



Ear to Asia podcast

- Title:** Hard lessons for aid agencies at work in Myanmar
- Description:** How do international aid agencies operate on the ground in Myanmar, with its complex, unstable and sometimes hostile political and social environment? Anthropologist Dr Anne Décobert and civil society expert Dr Tamas Wells join host Ali Moore to examine the aims and realities of foreign humanitarian efforts in a poor but resource-rich country beset by ethnic conflict. 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.
- Anne Décobert:** We can't forget that Myanmar was for a very very long time a very closed-off country. Staff of donor agencies and INGOs were genuinely trying to help populations on the ground in a context where they lacked information, they lacked access. And that has definitely shifted over time.
- Tamas Wells:** If Australia, for example, was to give aid to Myanmar, do we say, "Here's the money. You do whatever you want and we're not going to say anything."?

Or do we have extremely heavy restrictions on it? In which case they may say, "See you later. We don't want your aid anymore."

So there's this delicate balance that aid agencies play.
- Ali Moore:** In this episode, hard lessons for international aid agencies in Myanmar. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne.

Despite being rich in mineral and other natural resources, Myanmar is a poor country, where the per capita GDP is a mere 1300 US Dollars. It depends heavily on foreign aid. Yet, international aid agencies are forced to operate in a complex, unstable and, sometimes, hostile political and social environment. Although Myanmar has recently emerged from military rule, and has a democratically elected government, the Military Elite keep politicians on a tight leash. The country has long been plagued by armed conflict among its ethnic groups and, more recently, the Myanmar military has committed what the UN describes as ethnic cleansing on the minority Rohingya population.

In this tough environment, how do international aid agencies function on the ground in Myanmar? Can the Myanmar government be counted on to



distribute aid, or should aid agencies look to NGOs, who are better connected to the various ethnic minorities? How has that changed as Myanmar has developed, and what's the impact of China's particular aid model?

Joining me to discuss the aims and realities of foreign aid to Myanmar are anthropologist, Dr. Anne Décobert, and Civil Society Expert, Dr. Tamas Wells. Both Anne and Tamas are from the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Welcome to Ear to Asia, Anne, and Tamas.

Tamas Wells: Thank you.

Anne Décobert: Thank you.

Ali Moore: Let's start in the now, if you like. How important is international aid to Myanmar in 2019, Anne?

Anne Décobert: Well, Myanmar is now one of the world's largest recipients of foreign aid as of 2015. It was the world's seventh largest recipient of foreign aid. And in the region it's really significant, it comes third behind just Cambodia and Laos, so it's very significant now.

Ali Moore: And as we'll explore, that's quite a significant change, isn't it?

Anne Décobert: Very, very different to what was happening in previous decades. Yes, absolutely.

Ali Moore: Tamas, if we look at, again, what's happening in 2019, where does most of that aid focus on, and where is most of that aid coming from?

Tamas Wells: Interestingly, it's Japan, which is the largest donor, and the World Bank and Asian Development Bank make up a massive proportion of the aid that's been given over recent years. As you'd expect, health and education are, by far, the biggest sectors that are focused on. Now, it's in any sector you can imagine, whether that's electricity or immunisation, and everything in between. Australia is actually quite low, and it's the 17th largest donor to Myanmar now. Yes, it's dominated by Japan, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank.

Anne Décobert: So hit us with those statistics.

Tamas Wells: Yes, yes. We just got them ready for you this morning.

Ali Moore: I think what's particularly interesting is to contextualise aid as well. Currently aid to Myanmar, it's a little bit difficult to assess actual levels, but it sits somewhere between 1.5 and 2 billion dollars per year. When you compare to FDI, Foreign Direct Investment, aid is actually quite low. FDI sits at around 5.8 billion. To contextualise this, Myanmar's GDP is currently at 71.2 billion. Although Myanmar is one of the world's largest recipients of aid, we shouldn't overestimate aid within the overall budget of Myanmar-



- Tamas Wells: Yes, yes, compared to the other-
- Ali Moore: ... and compared to other flows that are coming into the country.
- Anne Décobert: That's part of the development story, I guess.
- Tamas Wells: Yes, that's right.
- Ali Moore: Absolutely.
- Tamas Wells: All around the world, people are saying the same.
- Anne Décobert: Yet, Myanmar has massive natural resources, but it does have a very low per capita GDP. Again, that's a development story, but is there any element of surprise that it is so reliant on aid at this point in the cycle?
- Tamas Wells: I think that's a trend that we'd see in other countries too, if you think of East Timor or Nigeria have huge oil reserves. The ability to translate natural resources into development, is highly problematic.
- Ali Moore: Much harder [crosstalk] than it looks.
- Tamas Wells: That's right, and relies heavily on governance, obviously. How do you harness that revenue in order to improve the lives of the people? That's just... I think, around the world, it's been shown to be incredibly difficult. Myanmar, emerging from an authoritarian military government, doesn't have a lot of that governance structure in place. Hopefully, in the future, their oil reserves or other natural resources can be used. At the moment, I think it's just extremely challenging.
- Ali Moore: You made reference, there, to, of course, Myanmar's past. I guess, in many ways... Anne, would you agree? ... that the aid story in Myanmar is really more than many other countries. It's really the story of the country, itself. You can't see aid separate to the political context and you can't see it separate to the various interpretations of that context.
- Anne Décobert: Oh, yes, you can't detach the way in which aid has been provided from the way in which international donors have tried to, at various times, promote political change in the country, through various tools. Also, the way in which international donors and the international community has tried to interpret the situation within what is a very, very complex country, with many internal divisions, both political, religious, and so on.
- It's a very complex story and, in a sense, looking at the history of aid in Myanmar, you can actually read the history of political changes within the country, and the history of changes in perceptions of the situation on the ground.



- Ali Moore: If we, then go to the evolution of aid, when did it really first start having an impact in Myanmar? Do we see anything before the elections in 1990, for example? Before that, was Myanmar the recipient of aid?
- Tamas Wells: Yes, it was a recipient of aid. The World Bank was there. Then, obviously, everything changed after 1998 and the protests. Then, Aung San Suu Kyi being put under house arrest and, yes, all of that political turmoil at the end of the '80s.
- Ali Moore: What happened when the World Bank pulled out?
- Tamas Wells: It wasn't just the World Bank. There was a whole string of things that happened after all the protests of 1988, and then, the military crackdown, and then, the beginning of the General Than Shwe government. Then the elections, when NLD wins the election and Aung San Suu Kyi becomes this famous democratic icon, but then gets put under house arrest. I think that was just extraordinary for western countries seeing that. That was a point when sanctions began to be placed on the country.
- Ali Moore: Does that mean that the International Aid Agencies pull out, or does that mean that they try and find a way to work within a sanctioned environment? Of course, all of that turmoil probably means people need more help, rather than less.
- Anne Décobert: Well, it impacted on the type of aid that was delivered and how it was delivered. From about, sort of, 1990, onwards, major western donors basically cut diplomatic and direct financial aid to the regime, but they maintained humanitarian aid to Myanmar. What that meant was that they channelled humanitarian aid through UN agencies and international and national non-government organisations. The idea was that you were essentially bypassing the State, so there was this fear at this period that if aid provided through the State, or in partnership with the State, it would essentially be misappropriation by the regime and used to bolster this regime, which was widely condemned as illegitimate by the international community.
- That was the first main way of channelling aid during this period. The other way was a non-official way. This really took off from the 1990s onwards. This was really a second mechanism, which enabled the international community to access the border areas, where the government restricted international humanitarian access. Therefore, donors began to channel assistance through organisations that were essentially working under the umbrella of the ethnic resistance groups in those areas.
- Ali Moore: So, under the radar.
- Anne Décobert: Under the radar [crosstalk 00:08:44], very much unofficial, under the radar. It was called cross-border aid, although that's a bit of a misnomer because, actually, although these organisations have a management base on the Thai



side of the border, or outside of Myanmar... generally, it's on the Thai side of the border... the people who deliver the services, whether it's health services, education, or so on, from the communities inside Myanmar, and they live and work in those communities, throughout the year.

Ali Moore: Tamas, the interaction between aid through the UN, aid through the NGOs, aid that was attempting to bypass the government, but was still working within an established system, versus this type of aid, which is completely under the radar, is there an interaction between the two?

Tamas Wells: In the time that I was living there, and when Anne was there too, there was an incredible, actually, division between the people and the programmes and organisations that were working, for example, out of Yangon, working around the country and then others that had their bases, maybe, on the Thai side of the border. There's actually quite a lot of division between those channels of-

Ali Moore: Division in what way? Disagreements about the best way to do this?

Tamas Wells: Yes, yes. Disagreements about strategy, really. I think, if you're characterising the Thai side of the border, they'll say that, inside of the country, they're collaborating with the government. Meanwhile, from the inside, people would say, "This is a pragmatic step that we need to take in order to reach incredibly poor areas." The incredibly poor areas are not just, perhaps, along the border, but basically everywhere in the country.

Ali Moore: This cross-border funding is not an external force coming in and providing aid. It's incredibly tightly linked into these local communities. Explain that.

Anne Décobert: In a way, it's one of those perfect, sort of, bottom-up models of development that people talk about in terms of ideals. The people who provide so-called cross-border aid are members of the communities in those areas. I worked, for a long time, with health organisations. These are ethnic health organisations and community-based health organisations which, basically, recruit members of local communities, and they train these medics to provide primary healthcare services in their areas. This means that you have, over decades, the development of a sustainable community-level healthcare system in areas where there was no access to official healthcare services, government healthcare services.

Ali Moore: This is almost reflective of Mao Zedong's barefoot doctors, isn't it?

Anne Décobert: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, and parallels have been drawn between the medics who work in these areas and the barefoot doctors, because they literally walk, on foot, with backpacks full of medical supplies to reach communities that have been displaced by conflict or who are just very, very remote and have no other access, at all, to medical services.

Tamas Wells: One other part of the story after '88, was that a lot of the activists and political



leaders fled from the country because of fear for their lives to the Thai border. Then, they became active in starting new organisations that might be doing advocacy and might be doing health. The mixture of ethnic organisations, but also these political leaders who were exiles from their country, and then working back into the country.

Ali Moore: How would this aid, and these organisations... How are they viewed by government, Myanmar government? Are they happy just to essentially allow it to go under the radar because it is serving a purpose, or was it considered a real threat?

Anne Décobert: This is something that has changed a lot, over time. When I first started working with these organisations in the southeastern border lands, it was still at a time when there was no real collaboration between state and non-state systems. These non-state systems were essentially seen by State actors as being part of the ethnic resistance. They were operating in areas that were conflict areas, and where State armed forces, basically, drew no distinction between military combatants and civilians.

Ali Moore: So they were targeted as well.

Anne Décobert: They were absolutely targeted. Medics were killed. Medics were arrested and detained, disappeared. We never saw them again, so they were, very much, operating in a situation where they feared for their lives. The situation has changed significantly, particularly since the cease-fires. The preliminary cease-fire of 2012, between the Karen National Union and the government was the first major change. Then, there was a nationwide cease-fire agreement, which was not a nationwide cease-fire agreement. [crosstalk]

Ali Moore: This is in 2015. But not everyone came to that party.

Anne Décobert: This is in 2015.

Tamas Wells: Yes. Yes, yes. Yes, yes, that's right.

Anne Décobert: No, absolutely. It's a very partial agreement but, in any case, it has led to increased dialogue and increased cooperation between State and non-State service providers, and this was revolutionary.

Ali Moore: I guess if we go back to those early 2000s, even though you had this cross-border aid you had, also working through NGOs, it was amazing how little aid was going into Myanmar. The numbers, if you compare it to Cambodia, Cambodia has got a quarter of Myanmar's population, and yet, they got 500 million US dollars in 2005, and Myanmar got 100 million. How much of that is because of sanctions and a desire to isolate, and how much of that was because Myanmar government was saying, "You can't come in."

Tamas Wells: A huge part of it is that, during that time, Aung San Suu Kyi was saying, "Don't



give aid to this country," with the idea that-

Ali Moore: But she was under house arrest.

Tamas Wells: Well, the times that she was able to voice her opinion about that, she said, "We don't want aid." The strategy there was about isolating the military government, her voice in the decision-making in Washington or London was enormous. But at the same time, it was incredibly difficult and when I was living there, if you wanted to go and visit a field site, you had to apply for a government liaison officer, who would come along with you every step of the way, whenever you went to every village you went to, or whatever, they'd be right there with you. It was highly controlled environment.

Ali Moore: When all of this was happening, of course, other countries were making their own roads into Myanmar, in particular, of course, China. Tell us a little about, while the West was focusing on a policy of isolation, Anne, what was China doing?

Anne Décobert: China was very establishing its presence in the region during this time. Interestingly, when you look back at the time of western isolationist policies towards Myanmar, many people talk about this period as basically a period that led to western countries being on the back foot when it came to China's presence in the region. This isolationism basically left the door wide open for China to become the key investor in Myanmar, and to basically establish its political presence and influence, as well.

Tamas Wells: We see projects like the Myitsone dam, in the north of the country. It was just a multi-billion dollar hydropower dam, which ultimately ended up being suspended, which is another part of the political story, but huge infrastructure investments.

Ali Moore: Well there's a whole China, Myanmar economic corridor.

Tamas Wells: Right.

Ali Moore: Isn't there? It's very much a part of the one belt, one road initiative.

Tamas Wells: Sure.

Ali Moore: But did China's presence also become a presence in aid? Where was China spending all its money?

Tamas Wells: Yes, it's hard to, when we talked about those aid numbers before, there's specific ways in which aid money is defined, in China. Much of the money that they would've spent on things in Myanmar is not included in those figures. A lot of money has gone for the infrastructure with roads-

Ali Moore: The dams.



- Tamas Wells: Yes. I've travelled in the northern Myanmar-China border. There's these incredible three-lane highways that have been built with largely Chinese money. So I think infrastructure has been the main focus.
- Ali Moore: What's the impact on the ground of Chinese spending? Is it money that helps local communities? Or China is well known for when it does these big projects. It tends to bring in its own workers, and then it moves on. How are the received on the ground?
- Tamas Wells: I think, like anywhere, it's mixed. On one hand, many local communities might be very happy with the new three-lane road they can use for trade, or whatever. There's some positive impacts for people. I think it's fair to say that there's quite a lot of negative perception of Chinese investment, for lack of consultation or lack of understanding, especially of the Myitsone dam, lack of understanding of just, "This is like a natural heritage site for Kachin people. Can't just come in and pay lots of people and build a dam on it."
- Ali Moore: Tell us about that project. When was that cancelled?
- Tamas Wells: Yes, it was cancelled in 2011. The plans had been going for a few years before that. It was one of the biggest hydropower dams in Southeast Asia, was going to be built on the top of the Irawaddy River, in Kachin. As I said, that's the natural heritage site of spiritual significance for Kaching people. Around the country, there was incredible opposition to that project and, obviously, against Chinese involvement in that project. I think that was one of the spin-offs of the transition in 2011, to the Thein Sein government, when the project was suspended, which was an incredible to everyone involved, given that the military government, to that point, had made no concessions to the people who were advocating for things like that to stop. It would cause incredible diplomatic problems between them and China, and still does.
- Ali Moore: I guess it has to be said that, while there was resentment towards Chinese investment, this was a time when there was not a lot of money coming in for infrastructure, in places like Myanmar, and they were desperately in need of roads and dams and power. Without any of that, they couldn't take that next step in development.
- Anne Décobert: Yes, absolutely, but I think, also, there has been a change in recent years with the growth in investment by countries like China, as the border lands have opened up with the tentative cease-fire agreements. It was a lot more difficult, previously, for investors to actually enter into those areas, so there has been a multiplication in recent years, of these so-called mega-development projects.
- One thing that I just wanted to add to what Tamas was saying about the perceptions of these things, so the perceptions of the dams, of the roads, and so on, it's true that, in many communities, their committees mix perceptions. There can be a perception that these things are beneficial, but amongst many ethnic minority community members, there is also a perception that



development means mega-development. It means things like roads and dams, an so on, and that they're not necessarily in the interests of local communities-

Ali Moore: Who want education, housing, and healthcare.

Anne Décobert: They want education, housing, healthcare, and so on. Also, there have been many, many instances of fairly large-scale displacement because of these mega-development projects, and of communities being even more disempowered than they were before, basically losing the main source of their livelihood, their land, but also being displaced and moved to new areas, and losing their connections to their traditional lands.

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 Myanmar experts Dr. Anne Décobert and Dr. Tamas Wells. We're talking about the constantly changing and challenging nature of international aid in Myanmar. We've been discussing how China came in while there was really a massive gap to be filled because the West was still very keen to isolate Myanmar. What happened in 2008 with Cyclone Nargis, Tamas? Was that a game changer?

Tamas Wells: I think the scale of it, with 140,000 people dying, yes, that definitely changed perceptions of the country. I think it also went along with, in 2007, the so-called Saffron Revolution, where there was widespread protests around the country. I think that was a moment when western donor agencies and embassies started to say, "Isolation's not working," and there was these protests all around the country, and another crackdown by the government. I think there was a realisation that shifted at that point to say, "We need to do something different here, and re-engage."

Then, Cyclone Nargis the scale of it, in some ways, allowed new actors to enter and a lot of-

Ali Moore: How easy was that? What was government response? Initially, they were not that open to international aid.

Tamas Wells: Yes. They weren't. Sure, you're right. They were very restrictive, but there was already a whole lot of actors there, immediately after the cyclone, there were these local organisations that are starting to do relief, and they're getting support from international groups. There'd been a lot of active groups before that, but I think that was a point of recognition that you could support civil society in Myanmar and that aid could be used effectively in Myanmar. I think that was a big shift. Would you say that, Anne?

Anne Décobert: Absolutely. I think it really shifted the narrative around aid in Myanmar. As we were talking about earlier, there was, sort of, until that time, this real division between international actors, who were basically promoting isolationism and sanctions and then those who thought engagement was a better way to work and to try to promote change in Myanmar.



Cyclone Nargis demonstrated, essential as Tamas was saying, this possibility of working with the government, and of delivering aid in effective ways, without bolstering the regime. This basically shifted the balance towards the engagement camp, and it was around that time that calls to so-called normalised aid in Myanmar really gained prominence.

Ali Moore: What does normalised mean, in the context of aid?

Anne Décobert: It basically means working with the government, in very, very simple terms. Particularly, when you're dealing with development aid, the predominant model is to work with the State. The State is the main actor, the main partner, for international development. As we were talking about earlier, historically, international aid to Myanmar, from the 1990s onward, was really humanitarian aid, not development aid, and it was also going around the State instead of working with the State. Normalisation meant essentially shifting towards working with the State and towards more of a development focus.

Ali Moore: You're right about Myanmar going from being pariah to partner.

Anne Décobert: Yes, absolutely. I think we can't oversimplify too much. Myanmar was a pariah for a very long time, and did shift to more of a partner, but I think there is still very much a wariness around whether the country, its political leaders can actually be trusted as real partners. Would you agree?

Tamas Wells: Yes, there's a flow of history, there, where, at the point of talking about Cyclone Nargis, and that was a point of the start of that, "Let's engage again."

Ali Moore: That was, then, followed... We had the 2010 elections. Then, we had the bar elections of 2012. Then we had the rise of Aung San Suu Kyi, from house arrest to leading her party.

Tamas Wells: Yes, absolutely. Through that time, most donor agencies increasingly grew in confidence that they could work directly with government. Then, obviously after 2015 and the election victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's party, that that went up to another level.

Ali Moore: That's when the World Bank, the Asia Development Bank all re-entered Myanmar.

Tamas Wells: During that time, yes.

Ali Moore: Was it an open floodgate, at this point? Is that when aid just-

Tamas Wells: Yes, we were-

Ali Moore: ... massive [crosstalk 00:24:21]?

Tamas Wells: ... tracking back through the figures, and I think it was 2013, where this



enormous spark in aid when the World Bank rushed to re-enter and Myanmar had outstanding debts to the World Bank from '80s, but other countries jumped in and paid off those debts to allow them to scale up with some new projects, so there was a rush.

Ali Moore: What happened in the border lands? What happened to those cross-border small, local aid organisations that had relied on foreign help?

Anne Décobert: Well, there was definitely a shift. As Tamas was just mentioning, there was this, sort of, rush or flood of aid into Myanmar, particularly after the by-elections of 2012. This was when donor countries also moved their embassies back into Myanmar, so aid really peaked at that period, in 2013, at six billion dollars, which was, pretty much, a 60-fold increase, compared with 2005, so really, really significant.

On the one hand, you had this, sort of, influx of aid into officially-sanctioned mechanisms and channels. Donors who had long been supporting cross-border groups began to withdraw funding for cross-border aid, but also for the refugee camps in Thailand. There was a shift in focus, really. That's not to say that the cross-border groups and the refugee camps lost all their funding. They're still being funded by certain major donors, but there was definitely the withdrawal by some donors, and this did have major impacts on the ground.

Ali Moore: This, again, goes back to the question of the interpretation of the political narrative. Talk to me about the Beauty and the Beast narrative, because it just is such a clear way of tracing what's happened.

Anne Décobert: The Beauty and the Beast narrative is actually a story that's been used to represent a situation in Myanmar. International actors viewed Myanmar, for a long time, through this quite simplistic story of the beauty, Aung San Suu Kyi, the beautiful woman who speaks the language of democracy and human rights, standing proud and tall against the beast, the military regime. There was this very, sort of, Manichean black and white perception of what was actually a much more complex reality on the ground. This shifted, over time, this perception, but in the research that we've been doing, recently, Tamas and I found that it did actually colour the way in which international donors channelled aid, these sort of shifting perceptions-

Ali Moore: Well, absolutely. They trusted again that they could go through the centre.

Tamas Wells: You're right. Aung San Suu Kyi became more prominent in the government. Yes, donors regained trust in her and made huge commitments. The Beast and the Beauty was actually the title of a article in Vogue Magazine. I think it might've been in about 2012. That was an actual way that people were describing the country, in mainstream media.

Ali Moore: She was educated in the West. She had this magnificent British accent. She spoke, you said, the language of democracy, but she also spoke in a way that



the West completely could understand and latch onto, so the fact that it was in Vogue doesn't surprise me in the slightest.

Tamas Wells: Yes, yes. I guess there's two dimensions to her icon status and how that came about. I think, domestically from Myanmar people, the fact that her father, Aung San, was the independent hero of the nation and was assassinated just before Independence, so she's got that, kind of, family link that people find extremely important. That's enormous for her status. In Western terms, her ability to speak to a Myanmar audience, but at the same time speak to a Western audience with this sort of fantastic Oxford accent, and sound so convincing, yes, she had that ability to communicate effectively in both directions.

Ali Moore: That, obviously, changed the game from an aid and international aid point of view but, of course, her story has not been a linear one. In many ways, she's gone from hero to pariah, because of her country's treatment of the Rohingya. The UN describes it as a textbook example of ethnic cleansing, and she has been extraordinarily silent on it. What has been the result of that in the aid world?

Anne Décobert: I think it's definitely had an impact. I think there was a period between about 2012 and when Aung San Suu Kyi essentially, or her government, came to power in 2016, when there was a lot of hope. There was this sense that, that battle between the Beauty and the Beast was ending with this beautiful happy ending and democracy and human rights would triumph, and peace would eventuate in the Myanmar. I think donors and international NGOs really believed in that happy ending, which isn't to say that they didn't understand how complex the situation is and how difficult the challenges are in Myanmar, but there was a lot of hope in that situation.

That changed dramatically around 2017, with the upsurge of violence in Rakhine State. Aung San Suu Kyi's silence and what has been denounced as collusion, essentially with the military, has led to a sense of disappointment, maybe, amongst donors and aid agencies, and a recalibration or the beginnings of a recalibration of how aid is channelled. As we were saying earlier, donors haven't given up on the ethnic groups and the systems in the border lands, but there was this shift to working with government. Increasingly, now, there is more of a focus on working with those on both sides, if we want to be simplistic about it, and really not putting, as one person we spoke to, put it, not putting all the eggs in the government basket.

Ali Moore: Because, if not shattered, trust has been severely shaken. Yes.

Tamas Wells: I think it's important to clarify, there though, that she's got a domestic Myanmar audience, and that she's got an international audience. Amongst the vast majority of her domestic audience, there's very little time for Muslim minorities, so she's not losing any votes by staying silent about this. Whereas, if we'd look at the Western audience direction-



- Ali Moore: And the international aid
- Tamas Wells: ... it's incredibly critical-
- Ali Moore: ... comes from there. That's what-
- Tamas Wells: Yes, that's right. Yes, so she's the fall from grace, or there's all kinds of quotes like that, from commentators in the West, but that's not the story locally.
- Ali Moore: I guess your point is, again, it's a simplistic narrative that we're putting on top of Myanmar, and allowing that to make judgments about where we might put international aid. That said, though, does the West ignore that, except that within her country, it is popular even if it's genocide, according to the UN? How else does the international aid community respond?
- Tamas Wells: That's an incredibly difficult question. Absolutely, there's been incredible abuse of human rights, and we can't do nothing about that. I guess this just conundrum around aid, about how much conditionality do you have with it? If Australia, for example, was to give aid to Myanmar, do we just say, "Here's the money, and you do whatever you want, and we're not going to say anything," or do we have extremely heavy restrictions on it, in which case, they may say, "We'll see you later. We don't want your aid anymore." There's this delicate balance that aid agencies play between wanting to have input but, at the same time, not being in a situation where the government has to reject the [crosstalk 00:31:57].
- Ali Moore: In some ways, does that mean that if someone put it to you, not putting all the eggs in one basket, is, in fact, the most appropriate response? You're not withdrawing the aid, but you're certainly providing yourself with other opportunities, for getting it where it needs to go.
- Anne Décobert: I think so, and I think that, that's what many donors and INGOs, that's the position that they would be adopting. Nowadays, there's this idea that aid can also be used, not only in conflict-sensitive ways, but in ways that contribute positively to peace and reconciliation. There is, more and more, this interlinking between the development programmes of international donors and attempts to actually promote dialogue and reconciliation between those who have been on different sides of this decades-long civil society conflict, basically.
- Ali Moore: That brings me, very nicely, to something that you've both written in your recent research. You write, "The decisions that international donors make, concerning where and how to channel aid effectively, amount to decisions about who are legitimate sociopolitical actors and agents of change." Is it that far an analysis, do you think, from the aid community, or is it more a matter of working where they can, when they can, dealing with the cards that they've been dealt?



Anne Décobert: Well, I think it's a bit of a combination. We can't forget the fact that Myanmar was, for a very, very long time, a very closed-off country, where there was a lack of information for international actors. Members or staff of donor agencies and INGOs were genuinely trying to help populations on the ground, in a context where they lacked information, they lacked access, and they lacked an ability to, maybe, play with all the players that they needed to play to at that time. That has definitely shifted, over time. There's more information, now, available. There's more access in some areas, although not all areas because in some areas, it's become more restrictive, but over time, there has been an ability for international actors to play more of this mediator and peace-building role.

Ali Moore: I guess one could almost argue almost benign work of international aid. I'm thinking more of the decisions about legitimate sociopolitical actors. That implies influencing power balances. That implies unintended consequences. It implies changing the game on the ground. Do you think that's what international aid had done in Myanmar?

Anne Décobert: I think it's something that was very obvious with the cross-border groups, in particular. For a long time, international donors, and we're talking major international donors, funded these cross-border groups as a way, not only to channel aid to communities that otherwise had no access to basic health and education services, but also because they considered the leaders of those cross-border groups to be legitimate sociopolitical actors and, in the words of one donor whom I spoke at the time, "Agents have changed." There was an endorsement of these actors as legitimate.

Then, what we saw around the period, sort of, 2010 to 2015, was that there was a real change in international perceptions of those actors. This is not all donors, but, in the narratives and in the discourses of some donors, those legitimate agents of change came to be redefined as illegitimate actors, so there was a shift where, for example, the ethnic resistance groups were no longer called freedom fighters. They came to be called illegal insurgents. The cross-border groups that worked with the ethnic resistance groups came to be redefined, from being seen as humanitarian workers, to... Many people condemned them, and said they couldn't be humanitarian. They weren't humanitarian because they weren't politically neutral, and they were... The accusation went that, through their partnerships with these resistance groups, they were feeding into conflict dynamics. There was very much, this change from these actors being good guys to, essentially, being bad guys.

Tamas Wells: Part of the problem.

Ali Moore: Yes, yes. Of course, we're talking about aid, which is fundamentally there to help people. So, while all of this good guy/bad guy, good guy/bad guy is going on, what is happening to the people?

Tamas Wells: We could probably tell loads of stories of grassroots projects where there's



been really profound changes and water and sanitation programme has built a well, and the children aren't getting diarrhoea anywhere near as much as they used to. I think there'd be hundreds of those kinds of stories that we could tell. Part of that bigger picture of, how much is that contributing to the changes happening? We looked, earlier, about those budgets that if you took all of the aid that goes to Myanmar, is still only a fraction of the size of government budgets or fund direct investment... Yes, aid in a small-scale way probably has had fantastic local level effects. They may not be as much as the effects of other things, and at a bigger level, it's probably empowered certain political actors and disempowered others, over time.

- Anne Décobert: There are definitely some fantastic stories. There are also some very practical and not so fantastic impacts of these shifting definitions of good guys and bad guys. You can see that very clearly in the hearts of the border lands, which is still only accessible by these ethnic minority service providers. One group that I've worked with, for a very long time, lost major donor fundings throughout this 2012, 2015 period, and this impacted very, very, clearly on the ability of that group to buy basic medical supplies, and they ran out of medicine. We're talking about systems for healthcare provision that have developed over decades, where you have 4,400 health workers serving a target population of three quarters of a million people and they're running out of medicine, and they still can't necessarily tap into the funding coming from central areas.
- Tamas Wells: Yes, so that's a tangible example of who is seen to be a good actor become one that's part of the problem, and that's on the ground impact.
- Ali Moore: What's the future of aid in Myanmar? Do you think we're seeing... the pendulum seems to have come to the middle, where no eggs go in a single basket? Do you think that is the future?
- Tamas Wells: I think that we're talking about this based in the beauty narrative. I think that's ended and, in that sense, I think donors now will be more cautious in the way that they approach the country and perhaps hedge their bets more. I think we can't get away from the bigger picture of Western aid globally being less influential. We saw those figures before of just how small a fraction of money flows. Aid is now-
- Ali Moore: Compared to foreign direct investment.
- Tamas Wells: Yes. Whereas, if we'd looked at the '90s in Cambodia, aid was just a huge part of the economy. I think we're seeing a shift towards Western aid being less influential, generally, which then raises these questions about conditionality and, "How much can I tell you what to do if you don't actually need this money?" Whereas, if aid makes up half of the economy, then, you can, kind of, force governments to do whatever you want, and donors have done that.
- Anne Décobert: Yes, and the other factor is there's a lot of uncertainty at the moment because Myanmar is facing an upcoming election in 2020. Aung San Suu Kyi is not as



young as she once was. There's a lot of discussion and uncertainty around her succession and around Myanmar's future. I think international actors, Western and non-Western, are facing this very uncertain political context, added to which the cease-fire discussions, the stalling, if not going backwards. There's a lot of political uncertainties.

Ali Moore: It is an absolutely extraordinary story and extraordinary country. I'm enormously grateful to both of you for being so generous with your thoughts. An enormous thank you to Tamas and Anne.

Tamas Wells: Thank you.

Anne Décobert: Thank you.

Ali Moore: Our guests have been Dr. Tamas Wells and Dr. Anne Décobert, of the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this, and all our other episodes, at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia, by following us on the Apple Podcast App, Stitcher, Spotify, or SoundCloud. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcast. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show. Of course, let your friends know about us on social media.

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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 Islamicturn.

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 data 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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