our public institutions to strengthen and build trust towards public good, with the narrative that nobody gets left behind. Everyone is a part of this, no matter what your religion is, no matter what your ethnic group is, race, nationality.

We want to see a more just society. We want to see more redistribution of wealth. It's something I think many sections of society actually relate to but don't know how to realise. It might not happen in this lifetime, but it's something to strive for. I think so to say that I'm optimistic, I'm not, but I think we just need to keep on going.

Ali Moore: You mentioned there, the rest of the world, for Indonesia... I guess none of these issues are unique to Indonesia. But are they particularly pertinent because of where Indonesia is, in its development cycle?

Inaya Rakhmani: Yes. Indonesia is an emerging market. It's one of the largest democracies in the world. It's the country with the largest Muslim population, and it's not in the Middle East. It has very unique social attributes, and it's an archipelago country. We have heavily urbanised islands like Java, but we also have very remote areas.

I think Indonesia has a lot to contribute to the world in terms of richness, but it can only do so if it can explain itself well, and knows exactly what's happening inside, and as things are, we still have a long way to go.

Ali Moore: Well, it is going to be an incredibly interesting journey to watch. Inaya, thank you so much for talking to Ear to Asia.

Inaya Rakhmani: Thank you, Ali. Thank you for having me here.

Ali Moore: Our guest has been Indonesia, political scientist, Dr. Inaya Rakhmani, from Universitas, Indonesia. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia.



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