

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

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Digital Convergence and Militant Crosspollination in Indonesia

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Indonesian Muslim cleric Rizieq Shihab (C), founder and leader of Front Pembela Islam (FPI), surrounded by his supporters on arrival at the police headquarters in Jakarta on December 12, 2020. The effect of Telegram suppressing jihadi channels and the Indonesian government clamping down on opposition Islamist groups and driving them into the virtual sphere has created fertile ground for crosspollination between pro-ISIS and pro-FPI militants. Picture: Dasril Roszandi, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A social media analysis of *salafi-jihadi* and opposition Islamist chat groups indicates early but significant signs of crosspollination between both communities.
- This appears to be the result of a government crackdown that has forced Islamists to rely especially on Telegram, a platform that had traditionally been a haven for ISIS sympathisers. Digital convergence among militants on Telegram and similar platforms may emerge as a long-term trend.
- The co-mingling between jihadi and Islamist groups is facilitating the spread of anti-Chinese sentiment in jihadist networks and the normalisation of extremist memes in opposition Islamist networks. This is a significant development given that opposition Islamist groups such as the now-banned Front Pembela Islam (FPI) and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) have traditionally kept their distance from pro-ISIS and other jihadi groups, and exercised strict internal policing of their ideological boundaries.
- An increasingly common narrative in both Islamist and jihadists chats characterises the Jokowi government as a tyrannical un-Islamic regime controlled by Chinese interests.
- As the Indonesian government continues to crack down on both the violent jihadi and Islamist opposition groups and drive them into the virtual underground, there is a risk that the resultant cross-pollination of both groups could push non-violent opposition activists into violent extremism.

INTRODUCTION

There are early signs of crosspollination and convergence among Islamist opposition movements in Indonesia, based on an analysis of activity on the encrypted Telegram chat platform. The blurring of lines came in the midst of a government crackdown on Islamists and indicates that some actors may have been radicalised and have crossed into the violent extremism sphere since the banning of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) mass organization in December 2020.

At the start of President Jokowi's second term, opposition Islamists such as the FPI and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) ran Telegram channels with around a hundred subscribers. By contrast, pro-ISIS militants ran channels with many hundreds. Now the ratio has reversed. Opposition Islamists run channels with tens of thousands of subscribers while ISIS militants have been suppressed into small channels of around one hundred members. As soon as pro-ISIS Telegram channels in Indonesia gain any critical mass, they are shut down by Telegram, presumably based on reporting by counter-terrorism authorities.

The effect of Telegram suppressing jihadi channels and the Indonesian government clamping down on opposition Islamist groups and driving them into the virtual sphere has created fertile ground for crosspollination between pro-ISIS and pro-FPI militants. Foreshadows of such crosspollination were seen in the Telegram chats that sprung up around the post-election violence of 2019. For the first time in Indonesia, groups emerged where pro-ISIS militants shared common cause with the conservative Islamist opposition activists. Both sides were galvanised by opposition to the government and the police. Typically, pro-ISIS militants would agitate against participating in street protests, while opposition activists bridled at ISIS sympathisers' glorification of Syria war propaganda.

ANTI-CHINESE SENTIMENT AND DIGITAL CONVERGENCE

Since 2019, anti-Chinese or anti-China sentiment has emerged as a crossover issue for militants across the spectrum in Indonesia.¹ Such sentiment plays a role in militant circles in Indonesia similar to anti-Shia sentiment in the recent past, and serve as an early indicator of convergence among militants at the ideological level.

The current wave of anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesia can be traced to the mass mobilisations that began in 2016 to protest against the alleged blasphemy of the then-governor of Jakarta, the Chinese-Christian Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok). Generally, pro-ISIS militants rejected the protests as unacceptable participation in the democratic process. While the FPI was focused on bringing down Ahok, Jemaah Islamiyah was sending members to train in Syria, and Jamaah Anshorut Daulah (JAD) was seeking to import the war from Syria.

Yet the Ahok case created a small overlap of interest between salafi-jihadist and Islamist militants. The case of the 31 March 2021 police headquarters shooter, Zakiah Aini, is a recent example. Zakiah Aini's last testament indicated that anti-Ahok sentiment had blended with her pro-ISIS agenda. In her hand-written document, she singled out Ahok for criticism, the only Indonesian politician mentioned. Her testament began by advising her family not to use banks (the charging of interest being against Islam), and to not associate

with the government which, per salafi-jihadi ideology, is considered an oppressive un-Islamic (*thogut*) regime. She then implored her older sister “to not celebrate the *kafir* Ahok.”

While Zakiah Aini did not elaborate on her mention of Ahok, Ahok-related controversy was one element of the media backdrop prior to the police headquarters attack. ISEAS data shows that in the three months leading up to the attack, Ahok was the subject of considerable social media chatter in relation to multiple controversies (see Figure 1).

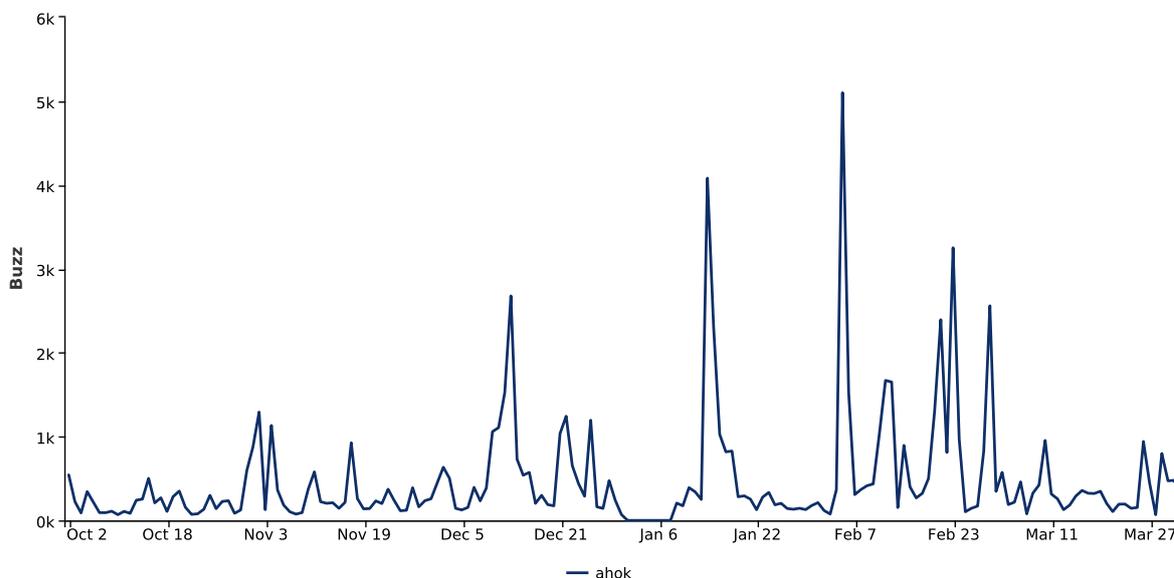


Figure 1: Indonesian social media mentions of “Ahok”, October-April, 2020-21 (Source: ISEAS data)

In late February, a political survey agency made news with a poll highlighting Ahok’s potential to be a presidential candidate in 2024—an unlikely prospect but a spectre that continues to haunt the imaginations of opposition Islamists.² Flooding after heavy rain in Jakarta, also in February, reignited an old debate about how to fix drainage in the capital, a discussion which inevitably dredges up Ahok’s controversial policy as governor of evicting and demolishing “slum” (*kawasan kumuh*) areas, which are common along waterways. In 2016, Ian Wilson argued the policy was “one of the most aggressive campaigns of evictions and forced displacements in the modern history of the city.” The evictions made perfect recruitment propaganda for FPI at the time, given its base among the urban poor.³

The highest profile the Ahok story gained prior to the attack was a controversy in which the former governor was identified as having attended a party held by Raffi Ahmad, an Indonesian celebrity with over 50 million followers on Instagram, despite pandemic restrictions on public gatherings. FPI and its allies led the online criticism of the event, claiming a double standard on the part of the authorities, where FPI leader Muhammad Rizieq Shihab was being prosecuted for holding events in violation of public health regulations while Ahok enjoyed a free pass.⁴ The controversy served as fodder for anti-Ahok memes on Islamist Telegram chats featuring photographs of the party Ahok attended (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: An anti-Ahok meme circulated on Instagram and Telegram, January-March 2021
(Source: Telegram)

Cluster analysis of social media mentions of “Ahok” in the months prior to the attack on the police headquarters shows the relative salience of these three story themes (see Figure 3). Among the largest clusters, the flooding issue is represented by the “banjir” (flood), “Anies Baswedan” (Ahok’s gubernatorial rival) and “Gubernur DKI” clusters. Both “Raffi Ahmad” and “Rizieq Shihab” are represented. Among the smaller clusters that began to grow following the attack are “surat wasiat” (last testament) and “Mabes Polri” (National Police Headquarters).

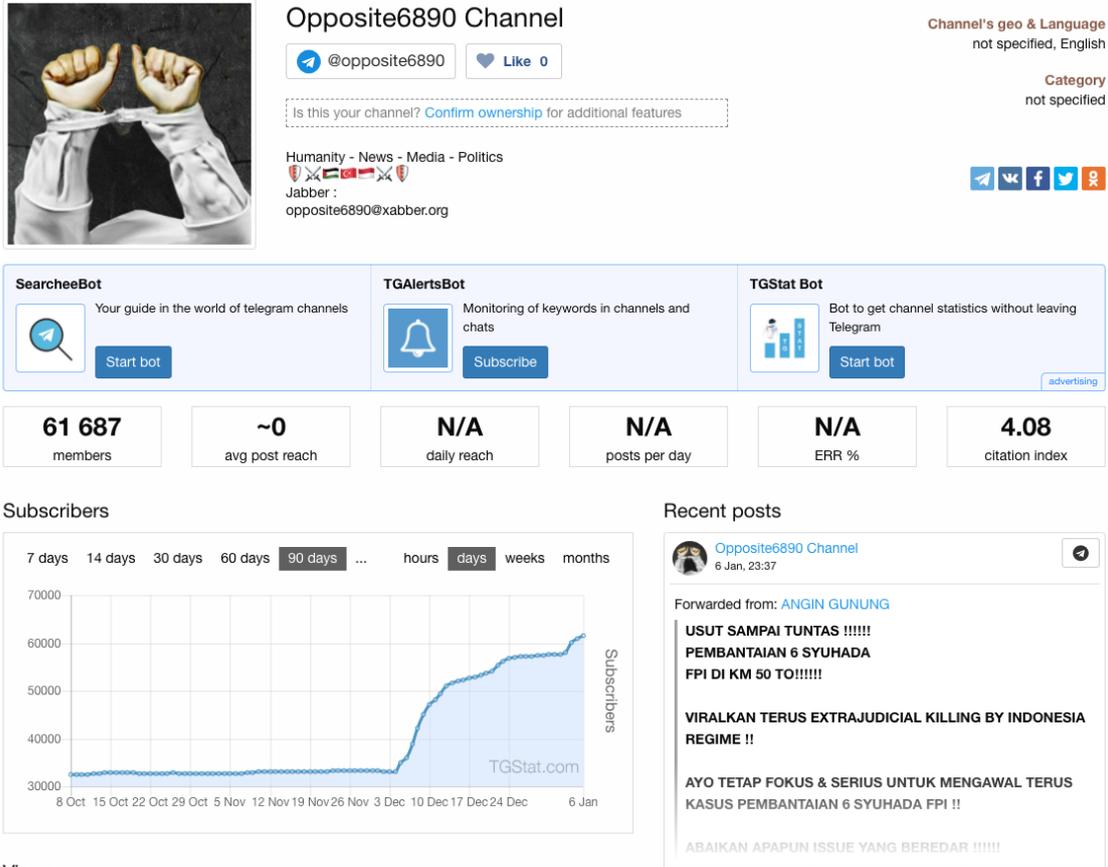


Figure 4: Leading opposition Telegram channel “Opposite6890” doubled its subscriber base to over 60,000 after the government crackdown on the Islamic Defenders Front in December 2020 (Source: tgstat.com).

MAINSTREAMING OF MILITANT MEMES

There are signs that militant crosspollination is also occurring at the level of memes and concepts, with the mainstreaming of terms and anti-government memes among FPI, PKS, and other Islamist groups that previously were common only among salafi-jihadists. Arabic terms such as “zalim” (“tyrannical,” in reference to the Jokowi government), “thogut” (un-Islamic oppressor), and “firaun” (pharaoh), for example, have become common among opposition Islamists, especially since the crackdown on the FPI and the killing of six members of former FPI leader Muhammad Rizieq Shihab’s security detail in a shootout with police on 7 December 2020. Until very recently, in Indonesia, *thogut* (also transliterated as *thaghut*) was deployed primarily by militants of Jemaah Islamiyah and ISIS to refer to the Indonesian government or leadership. According to their salafi-jihadi worldview, ISIS followers conceive of themselves as “helpers of the (Islamic) state” (*anshor daulah*) and of the police and government officials as “helpers of the thogut” (*anshor thogut*).

Thogut is rare in vernacular Indonesian, making it a useful index for the spread of a radical meme across social media platforms. Zakiah Aini used the term in her last testament, a fact noted by Indonesian reporting. Given the rarity of its appearance in the media, it is not

surprising that Google searches for the two main spellings of *thogut* spiked in late March/early April, as shown by Google Trends data (see Figure 5).

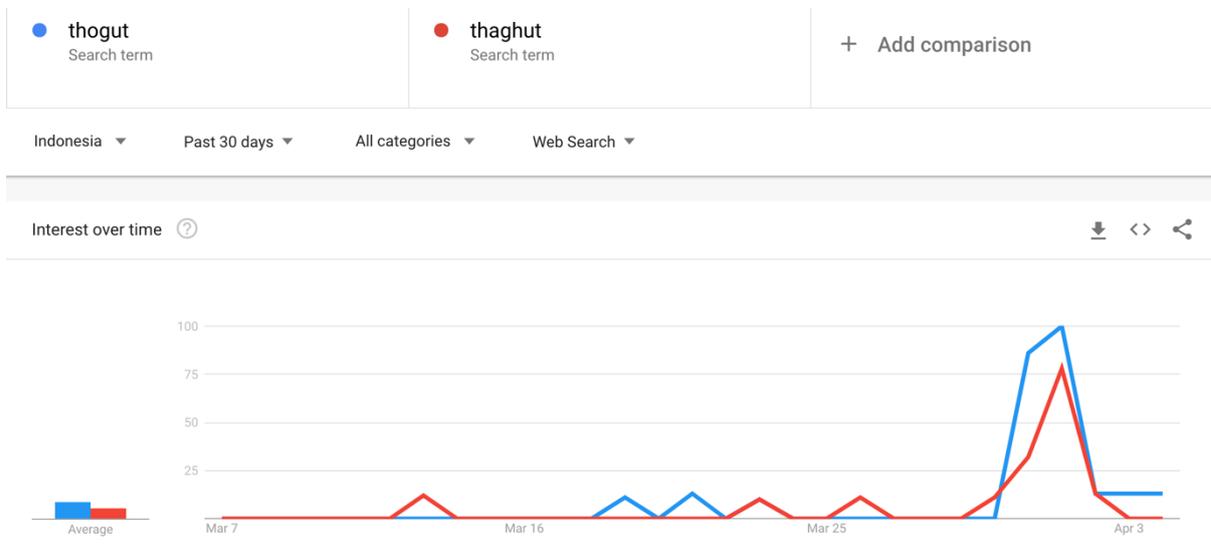


Figure 5: Google Trends, March-April 2021.

Cluster analysis of ISEAS data on mentions of “thogut” on Indonesian social media reveals how the term is now associated with both ISIS and FPI militants. “Negara Thogut” (Thogut State) is the largest cluster of social media chatter. Other major clusters associated with the term reflect the police headquarters shooting incident (“Polisi,” “Surat Wasiat”) while others relate to the FPI (“Rizieq Shihab”, “HRS”, “Habib Rizieq”).



Figure 6: “Thogut State” cluster analysis, March-April 2021 (Source: ISEAS data).

The epithet most commonly used by FPI sympathisers for the Indonesian government is *zalim* (meaning oppressive or unjust). But the growing use of *thogut* is a signal of the diffusion of delegitimizing and extremist language from salafi-jihadism into more

mainstream Islamist contexts. A striking example of the use of the term in a mainstream context could be found following the police headquarters attack on Reddit, a web forum that is often the birthplace of new internet memes. An Indonesian user created a meme depicting Zakiah Aini, the police headquarters shooter, in the style of an album cover, under the title “Diss Track Album for Ahok and the Thogut Government” (see Figure 7).



Figure 7: Meme depicting pro-ISIS militant Zakiah Aini (Source: Reddit)

Another increasingly popular meme reflects the radicalisation of rhetoric in the wake of the crackdown. Opposition activists now commonly characterise President Jokowi as a “pharaoh” (fir’aun), a word uncommon in Indonesian parlance but which appears in the

Qur'an in reference to the battle between Moses (Musa) and the Pharaoh of Egypt. The term is often used by salafi-jihadists (along with zalim and thogut) but it is also a common trope used by mainstream Islamists against a leader perceived as unjust and illegitimate. The growing popularity of the "fir'aun" imagery reflects the rapid deterioration of relations between the government and the Islamist opposition in Indonesia. Although the term is still too rare to show up in social media analytics, it is another early signal of radicalisation, and is used to great visual effect in pro-FPI memes on Telegram (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Pro-FPI meme. Caption reads "The more ferocious the Pharaoh in chasing [the prophet] Musa, thus the closer the time for the Pharaoh to fall" (Source: Telegram)

CONCLUSION

Early signals from social media analysis suggest that extremist rhetoric against the Jokowi government is becoming more common in Islamist circles, partly through a process of crosspollination with salafi-jihadist ideas in shared online spaces. Opposition Islamists increasingly describe the Jokowi government as a tyrannical un-Islamic regime controlled

by Chinese interests. Crosspollination is occurring among opposition Islamists as previously mainstream actors get pushed off open platforms and into deep web platforms and closed chat groups, such as those found on the Telegram app. This trend can be seen in the spread of anti-Chinese sentiment in salafi-jihadist circles and in the spread of violent extremist terms in opposition Islamist circles. On Telegram, several groups have emerged which blend jihadist (pro-ISIS) and opposition Islamist (pro-FPI) propaganda.

Although the adoption of more radical anti-government memes by Indonesian Islamists may appear to vindicate the banning of FPI, it can also be argued that the government’s suppression policy risks pushing non-violent opposition activists into violent extremism. The risk might be raised especially if government actions are seen as indiscriminate, and mainstream forums for dissent are seen as blocked. With the post-9/11-style violent extremism of groups like ISIS in decline, the increasingly militant views of mainstream opposition Islamists are more significant than ever.

¹ Quinton Temby, “Disinformation, Violence, and Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Indonesia’s 2019 Elections”, *ISEAS Perspective*, September 2, 2019, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

² “Survei LSI, Ahok Masuk Daftar Calon Presiden 2024”, *Kompas*, February 23, 2021, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2021/02/23/13091541/survei-lsi-ahok-masuk-daftar-calon-presiden-2024>

³ Ian Wilson, “Making Enemies Out of Friends”, *New Mandala*, November 3, 2016, <https://www.newmandala.org/making-enemies-friends/>

⁴ “Kapolda Metro Ditantang Tersangkalan Raffi Ahmad hingga Ahok”, *Gelora*, January 16, 2021, <https://www.gelora.co/2021/01/kapolda-metro-ditantang-tersangkalan.html>

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