PERSPECTIVE

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Disinformation, Violence, and Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Indonesia's 2019 Elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The violence that broke out in Indonesia of May 21-23, 2019, marks the world's first instance of online disinformation leading to election-related riots.

- A disinformation cascade followed the opposition's claim that the election had been stolen by incumbent president Jokowi.

- Framed by this narrative, social media platforms saw a large spike in the volume of anti-Chinese disinformation.

- Anti-Chinese narratives were a hybrid of old prejudices against local ethnic Chinese and new anxieties over China's rising influence in the region.

- Anti-Chinese tropes will persist beyond 2019, serving as they do to unite right-wing nationalists and militant Islamists.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's 2019 elections culminated in protests and riots on May 21-23, as supporters of the Prabowo Subianto-Sandiago Uno opposition rejected the results of the presidential election, alleging electoral fraud by incumbent Joko Widodo (Jokowi). During the unrest, eight people were killed in clashes with police, and a ninth died later in hospital. Hundreds more were injured. A search for the "dalang" (puppetmaster) of the riots, however, has obscured the fact that a wealth of open source data indicates that many of those involved in the street violence were motivated by misleading or false information. Militant oppositionists were mobilised by a cascade of fake news that began with reports that the election had been stolen, and culminated in a belief that their community was under attack.

This marks the first time in a democracy that social media-fuelled fake news and disinformation has led to election riots. Needless to say, the violence in Jakarta was caused by a convergence of factors, including elite machinations and protestor grievances. However, with a mainstream media largely sympathetic to the government, those provoking the unrest relied on the spread of disinformation through social media platforms.

The analysis in this report is informed by access to hundreds of messages by opposition activists and militant Islamists on the encrypted Telegram platform, combined with other open source data and reporting. The Indonesia case serves as a warning to other democracies with polarised electorates and high social media penetration, especially where democratic institutions are labouring under the strain of populist politics.

FROM PROTESTS TO RIOTS

Acting on the belief that the presidential election had been stolen by President Joko Widowo (Jokowi), thousands of supporters of opposition leader Prabowo Subianto descended in protest on the office of the Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) on 21 May 2019. The protests were triggered by the official declaration of Jokowi as the winner early that same morning, a timing chosen to minimise attention and potential disruptions. Protestors, marching under the banner of the National Movement for People's Sovereignty (GNKR), demanded that Bawaslu disqualify Jokowi and his running mate Ma'ruf Amin for electoral fraud that was "structured, systematic, and massive"—the legal threshold to overturn an election result under Indonesia's electoral law.[1]

After nightfall, as the protests outside the Bawaslu office dissipated, smaller groups of people began to throw rocks and Molotov cocktails at the police. Skirmishes between rioters and police broke out in the Tanah Abang area of Central Jakarta, an area adjacent to the Bawaslu office where many protesters from out of town were staying due to it being the location of the headquarters of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), the lead organisation in the protests. A violent clash occurred outside the headquarters of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) itself. A nearby police dormitory came under attack. By the end of May 23, eight civilians had died (all but one of gunshot wounds), hundreds were injured, and over 400 people were arrested in the worst street violence in Jakarta since the fall of Suharto in 1998.

In the weeks preceding the riots, and especially during them, supporters of the government and of the opposition appear to have been inhabiting almost completely separate information ecosystems. Pro-opposition message groups on platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram became deluged with paranoid fake news and misinformation. Although the master frame of such misinformation was the allegation of massive electoral fraud ("kecurangan"), a high proportion of message traffic consisted of anti-Chinese disinformation and conspiracy theories.

On May 22, in order to reduce fake news traffic, the Ministry of Communications and Information blocked video and photo uploads and downloads on several social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.[2] This temporary move, however, appeared to only drive more activity to chat groups on the encrypted Telegram platform, where the traffic in anti-Chinese disinformation has continued apace, despite the resolution of the electoral conflict.

ANTI-CHINESE DISINFORMATION

Online disinformation that the election had been stolen inflamed a volatile atmosphere and led to rioting. Much less recognised, however, is the fact that during the riots, fake news and conspiracies drawing on anti-Chinese tropes raised the risk of racially motivated violence. The primary false narrative circulating during the riots drew on the trope of Chinese "colonisation." Message groups become deluged with false claims that soldiers from mainland China had infiltrated the Indonesian National Police (Polri) and were being allowed by the Jokowi government to repress opposition protesters. Some versions of the conspiracy theory suggested that the Indonesian Communist Party was colluding with the Chinese Communist Party in the plot.[3]

Out of context, reports of Chinese troops on the street of Jakarta might sound implausible. But within the militant opposition online echo chamber, the false narrative was the logical extension of months, if not years, of conspiracy theories on the theme of Chinese neo-imperialism. Such conspiracy thinking can be traced to the anti-Ahok controversy of 2016.[4] In addition to feeding into anti-Chinese sentiments, the "Chinese soldiers" hoax also contributed to a dangerous false narrative that accused the police of communist sympathies and sought to play the police off against the army.

During the riots of May 21-23, a continuous stream of messages and discussions appeared on Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram suggesting that Chinese troops had infiltrated the police deployed to counter the rioters. One message, circulated on Facebook on May 22 commented on an image taken from television footage of mobile brigade police (Brimob) forcing back rioters. The message by "Khumayra" said, "The language spoken by these Brimob members is Chinese. So it is not a hoax that Brimob has been infiltrated by the Chinese military."[5] Another user, active on Telegram, wrote in response to the "Chinese soldiers" hoax, "I thought only foreign workers were being brought from China, in fact [Chinese] are also being brought to kill the people."

In one of its regular reports, the Ministry of Communications and Information notes a different iteration of the same conspiracy circulating as a series of messages on WhatsApp. The messages warned of "mass kidnapping" by Chinese troops, one of them stating: "Take

care those who want to travel to Jakarta [for the protests]. If there is a free lift and you don't know the driver, don't accept it. Because there is a plot to kidnap en masse and Chinese soldiers are on standby with weapons in strategic places. This info is from Koramil [Indonesian military]. Spread to your groups, the info is validated by a Gerindra candidate."[6]

The ministry report adds that fake news about Chinese soldiers infiltrating Indonesia had been circulated online for some time. The report refers to a Facebook post from 19 December 2018, that claimed that "as many as 500 thousand soldiers from China are already inside Indonesia and they are ready to burn the whole of Indonesia."[7]

During the riots, the "Chinese soldiers" hoax was disseminated and discussed incessantly on Telegram chat groups that aggregated opposition activists and Islamists. The stream of disinformation was striking for its images of masked Indonesian police who were said to be Chinese soldiers, identifiable by their facial features, deployed against the protestors. Some posts drew threatening messages in return, including calls to behead the Chinese troops and steal their rifles.

In an indication of how seriously the Indonesian police responded to the hoax, on May 24 at the National Police Headquarters in Jakarta, the public relations unit held a press conference in which three officers whose images had been used in the hoax were presented to the public. In a dramatic scene made for live television, the officers unmasked themselves before the cameras and proceeded to give their names and birthplaces, in order to prove that they were in fact Indonesian citizens.[8]

"MOSQUE ATTACK" DISINFORMATION

Building on the "stolen election" and "Chinese soldiers" themes, after the outbreak of violence on the night of the May 21, fake news was spread that a historic mosque located not far from the protests outside the Election Monitoring Agency had been attacked by police. The Al-Makmur mosque, which has been at the centre of the anti-Ahok Islamist mobilisations, was one of dozens of mosques in the area at which protestors from outside Jakarta had stayed overnight.[9] One version of the false story claimed that the police involved in the "attack" were ethnic Chinese.[10] Other versions did not come to this conclusion. However, the claims appeared in opposition message groups within a stream of messages and photographs depicting the police as being infiltrated by "Chinese soldiers".

The origins of the hoax trace to the night of May 21, when violence first broke out in front of the Election Monitoring Agency (Bawaslu) building. As police forced protestors back from the Bawaslu building towards the Central Jakarta suburb of Tanah Abang, their rounds of rubber bullets and tear gas appeared to have come in close proximity of the mosque, which is located along the route. Panic was sparked among protestors who feared that the mosque was being targeted.

In a brief, shaky video circulated on messaging apps not long after the incident, titled "Tanah Abang Mosque Situation", an unidentified voice says "Al-Makmur mosque in Tanah Abang is being fired on by inhumane police, we are being fired on here…"[11] The video circulated widely on opposition message groups and on militant Islamist groups— including pro-ISIS groups—that rapidly took up the opposition cause. In one hybrid pro-

opposition jihadist message group, the "mosque attack" hoax video was forwarded with the comment, "the masses are being massacred by police at the Al Ma'mun [sic] Mosque, Tanah Abang. Someone in the same group then comments, "Al-Makmur mosque is being shot at exactly like Al-Aqsa," in reference to the mosque in Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam, often a target in the Israel-Palestine conflict.[12]

Jejak News Agency, a recently emerged jihadist Telegram account styled as a newswire, also reported on the "mosque attack", spreading the disinformation across the Indonesian jihadist community. The article stated: "Reportedly the riots grew bigger last night after many of the Aksi 22 masses were injured and even reportedly died; moreover police and Brimob shot at the masses inside a mosque and caused the mosque to be damaged."[13]

A video that circulated on the night of the 21st and the morning of the 22nd spread the hoax by using prominent local Muslim figures to add credibility. Titled "Siaga Jihad" (Jihad Alert), the video featured three Tanah Abang Muslim figures standing in the street with the burning and exploding debris of the riots in the background. One of them, the prominent community leader, Fachry Al-Habsyi, was identified in the video titles.[14] In the brief recording the men call for people to join them in defending the mosque against attack. Fachry Al-Habsyi shouts: "Defend Tanah Abang! Tanah Abang is the bastion of the Muslim community. I invite all to join us—all!—tonight. The Al-Makmur Mosque is the pride of the Muslim community in Tanah Abang; not just Tanah Abang, even in West Sumatra they know this mosque."[15]

In fact, the mosque suffered no damage and the reports of an attack were denied by police and debunked in a detailed account by *Tirto.id*.[16] But in one of the most provocative moments of the post-election conflict, the following day National Mandate Party (PAN) founder and key opposition figure Amien Rais visited Al-Makmur mosque where he made a statement that further perpetuated the hoax. In a video posted to his official Instagram account, Amien Rais waved a bullet jacket as he stood in the mosque, declaring, "My brothers, I'm crying. I'm very, very sad, but also angry that the police, who I think smell like PKI [Communist Party of Indonesia], have crudely shot at the Muslim community."[17]

Following the riots, police investigators and journalists focused on uncovering the premeditated and coordinated aspects of the violence. There is some evidence that a degree of preparation and coordination by actors helped to turn a peaceful protest into a street battle, employing Tanah Abang gang figures with connections to Prabowo.[18] Promises to reveal the "puppet master" of the riots, however, have fallen through.

Meanwhile, it is clear that a cocktail of false information and grievances created a fertile environment for political violence.[19] Beneath the platitudes from the authorities that the rioters were an unknown "third force", there is abundant evidence that many individuals were motivated to join the riots because of false and misleading information. These individuals included FPI members,[20] an assortment of FPI sympathisers, mosque youth, street toughs, locals "defending" their kampung, and a number of youth from West Java and other regions who had been sent to Jakarta by their religious teachers to join the protest against the election results.[21] Others may have been bystanders reacting to police raids.

The protestors had congregated in the Tanah Abang area, where many of those from out of town were staying overnight, likely because the area is the location of the FPI headquarters

and not far from the main protest site at the Bawaslu office. Not coincidentally, this was the area that saw most of the clashes with police. In a video statement circulated on May 29 exiled FPI leader, Habib Rizieq Shihab, pointedly denied the involvement of provocateurs in the riots, labelled the dead as martyrs, and called for further violence.[22]

A Tempo magazine investigation found that although some people had been paid to join the unrest, others were motivated by disinformation, including the "mosque attack" story:

> There were those who attacked the police because they were victims of misleading information after watching a viral video on social media. In that video Mobil Brigade [police] members were suspected of shooting at a mosque in Tanah Abang while in pursuit of demonstrators. Sapto Putra Permana, 22 years, who was provoked after watching the video, decided to go to the streets and fight the police without checking the accuracy [of the video]. "I couldn't accept that my religion was being meddled with," said the man from Radio Dalam, South Jakarta.[23]

Sapto was hospitalised after being shot by police in the leg with a rubber bullet.

CONCLUSION

Much detail of the 2019 post-election riots remains unclear. We may never know the truth about claims of elite actors and paid provocateurs. The spectre of a "puppetmaster" looms large as it resonates with historical patterns of political violence in Indonesia, such as 1998. In the era of social media, however, it is much easier and perhaps more effective to provoke unrest through disinformation spread virally online.

Whatever the ratio of planning to spontaneity, it is clear that a pro-opposition disinformation cascade led to protests and then violence that developed in a dangerous and unpredictable way on the streets of the capital in May 2019. Indonesia has given the world a salutary example of how ethnic and religiously tinged disinformation can spiral out of control on social media, intensifying post-election tensions into violent conflict and creating a sense of political crisis. The leveraging of social media disinformation to target core institutions of democracy, such as election monitoring agencies and the electoral process itself, is a particular threat to democratic countries everywhere in the context of rising populism.

The disinformation cascade gathered force through a nested sequence of conspiracies— "stolen election", "Chinese soldiers", "mosque attack". No ethnic violence eventuated. However, there remains the unresolved case of Yunarto Wijaya, the director of polling institute Charta Politika, who was allegedly targeted for assassination along with four senior government officials. Yunarto believes he was singled out due to his prominent Chinese heritage.[24] The riots may have been larger and the violence more targeted if the Indonesian authorities, wary of repeating the mistakes of the Ahok case, had not been more active in suppressing the opposition.[25]

Despite the Jokowi government's tougher stance against militant oppositionists, online disinformation will continue to be a challenge for Indonesian democracy. Finding the balance between countering malicious disinformation and protecting freedom of

expression is itself fraught with dangers to democracy. Meanwhile, anti-Chinese sentiment is likely to persist online, providing a populist theme that unifies militant Islamists and right-wing nationalists.

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[3] Photo and WhatsApp message screenshot, "Kami Partai Komunis Indonesian Telah Bekerjasama dengan Partai Komunis China", May 22, 2019.

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[5] Khumayra, screenshot of Facebook post, May 22, 2019.

[6] Kementerian Komunikasi Dan Informatika, "Laporan Isu Hoaks Terkait Kerusuhan 22 Mei 2019", May 25, 2019, https://web.kominfo.go.id/sites/default/files/Laporan%20Isu%20Hoaks%20Terkait%20Kerusuhan%2022%20Mei%202019%20Kementerian%20Kominfo.pdf

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[8] "Bantah Hoaks 'Polisi Impor' dari China, 3 Brimob Dipamerkan di Mabes Polri," Liputan 6, May 24, 2019 https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/3974925/bantah-hoaks-polisi-impor-dari-china-3-brimob-dipamerkan-di-mabes-polri

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[12] Telegram messages, May 22, 2019.

[13] "Kericuhan Terjadi Diwilayah Jakarta Pusat, Dimana Masa Aksi 22 Menuntut Untuk Menggunlingkan Rezim Jokowi," Jejak News Agency, May 22, 2019.

[14] Telegram message, "Siaga Jihad," mp4 recording, May 21, 2019.

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[23] Tempo Magazine, 9 June 2019, p. 37.

[24] Mata Najwah, Soal Cina dan Jilbab: Blak-blakan Merawat Indonesia, July 15, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_aUfAHtT8-E&t=2448s

[25] A similar point is made in an IPAC report on the protests. See Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Indonesian Islamists and Postelection Protests in Jakarta", IPAC Report No. 58, July 23, 2019, p. 18.