



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

# CYBER TROOPS, ONLINE MANIPULATION OF PUBLIC OPINION AND CO-OPTIONATION OF INDONESIA'S CYBERSPHERE

Yatun Sastramidjaja and Wijayanto

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# **FOREWORD**

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# **Cyber Troops, Online Manipulation of Public Opinion and Co-optation of Indonesia's Cybersphere**

By Yatun Sastramidjaja and Wijayanto

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Organized propaganda and public opinion manipulation are increasing in Indonesia's cybersphere. Specifically, since 2019, there has been a marked rise of cyber troop campaigns that serve to mobilize public consensus for controversial government policies.
- Cyber troop operations played a crucial role in three controversial events in which public opinion had been initially critical of the government policy at issue. These were, first, the revision of the Law on the Corruption Eradication Commission in September 2019; second, the launch of the New Normal policy during the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2020; and third, the passing of the Omnibus Law for Job Creation in October 2020. In all three cases, there is clear evidence of cyber troops manipulating public opinion in support of government policy.
- In all three cases, the cyber troops manufactured consent by flooding social media with narratives that promoted the governing elite's agenda, often using deceptive messages and disinformation that were amplified by numerous "buzzer" and "bot" accounts. Thereby they effectively drowned out oppositional discourses on social media and neutralized dissent, especially as mainstream media simultaneously echoed the cyber troops' narratives.
- The ever more systematic use of cyber troops—and the considerable resources spent on such operations—indicates increasing co-optation of Indonesia's cybersphere for elite interests. This threatens to undermine the quality of public debate and democracy in Indonesia because cyber troop operations not only feed public

opinion with disinformation but also prevent citizens from scrutinizing and evaluating the governing elite's behaviour and policy-making processes, which further exacerbates Indonesia's ongoing democratic regression.

# Cyber Troops, Online Manipulation of Public Opinion and Co-optation of Indonesia's Cybersphere

By Yatun Sastramidjaja and Wijayanto<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

As the world's third-largest democracy, Indonesia was once touted as a role model for democratization in Southeast Asia, especially after the reformist Joko Widodo (known as "Jokowi") was elected president in 2014. However, recent studies show that Indonesia is becoming a "defective democracy",<sup>2</sup> following a series of "democratic setbacks" since the second half of Jokowi's first term in office.<sup>3</sup> A process of democratic regression has been deepening since,<sup>4</sup> if not undergoing an

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<sup>1</sup> Yatun Sastramidjaja is Assistant Professor in Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam and an Associate Fellow in the Media, Technology and Society Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. Wijayanto is Director of the LP3ES Center for Media and Democracy and Lecturer in Government Science, Diponegoro University. This article is based on a collaborative research project on "Cyber Troops and Public Opinion Manipulation in Indonesia" (funded by ANGIN-KNAW), co-led by the authors with Ismail Fahmi (Drone Empiric) and Ward Berenschot (KITLV, University of Amsterdam).

<sup>2</sup> Ben Bland, "Politics in Indonesia: Resilient Elections, Defective Democracy", Lowy Institute, 10 April 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/politics-indonesia-resilient-elections-defective-democracy>

<sup>3</sup> Vedi R. Hadiz, "Indonesia's Year of Democratic Setbacks: Towards a New Phase of Deepening Illiberalism?", *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 53, no. 3 (2017): 261–78.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Power and Eve Warburton, eds., *Democracy in Indonesia: From Stagnation to Regression?* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020); Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, "Indonesia's Democratic Paradox: Competitive Elections amidst Rising Illiberalism", *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 55 (2019): 295–317.

all-out “authoritarian turn”.<sup>5</sup> As Larry Diamond states, one of the key signs of democratic regression is a substantial decline of civil liberties.<sup>6</sup> This has been apparent in Indonesia. In its 2020 Democracy Index, the Economist Intelligence Unit ranked Indonesia’s civil liberties among the worst in ASEAN (below Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance found that the deterioration of civic space indicates democratic backsliding in Indonesia.<sup>8</sup> As Wijayanto argues, a clear indicator of that are growing threats to media freedom.<sup>9</sup>

Against this backdrop, we turn our attention to Indonesia’s digital public sphere, where signs of democratic regression are also becoming clear. While digital media have long been hailed for their democratizing potential—providing civil societies with new means for political expression and action—studies show that digital media are no less amenable to illiberal practices or authoritarian uses.<sup>10</sup> Cybersurveillance, Internet censorship, online repression, and digital

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Power, “Jokowi’s Authoritarian Turn and Indonesia’s Democratic Decline”, *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 54, no. 3 (2018): 307–38; Wijayanto et al., *Menyelamatkan Demokrasi*, Outlook Demokrasi LP3ES (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Larry Diamond, “Breaking Out of the Democratic Slump”, *Journal of Democracy* 3 (2020): 36–50.

<sup>7</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2020*, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>

<sup>8</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, “The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise”, *IDEA GSOD Reports*, 19 November 2019, p. 193, <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2019.31>.

<sup>9</sup> Wijayanto, “Democratic Regression and Authoritarian Practices in Indonesia”, *Indonesian Journal of Political Research (IJPR)* 1 (2020): 59–71.

<sup>10</sup> Michael L. Miller and Cristian Vaccari, “Digital Threats to Democracy: Comparative Lessons and Possible Remedies”, *International Journal of Press/Politics* 25 (2020), no. 3: 333–56; Marlies Glasius and Marcus Michaelsen, “Illiberal and Authoritarian Practices in the Digital Sphere”, *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 3795–813.

propaganda and manipulation have increased in recent years. This is also apparent in Southeast Asia,<sup>11</sup> including Indonesia. Our research found evidence of cyber troops being deployed by powerful actors to mobilize consensus for elite agendas and to neutralize dissent.<sup>12</sup> Democratic regression, then, appears to go hand in hand with the rise of “digital authoritarianism”, or the use of digital media to enable and enhance authoritarian governance.<sup>13</sup>

## INDONESIA’S NARROWING CYBERSPHERE

The manipulation of public opinion on the Internet occurs in the context of an increasingly narrowing digital public sphere. In Indonesia as elsewhere, the Internet was long believed to provide a free public space for civil society groups to realize their agendas, raise public awareness of power abuses, and fight for civil and political rights.<sup>14</sup> However, in the

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<sup>11</sup> Yatun Sastramidjaja, Sue-Ann Lee, and Yew-Foong Hui, eds., *Digital Technologies and Democracy in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, forthcoming); Aim Simpeng, “Digital Media, Political Authoritarianism, and Internet Controls in Southeast Asia”, *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 1 (2020): 25–39; Fernan Talamayan, “Policing Cyberspace: Understanding Online Repression in Thailand and the Philippines”, *Journal of ASEAN Studies* 8, no. 2 (2020): 129–45.

<sup>12</sup> Following a mixed-methods approach, the research consisted of social network analysis (SNA), digital ethnography, and seventy-eight interviews with members of cyber troops.

<sup>13</sup> Tiberiu Dragu and Yonatan Lupu, “Digital Authoritarianism and the Future of Human Rights”, *International Organization* 34, no. 2 (2021): 1–27.

<sup>14</sup> Ross Tapsell, *Media Power in Indonesia: Oligarchs, Citizens and the Digital Revolution* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Muhammad Zamzam Fauzanafi, “Searching for Digital Citizenship: Fighting Corruption in Banten, Indonesia”, *ASEAS-Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2016): 289–94; Merlyna Lim, “Many Clicks but Little Sticks: Social Media Activism in Indonesia”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 4 (2013): 636–57.

last decade, Indonesia's cybersphere has been subjected to stricter cyber controls and growing online repression, which threatens to curb citizens' freedom of online expression.

To start with, the Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE) Law, Indonesia's cyber law, has been frequently used to criminalize online expressions and thereby silence critics. SAFENet, a civil society organization working on digital rights, has documented 287 cases of citizens, journalists and activists being prosecuted for violating the ITE Law since its enactment in 2008 until 2019; twenty-four of these cases occurred in 2019.<sup>15</sup> The ITE Law has also been used to target websites, allowing the Ministry of Communication and Information to block or close down websites without going through the legal process. Besides targeting websites that contain prohibited content, such as pornography or pirated material, the government has since 2016 stepped up efforts to block websites found to contain "provocative" content and to be promoting "radicalism", frequently Islamic websites and websites linked to Papua that are known to be critical of the government.<sup>16</sup>

Repressive uses of the ITE Law indicate increasing online censorship, which is also apparent from the occurrence of another form of cyber repression: the temporary shutdown of Internet connection by the government, purportedly for security reasons. This sweeping measure was first applied on 22–24 May 2019, following protests triggered by the results of the 2019 presidential election; although the protests took place mainly in Jakarta, all Indonesian regions were affected by the shutdown. The next shutdown was enforced on 21 August 2019 in the provinces of Papua and West Papua to calm political unrest, and again on 23–29 September to prevent riots in the Papuan cities Wamena and

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<sup>15</sup> SAFENet, *Indonesia Digital Rights Situation Report 2019: The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism* (Denpasar: Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network, 2020), <https://safenet.or.id/2020/10/digital-rights-situation-report-indonesia-2019-the-rise-of-digital-authoritarian/>

<sup>16</sup> Reja Hidayat, "Ketika Pemerintah Makin Digdaya Memblokir Situs", *Tirto.id*, 23 November 2016, <https://tirto.id/ketika-pemerintah-makin-digdaya-memblokir-situs-b5tq>

Jayapura from spreading. As SAFENet director Damar Juniarto argues, the shutdowns fit a pattern in which the central government seeks to control all online information flows.<sup>17</sup>

## CYBER TROOPS IN INDONESIA

In Indonesia, the concerted use of cyber troops as a tool to neutralize and repress online oppositional narratives and activism has increased since 2019. This fits a global pattern. According to a global inventory of organized social media manipulation, conducted annually since 2017 by researchers from the Oxford Internet Institute, cyber troop operations are becoming more widespread each year. In 2020, they recorded evidence of eighty-one countries using cyber troops to spread propaganda on social media.<sup>18</sup> In their definition, cyber troops are “government or political party actors tasked with manipulating public opinion online”;<sup>19</sup> in doing so, they “purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks”,<sup>20</sup> often by means of computational propaganda, or “the use of algorithms, automation, and big data to shape public life”.<sup>21</sup> Ranking countries according to “high”, “medium”, or “low” cyber troop capacity, the Oxford researchers place Indonesia in the “medium” category, where cyber troops are “more consistent in form and strategy, involving full-time staff members who are employed year-round to

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<sup>17</sup> Damar Juniarto, “Internet Shutdown in Indonesia: The New Policy to Control Information Online?”, in *Digital Technologies and Democracy in Southeast Asia*, edited by Sastramidjaja, Lee, and Hui.

<sup>18</sup> Samantha Bradshaw, Hannah Bailey, and Philip N. Howard, *Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation* (Oxford Internet Institute, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, *The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation* (Oxford Internet Institute, 2019), p. i.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard, “Computational Propaganda Worldwide: Executive Summary”, Computational Propaganda Research Project, Working Paper No. 2017/11, Oxford Internet Institute.

<sup>21</sup> Bradshaw and Howard, *The Global Disinformation Order*, p. i.

control the information space”, and “often coordinate with multiple actor types, and experiment with a variety of tools and strategies for social media manipulation”.<sup>22</sup> While this description fits our findings, our research indicates that Indonesia might transition to the category of “high cyber troop capacity”, which “involves large numbers of staff, and large budgetary expenditure on psychological operations or information warfare”, often from state-allocated funds.<sup>23</sup> Yet, Indonesia’s cyber troops are nothing like the industrialized propaganda machines found in countries like Russia, with state-sponsored troll farms operating on a massive, international scale.<sup>24</sup>

In Indonesia, cyber troops consist of loose networks of actors collaborating only for specific campaigns. The fluid, ad hoc nature of this collaboration resembles the character of election campaign organizations (called “success teams”) in Indonesia.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, cyber troops first emerged as appendices to election campaigns. Starting from the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election, in which volunteer teams—particularly from the Jokowi-“Ahok” (Basuki Tjahaja Purnama) camp—flooded social media to champion their candidate, and more systematically since the 2014 presidential election, campaign teams began making use of influencers and unregistered teams of anonymous fake account operators—called “buzzers” in Indonesia—to promote their candidate on social media.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Bradshaw, Bailey, and Howard, *Industrialized Disinformation*, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Davey Alba, “How Russia’s Troll Farm Is Changing Tactics Before the Fall Election”, *New York Times*, 29 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/29/technology/russia-troll-farm-election.html>

<sup>25</sup> Edward Aspinall and Ward Berenschot, *Democracy for Sale: Elections, Clientelism, and the State in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Ali Nur Alizen and Maarif Setiadi Fajar, “Election Campaigns and Cyber Troops”, *Inside Indonesia* 146 (Oct–Dec 2021), <https://www.insideindonesia.org/election-campaigns-and-cyber-troops>; Pradipa R. Rasidi, “Of Play and Good Men: The Moral Economy of Political Buzzing in Indonesia”, in *Digital Technologies and Democracy in Southeast Asia*, edited by Sastramidjaja, Lee, and Hui.

The buzzer teams then evolved to take up a wider range of issues beyond the campaign period.

In their manner of organization, Indonesia's cyber troops resemble the “architecture of networked disinformation” in the Philippines, as described by Jonathan Ong and Jason Cabañas,<sup>27</sup> identifying three actor types in this network. On top of the hierarchy are the “chiefs of architects”, or elite advertising and PR strategists employed by political clients to set campaign objectives and strategies. The second tier consists of “digital influencers”; these include key opinion leaders such as celebrities and pundits with a large social media following, who carry a core campaign message, and anonymous social media operators who translate this message into viral posts. The third, most numerous tier consists of the community-level fake account operators, who are often precarious middle-class workers hired to amplify and create fake engagement on viral posts. We found a similar structure in Indonesia, although here the networks appear to be more intricate, with an added layer between the first and the second tiers consisting of “coordinators” employed by the elite strategists. These coordinators are tasked with recruiting and supervising their own teams of content creators and buzzers, while simultaneously acting as one of the leading buzzers within their team, operating so-called “general’s accounts” whose posts will later be amplified by lower-ranking buzzers. Coordinators thus also serve as anonymous digital influencers, and could further act as middle-men between celebrity influencers and the elite strategists and their political clients.<sup>28</sup>

The objective of these cyber troops is to manipulate public opinion in order to make it align with the interests of the political client. They

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<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Corpus Ong and Jason Vincent A. Cabañas, “Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines” (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.7275/2cq4-5396>

<sup>28</sup> Wijayanto and Ward Berenschot, “Organisation and Funding of Social Media Propaganda”, *Inside Indonesia* 146 (Oct–Dec 2021), <https://www.insideindonesia.org/organisation-and-funding-of-social-media-propaganda>

do so by creating certain narratives—designed to capture the attention of online publics and evoke emotional responses—and then circulating these narratives on social media as widely and quickly as possible, often with the use of semi-automated “bot” accounts set to bombard social media at strategic times with contents that distribute the narrative over easily digestible and shareable posts, such as one-liners, memes, short videos, and accompanying hashtags.

Of all social media platforms, cyber troops in Indonesia favour Twitter for their operations (though Facebook and other platforms are also used). While Twitter ranks only fifth of the most used social media platforms in Indonesia (after YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook), 64 per cent of Indonesia’s 170 million active social media users regularly turn to Twittersphere to engage in public debates on social and political issues,<sup>29</sup> making this one of Indonesia’s most important digital public spaces. Moreover, Twitter’s unique trending topic feature, highlighting the most talked about topics on the platform through a real-time ranking of the most popular hashtags used, not only reflects the focal points of online public discussion but can also steer that discussion, raising online public interest in the trending topic and stimulating engagement. Furthermore, Twitter’s trending topics are frequently amplified by the mainstream media as an indicator of public opinions on an issue. Twitter’s trending topics are thereby viewed as a reliable source of information on public sentiments on current issues. They seem to have real-world influence, and it is this influence that cyber troops seek to tap into by manipulating online trends.

## CASE STUDY 1: THE KPK LAW REVISION

Our first case study into how cyber troops were deployed to manipulate public opinion focuses on the efforts to neutralize opposition to the revision of the Law on the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) in September 2019. The revision turned Indonesia’s hitherto autonomous

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<sup>29</sup> We Are Social and Hootsuite, “Digital 2021: Indonesia”, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-indonesia>

antigraft body—founded in 2002 in the wake of post-New Order reform—into a government agency monitored by an oversight board to be appointed by the president, which would effectively undermine its powers of independent investigation. This was not the first time the KPK faced attempts to curtail its mandate to fight corruption, since it frequently targeted corrupt elites.<sup>30</sup> Still, the KPK Law revision came as a shock to many as it happened so abruptly. The revision process was carried out in a matter of days, from the bill’s submission in the parliament until its ratification on 17 September 2019. The parliament approved the revision despite strong objections from civil society organizations and mass protests by students, academics and activists across the country. The outcry soon swelled on social media, too, giving rise to Indonesia’s first hashtag-based movement, #ReformasiDikorupsi (“Reform Corrupted”), spreading the protest hashtag #TolakRevisiKPK (“reject KPK’s revision”).<sup>31</sup>

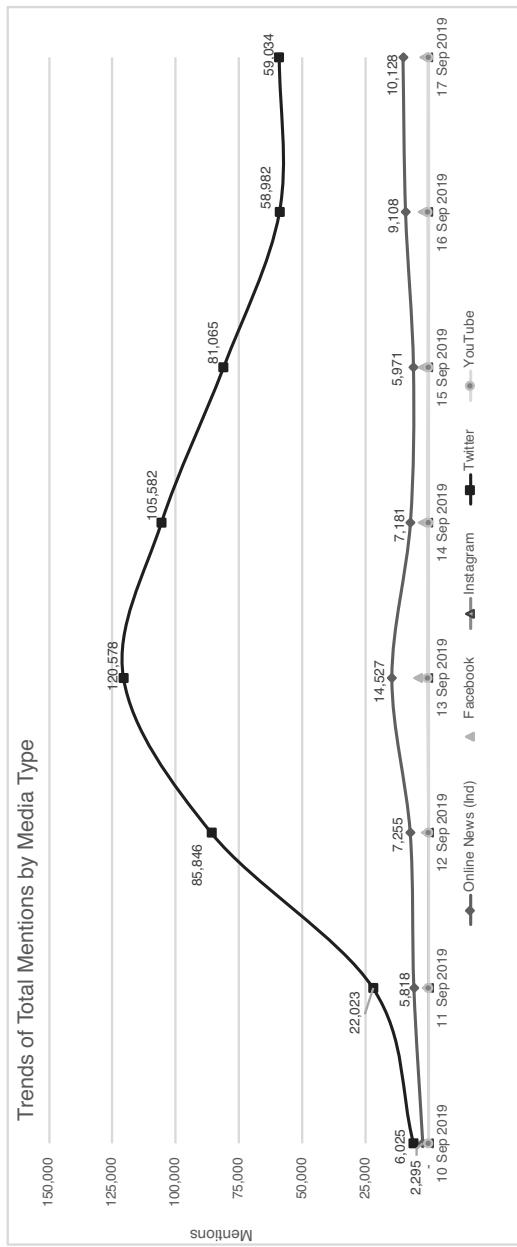
In response to these protests, pro-government elites financed online campaigns to gain public support for the controversial legislation. Our social network analysis of online conversations on the topic indicates that cyber troops were mobilized in these campaigns, showing a sudden, unnatural surge in the volume of conversations in the days leading up to the bill’s ratification, mainly on Twitter. In one week, more than half a million tweets mentioned the KPK (Figure 1), in which the protest hashtag #TolakRevisiKPK had a tiny share of 2,229 tweets. The bulk of tweets carried a pro-revision narrative, which focused on a peculiar

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<sup>30</sup> Simon Butt, “Anti-Corruption Reform in Indonesia: An Obituary?”, *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 47, no. 3 (2011): 381–94; Michael Buehler, “Indonesia Takes a Wrong Turn in Crusade Against Corruption”, *Financial Times*, 2 October 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/048ecc9c-7819-3553-9ec7-546dd19f09ae>

<sup>31</sup> Yatun Sastramidjaja, “Indonesia: Digital Communications Energising New Political Generation’s Campaign for Democracy”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2020/16, 17 March 2020, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/indonesia-digital-communications-energising-new-political-generations-campaign-for-democracy-by-yatun-sastramidjaja/>

**Figure 1: Spike in Online Conversations about the KPK Law Revision, 10–17 September 2019**



Source: Drone Emprit.

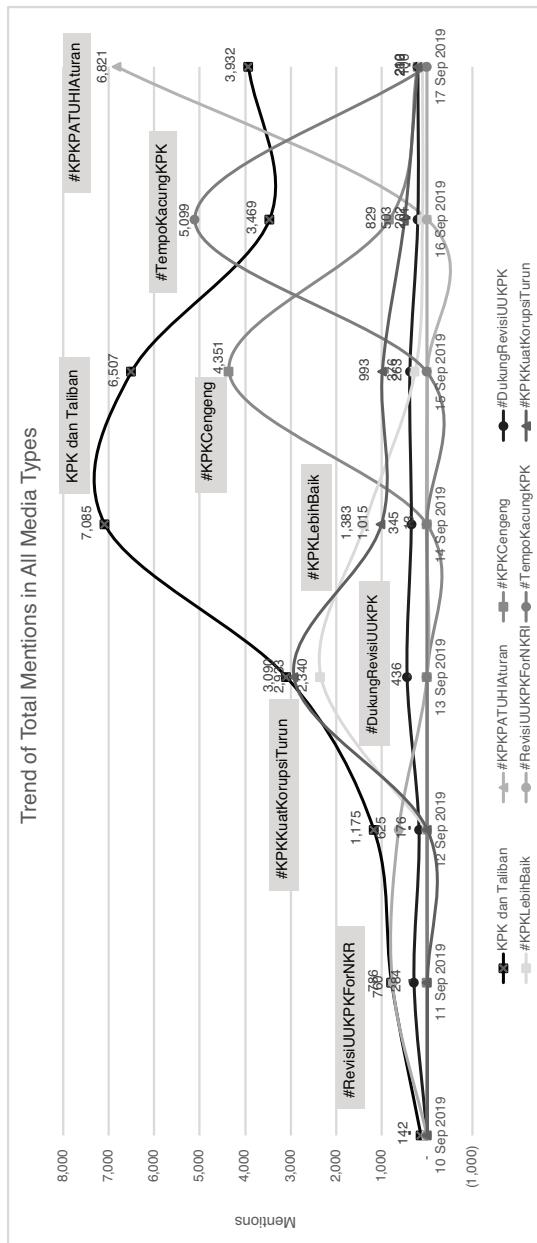
theme: “KPK and Taliban”, implying the KPK was infested with “extremist elements” and therefore it needed to be brought under control. While this narrative was obviously based on disinformation—there is no indication that KPK members embraced extremist versions of Islam—it struck a chord with public fear of religious extremism and terrorism.

Hence, Twitter was flooded with the hashtag #KPKTaliban and variations on this theme, paired with other hashtags that took turns in dominating the trending topics, which indicates a concerted effort in constructing an evolving pro-revision narrative throughout the week (Figure 2). The narrative opened with the hashtag #RevisiUUKPKFor NKRI (“KPK Law Revision for the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia”), suggesting that supporting the revision was a patriotic duty and those opposing the revision were unpatriotic. It continued over the next few days with the hashtags #KPKKuatKorupsiTurun (“strong KPK, corruption declines”), #DukungRevisiUUKPK (“support the KPK Law Revision”), #KPKLebihBaik (“KPK is better”), #KPKCengeng (“KPK crybaby”), #TempoKacungKPK (“Tempo is KPK’s janitor”, bashing *Tempo* magazine’s critical commentaries on the bill), and finally—the dominant hashtag on 17 September, the day the revision was passed—#KPKPatuhAturan (“KPK obeys the law”).

The hashtags often accompanied memes designed to convince the public that the revision was broadly supported by leading public figures. One meme featured pictures of former vice president Jusuf Kalla, former minister of state Yusril Ihza Mahendra, criminal law expert and KPK law drafter Romli Atmasasmita, and member of parliament Arteria Dahlani, each captioned with a quote that was not necessarily in their own words (Figure 3). For example, Yusril Ihza Mahendra’s picture contained the quote: “All institutions need an internal monitoring body, KPK is no exception”. The quote added to Romli Atmasasmita’s picture read: “KPK must be monitored, [it must be] attached to the structure, not [stand] outside the structure”. This example again illustrates the cyber troops’ frequent resort to disinformation as an effective tactic to persuade citizens, as elaborated below, especially when combined with memes providing instant visual impact.

Besides using numerous fake accounts and bots to amplify their narrative, cyber troops also used various tactics to tempt ordinary

*Figure 2: Development of the Pro-revision Narrative Pushed by Cyber Troops*



Source: Drone Emprit.

*Figure 3: Meme Created and Disseminated by Cyber Troops, Pairing Pictures of Trusted Public Figures to Pro-Revision Statements*



*Source: Drone Empirit.*

netizens into posting pro-revision hashtags. One common tactic was the “give-away quiz”, in which netizens could win a prize for posting certain content. On the day that the Parliament passed the revision, one such quiz read: “50K for 2 lucky people”, on the condition that they tweet the hashtag “KPK obey the law”. This helped to catapult the hashtag into Twitter’s trending topics, creating the impression that public opinion was overwhelmingly in support of the revision.

A similar effect resulted from mainstream media reporting, which reproduced the online narrative almost instantaneously. Between 10 and 17 September, the story of the KPK being a “Taliban hotbed” was mentioned in at least 250 online news articles. While some of the articles focused on debunking this story,<sup>32</sup> other news sites simply echoed the viral narrative uncritically. In an era of fast-paced clickbait journalism, the cyber troops’ online fabrications provided quick fodder for sensational news stories that are sure to attract a large audience. Due to this mainstream media amplification, the “KPK=Taliban” narrative came to dominate the public conversation. By constructing and disseminating stories that would likely be picked up in mainstream media, the cyber troops succeeded in setting the agenda of public debate as this sensational topic became the talk of the town.

The impact of the cyber troop campaign was reflected in a survey by newspaper *Kompas*, held at the height of this online campaign. It found that most respondents agreed with the need to revise the KPK Law (44.9 per cent; against 39.9 per cent who disagreed). Moreover, a large majority (78.2 per cent) agreed with the statement that the revision would strengthen the KPK. In previous years, KPK consistently polled

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<sup>32</sup> For example, CNN Indonesia cited the KPK’s vice-chairperson, Busyro Muqodas, who stated the story was a political ploy from the palace to justify the KPK’s weakening; *SINDONEWS.com*, 9 May 2021, <https://nasional.sindonews.com/read/422654/13/bela-75-pegawai-kpk-busyro-muqoddas-isu-radikalisme-dan-taliban-mainan-imperium-buzzer-1620511514>. Similarly, news site *Tirto.id* cited KPK investigator Novel Baswedan’s objection that the viral narrative on social media was just a scheme to break up the KPK, *Tirto.id*, 16 September 2019, <https://tirto.id/novel-baswedan-skenario-taliban-dibuat-untuk-memecah-kpk-eh96>

as one of the most trusted institutions of the country, with some 80 per cent of respondents indicating they trusted the antigraft body.<sup>33</sup> The *Kompas* survey thus indicated a considerable swing in public opinion, suggesting that the pro-revision campaign on social media had been effective. Ironically, by reporting the survey results on 16 September (the day before parliament ratified the bill), *Kompas* also helped to legitimize the revision. One member of the parliamentary commission debating the KPK bill, Nasir Djamil, commented that the *Kompas* survey confirmed that Indonesians approved of the government's effort to revise the KPK law.<sup>34</sup>

In a nutshell, the cyber troops' swarming of the cybersphere—in a concerted campaign lasting no more than one week—had successfully drowned out the oppositional discourse both on social media and in mainstream media. The use of disinformation in the cyber troops' pro-revision narrative did little to dampen its resonance among the general public. On the contrary, it made the narrative all the more effective because it raised confusing questions that distracted from the issue, rather than providing a credible argument for why the KPK was put under the control of political elites whose actions it was meant to scrutinize. As Jason Cabañes argues, disinformation narratives often work so well because they tap into the imaginative dimension of public communication, appealing to shared sentiments that transcend the issue at hand and channel confusing (fake) news towards familiar themes.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Bintang Pradewo, "Tingkat Kepercayaan Publik Turun, KPK: Masih di Atas 85 Persen", *Jawa Pos*, 15 November 2019, <https://www.jawapos.com/nasional/15/11/2019/tingkat-kepercayaan-publik-turun-kpk-masih-di-atas-85-persen>

<sup>34</sup> Hasanudin Aco, "Survei Litbang Kompas: 44,9% Publik Dukung Revisi UU KPK, 39,9% Menolak", *TribunNews.com*, 16 September 2019, <https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2019/09/16/survei-litbang-kompas-449-publik-dukung-revisi-uu-kpk-399-menolak>

<sup>35</sup> Jason Vincent A. Cabañes, "Digital Disinformation and the Imaginative Dimension of Communication", *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 97, no. 2: 435–52; Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, "Disinformation as Political Communication", *Political Communication* 37, no. 2 (2020): 145–56.

The cyber troop campaign channelled the KPK controversy towards the familiar theme of “radicalism”, contrasted to “patriotism”,<sup>36</sup> and away from the core problem of corruption.

## CASE STUDY 2: NORMALIZING THE NEW NORMAL DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Six months after the KPK controversy, similar online campaigns to steer public opinion were initiated around the government’s policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially President Jokowi’s “New Normal” policy. Announced on 7 May 2020, the New Normal was presented as an advanced stage in the pandemic response, following the local lockdowns, called Large-Scale Social Restrictions or PSBB (Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar), imposed by regional governments since April 2020. Unlike PSBB, which limited people’s activities to their homes, the New Normal was the president’s attempt to compel citizens to carry on their normal activities during the pandemic, albeit while following the basic health protocols (known as “5M”: wear face masks, wash hands with soap, keep social distance, avoid crowds, and reduce mobility). The New Normal was declared only two months after the first COVID-19 cases were detected in Indonesia, on 2 March 2020, reflecting Jokowi’s concern about Indonesia’s economy stagnating due to the pandemic from the start. Even before COVID-19 was confirmed in Indonesia, on 25 February 2020, Jokowi allocated Rp298.5 billion to promote foreign tourism to Indonesia, including Rp72 billion for “influencer and media relations”.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, hidden from public

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<sup>36</sup> Pradipa R. Rasidi and Khoirun Nisa Aulia Sukmani, “Languages of Propaganda”, *Inside Indonesia* 146 (Oct–Dec 2021), <https://www.insideindonesia.org/languages-of-propaganda>

<sup>37</sup> Rakhmat Nur Hakim, “Pemerintah Anggarkan Rp72 Milliar untuk Bayar Influencer demi Tingkatkan Pariwisata”, *Kompas.com*, 25 February 2020, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/02/25/20380521/pemerintah-anggarkan-rp-72-miliar-untuk-bayar-influencer-demi-tingkatkan>

view, cyber troops were put to work to convince citizens of the need for the New Normal.

Given that COVID-19 was rapidly spreading throughout the country, many citizens questioned the wisdom of the New Normal policy. Scientists, health workers, civil society activists, and local politicians from opposition parties raised strong objections, decrying the central government's prioritizing of the economy over public health, and generally its negligent and fickle response to the pandemic.<sup>38</sup> There were also widespread doubts about the accuracy of the official COVID-19 figures, compelling citizens to launch grassroots-driven monitoring platforms.<sup>39</sup> Many Indonesians, especially from among the higher-educated urban middle class, called on the government to focus on combating the pandemic before all else to avoid a bigger tragedy. Instead, a concerted campaign was launched to promote the New Normal. State institutions—including the Ministries of Economics, Health, and Tourism, and the National Police—promptly backed the campaign, allocating considerable resources. Part of those resources were used to mobilize cyber troops, both influencers and buzzers, and to work as early as March 2020.

In the weeks before and after Jokowi's announcement of the New Normal policy, those influencers and buzzers mainly focused on raising public concern about the threat of mass layoffs and widespread unemployment if businesses were not allowed to resume their activities immediately. Additionally, cyber troops spread positive news stories

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<sup>38</sup> Felix Nathaniel, “New Normal Pertama: Pemerintah Plin-Plan Tangani Wabah sejak Awal”, *Tirto.id*, 31 December 2020, <https://tirto.id/new-normal-pertama-pemerintah-plin-plan-tangani-wabah-sejak-awal-fFzr>; I Nyoman Sutarsa, Elan A. Lazuardi, Rabian Al Adawiyah, and Rizki Filaili, “Why a ‘New Normal’ Might Fail in Indonesia and How to Fix It”, *The Conversation*, 25 June 2020, <https://theconversation.com/why-a-new-normal-might-fail-in-indonesia-and-how-to-fix-it-140798>; unknown, “‘New Normal’: Tudangan ‘Herd Immunity’ hingga ‘Mengorbankan Warga demi Bisnis’ di Balik Protokol Cegah COVID-19”, *BBC.com*, 18 May 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-52705616>

<sup>39</sup> The most prominent is Lapor COVID-19 (“report COVID-19”), <https://laporcovid19.org/>

and figures of recovered COVID-19 patients to counter doubts about the official figures. A clear shift in the online strategy occurred since 26 May 2020, when Jokowi marked the start of Indonesia's New Normal era with a symbolic visit to a shopping mall in Bekasi. This visit was widely reported in the media. Moreover, it occasioned a significant increase in the number of Twitter conversations using the term "New Normal", peaking on 28 May with almost 150.000 tweets, and remaining high at an average of more than 50,000 tweets per day over the following month. Our interviews with influencers, buzzers and coordinators who were involved in the New Normal campaign corroborate that this was a very busy—and lucrative—period for cyber troops.

The cyber troops were tasked with explaining the benefits of the New Normal by spreading videos, infographics and memes on Twitter and other social media platforms, tagging their posts with the following hashtags: #NewNormalPulihkanEkonomi ("New Normal recovers the economy"), #NewNormalCegahPHK ("New Normal prevents lay-offs"), #TataKehidupanBaru ("new life order"), #DisiplinKunciNewNormal ("discipline is the key to New Normal"), #BersamaJagaIndonesia ("protecting Indonesia together"), #BersiapMenujuNewNormal ("getting ready towards New Normal"), or similar hashtags. The consistent use of these hashtags ensured uniformity of the message, together creating the narrative of a safe and prosperous "new life order".

Remarkably, our social network analysis indicates that several of these hashtags, amplified by cyber troops, originated from official Twitter accounts linked to the National Police network. In fact, the hashtag #PolriDukungNewNormal, "National Police supports the New Normal", ranked third in the trending topics (with 14,783 tweets) in the week of the launch of the New Normal policy on 26 May 2020. This shows that the boundary between official digital campaigns and cyber troop operations was blurring in the New Normal campaign, indicating a deepening entanglement of formal and informal networks in the government's propaganda efforts; the New Normal campaign thus signalled the normalization of the use of cyber troops for government communications.

Some government agents had called in the services of cyber troops before, but the scale of this operation and the number of actors and

institutions involved indicates that cyber troops had became an accepted part of the outsourcing strategy of government communications. As one ministry official justified it in our interview with him, “If it’s us talking, we just sound like merchants selling their own wares, therefore it was more effective to sell the message from others’ angles”. Instead of the government speaking in its own capacity, they hid behind the outsourced forces of cyber troops to make it appear as if the message represented genuine public sentiment; this practice is known as political astroturfing. While the New Normal campaign did not feature the blatant disinformation seen in the KPK Law revision campaign, political astroturfing is considered a common strategy of disinformation.<sup>40</sup> In the case of the New Normal campaign, the orchestrated faking of public sentiment on such a massive scale—by means of secretive operations in which critical information on a deadly pandemic was selectively withheld, downplayed, or manipulated—certainly made it misleading, if not downright deceptive.

### CASE STUDY 3: SELLING THE OMNIBUS LAW ON JOB CREATION

The trend of government outsourcing of political communications to cyber troops took a new flight during the controversy around the Omnibus Law on Job Creation, in October 2020. From the moment Jokowi announced his plans, during his inaugural speech for his second term on 20 October 2019, to revise “dozens of laws that inhibit job creation” into an efficient Omnibus Law,<sup>41</sup> it met with strong resistance from labour unions, civil society organizations, grassroots movements, student organizations, academics, and the activist coalition emerging

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<sup>40</sup> Franziska B. Keller, David Schoch, Sebastian Stier, and JungHwan Yang, “Political Astroturfing on Twitter: How to Coordinate a Disinformation Campaign”, *Political Communication* 37, no. 2 (2020): 256–80.

<sup>41</sup> Riza Roidila Mufti and Kharishar Kahfi, “Jokowi Pushes for Passage of Omnibus Laws: What Are They?”, *Jakarta Post*, 25 October 2019, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/10/25/jokowi-pushes-passage-omnibus-laws-what-arethey.html>

from the protest against the KPK Law revision, #ReformasiDikorupsi. Arguing that the Omnibus Law would merely benefit big corporations and elite interests while harming workers, indigenous peoples and the environment,<sup>42</sup> these groups launched a series of online actions (since the pandemic inhibited street action), using the hashtag #TolakOmnibusLaw (“reject Omnibus Law”). This online protest snowballed throughout the first half of 2020, gradually dominating online conversations on the topic, and topping Twitter’s trending list on several occasions.<sup>43</sup>

In response to the criticism, the government again launched online campaigns to sway public opinion. Initially, the campaign used official government accounts and the hashtag #RUUCiptakerLindungiPekerja (“Job Creation Bill protects workers”). But since this hashtag too overtly propagated government policy, it had little public resonance and was soon abandoned. Instead, in August 2020, influencers were recruited to disseminate the hashtag #IndonesiaButuhKerja (“Indonesia needs jobs”). Without mentioning the bill, the hashtag was linked to moving stories about economic hardships suffered during the pandemic. On 10 August, #IndonesiaButuhKerja suddenly topped the trending lists on Twitter and Instagram, as celebrity influencers began tagging their posts with the hashtag. But the campaign backfired, when three days later it was

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<sup>42</sup> Contentious articles in the bill included the flexibilization of layoff rules and minimum wages; eased licensing for the employment of foreign workers; loosened requirements on industries for environmental impact assessment; tighter restrictions to community involvement in the preparation of such assessments and loss of opportunities to contest environmental permits; and changes in regional government authority under the central government. Aulia Nastiti, “Why Indonesia’s Omnibus Bill Will Not Create Jobs and Only Strengthen the Oligarchy”, *The Conversation*, 20 October 2020, <https://theconversation.com/why-indonesias-omnibus-bill-will-not-create-jobs-and-only-strengthen-the-oligarchy-147997>

<sup>43</sup> Yatun Sastramidjaja and Pradipa R. Rasidi, “The Hashtag Battle over Indonesia’s Omnibus Law: From Digital Resistance to Cyber-Control”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/95, 21 July 2021, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-95-the-hashtag-battle-over-indonesias-omnibus-law-from-digital-resistance-to-cyber-control-by-yatun-sastramidjaja-and-pradipa-p-rasidi/>

revealed that twenty-one influencers had been paid up to Rp15 million for using the hashtag. The backlash on social media, where netizens mocked the influencers and publicly shamed them for “pocketing the people’s money”, led many of them to remove posts of theirs carrying the hashtag. Some issued a public apology and denied any knowledge of the source of the hashtag (or the payment), claiming they had no idea it was linked to the controversial bill.<sup>44</sup> The presidential office denied any government involvement. The Omnibus Law proved to be too contentious for celebrities to risk their reputation. Hence, anonymous buzzers were mobilized.

Up until the first week of October 2020, the online narrative on the Omnibus Law was evidently dominated by its opponents (Figure 4). The online resistance accelerated on 5 October 2020, when the parliament’s hasty ratification of the bill (initially scheduled for 8 October) triggered a nationwide revolt<sup>45</sup> on the streets and online, using the hashtags #TolakOmnibusLaw, “reject the Omnibus Law” and #MosiTidakPercaya (“vote of no confidence”). On social media, the massive reach of these two hashtags can be attributed to younger netizens, especially those identifying as “K-poppers” (Korean pop fans), who named their cyber-offensive “K-poppers strike back”.<sup>46</sup> The online resistance

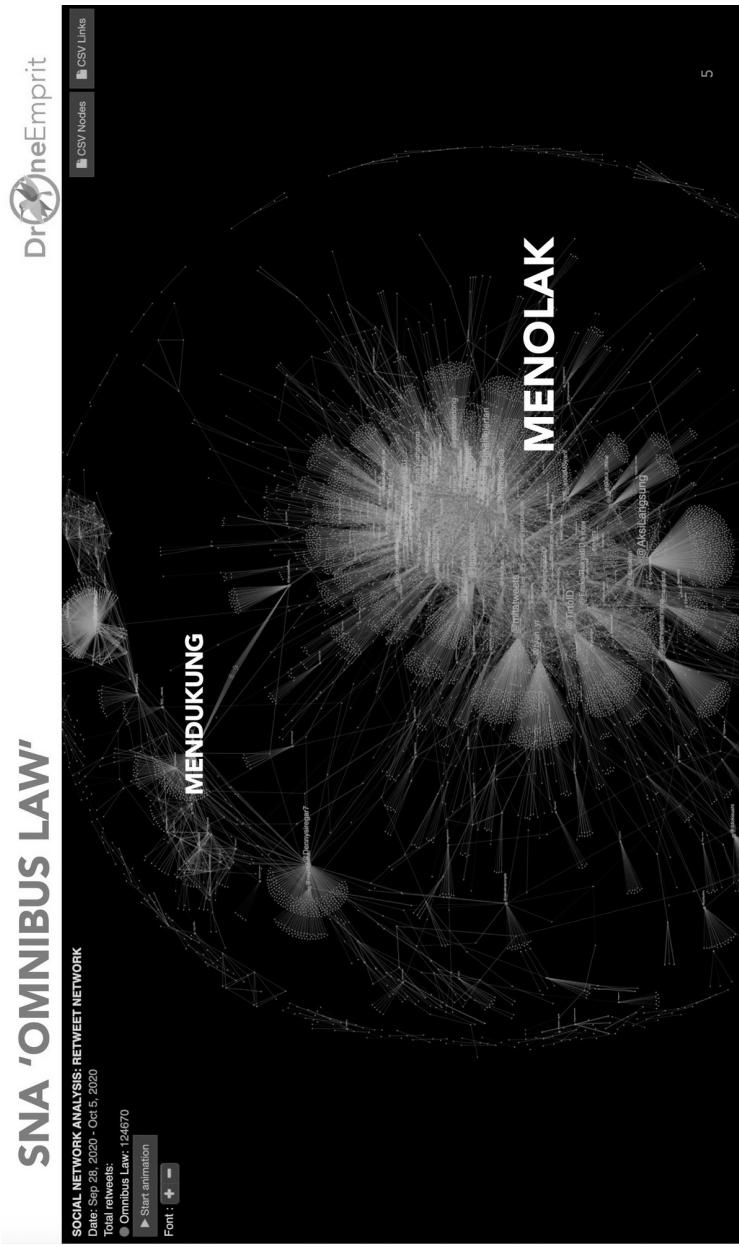
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<sup>44</sup> Dyaning Pangestika, “Influencers Apologize for Supporting Job Creation Bill after Furore among Followers”, *Jakarta Post*, 16 August 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/08/15/influencers-apologize-for-supporting-job-creation-bill-after-furor-among-followers.html>

<sup>45</sup> Max Lane, “Protests Against the Omnibus Law and the Evolution of Indonesia’s Social Opposition”, *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 2020/128, 9 November 2020, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2020\\_128.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_128.pdf); Aisyah Llewellyn and Tonggo Simangunsong, “Demonstrations Sweep Indonesia over Controversial Labour Law”, *AlJazeera*, 9 October 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/9/demonstrations-sweep-indonesia-over-controversial-omnibus-law>

<sup>46</sup> Rosa Folia, “Fans K-Pop Aktif di Garis Depan Protes Pengesahan UU Cipta Kerja”, *VICE*, 6 October 2020, <https://www.vice.com/id/article/qj47ad/fans-k-pop-aktif-memprotes-pengesahan-uu-cipta-kerja-omnibus-law-di-medios>; Ismail Fahmi, “RUU Omnibus Law Disahkan: K-Popers Strike Back”, *Drone Emprit*, 6 October 2020, <https://pers.droneemprit.id/ruu-omnibus-law-disahkan-k-popers-strike-back/>

*Figure 4: Visualization of Social Network Analysis of Tweets and Retweets on the Omnibus Law from 28 September to 5 October 2020, Showing Netizens' Rejection ("Menolak") of the Bill.*



Source: Ismail Fahmi, "Omnibus Law Peta Aspirasi Publik di Media Sosial", Drone Emprit, 5 October 2020, <https://persdroneemprit.id/omnibus-law-peta-aspirasi-publik-di-media-sosial/>

peaked on 6 October, reaching a volume of half a million tweets that day, and remaining strong over the next three days. After 10 October, however, the dominant online narrative suddenly tilted towards support for the Omnibus Law (Figure 5), with the rise of hashtags such as #OmnibusLawBawaBerkah (“Omnibus Law brings blessing”), #OmnibusLawBasmiKorupsi (“Omnibus Law eradicates corruption”), #RakyatButuhUUCiptaker (“people need the Job Creation Law”), and #OmnibusLawUntungBuruh (“Omnibus Law benefits workers”). By 16 October, the pro-Omnibus Law narrative prevailed, and by the end of the month, online conversations on the contested legislation had virtually died out. The cyber troop campaign continued until the end of the year, but with the use of hashtags that referred to the Omnibus Law only indirectly, such as #MudahDapatKerja (“easy to get a job”).

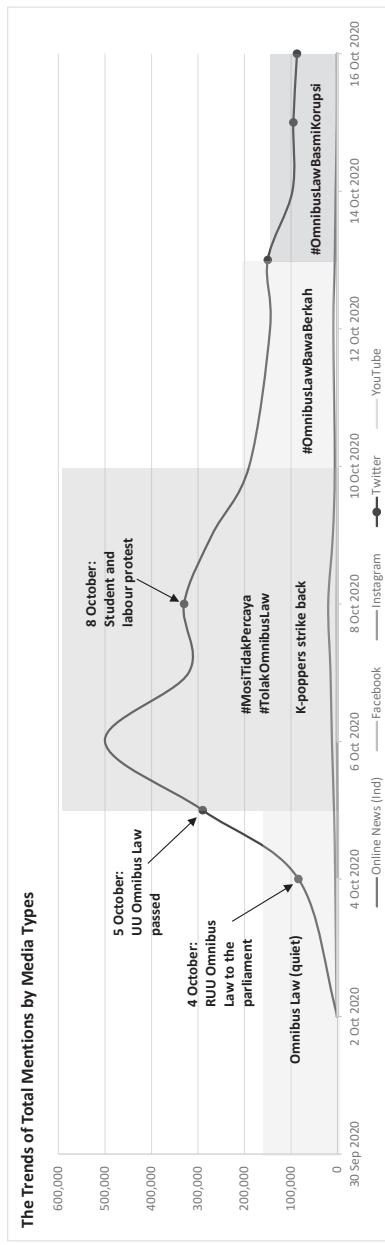
The effective quelling of the protest indicates that the authorities were well prepared to counter its impact. The strategy to do so was revealed in a leaked telegram, dated 2 October, in which the National Police Chief instructed his personnel, firstly, to heighten vigilance at “strategic risk areas” to nip “anarchistic action” in the bud; secondly, to step up cyber-surveillance on social media to detect online agitation; and thirdly, to “operate counter-narratives against issues that discredit the government”, specifically by means of “media management” to make public opinion “disagree with protest actions”. The police thus set out not only to monitor online conversations, but also to delegitimize the protest, both in mainstream media and on social media. For that purpose, the “anarchy” discourse, a legacy of the New Order regime, proved its efficacy.

On 8 October, an incident occurred during a protest in Jakarta that provided the cue for the “counternarrative” to discredit the movement; several bus stops were vandalized and some set on fire. The incident, which was blamed on “anarchistic elements” among the protesters (but an investigation by the independent media channel NarasiTV exposed the likelihood of outsider provocateurs<sup>47</sup>), instantly overshadowed all

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<sup>47</sup> Aqwam Fiazmi Hanifan and Arbi Sumandoyo, “62 Menit Operasi Pembakaran Halte Sarinah”, *Buka Mata* (NarasiTV), 28 October 2020, <https://www.narasi.tv/buka-mata/62-menit-operasi-pembakaran-halte-sarinah>

*Figure 5: The Flow of Online Narrative on the Omnibus Law*



Source: Drone Emprit.

other news on the protest. While images of the burning bus stops and ransacking crowds dominated printed media and television shows, on social media it prompted widespread disapproval from netizens, who had thus far supported the protest. The narrative about the “anarchic” nature of the protest now prevailed. In addition, a second narrative was constructed portraying the protesters as “ignorant”, or uninformed and misled. As Jokowi claimed, in a headline statement on 9 October, criticism of the Omnibus Law was rooted in “disinformation and hoaxes spread through social media”.<sup>48</sup>

Both of these narratives were then amplified and embellished by buzzers, adding and spreading lurid (doctored) images with sensational captions. For example, one meme displayed a claim from the army that “100 thugs from outside Jakarta were promised money to demonstrate”, with the added caption, “PROVEN!!! ANARCHIC DEMO 8 OCTOBER FUNDED BY SPONSOR”. In addition, buzzers began launching concerted online attacks on activists—doxing, trolling and harassing them on social media—often with the use of foul language, or misogynistic slurs for activist women, and death threats. The buzzers also framed activists as “hoax-spreaders”, and several activists and netizens were thereafter prosecuted for violating the ITE Law.<sup>49</sup>

The scale at which the government deployed its power and resources in cyberspace to clamp down on opposition to the Omnibus Law was unprecedented. As one cyber troop coordinator said in our interview, “all troops were mobilized” for this big operation, with buzzer teams working frantically around the clock. The success of this operation indicates increasing sophistication in the government’s capacity to neutralize opponents in the cybersphere. It is likely the government will build on this success.

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<sup>48</sup> Ivany Atina Arby, “Jokowi Dismisses Criticism of Omnibus Jobs Law as Hoax News”, *Jakarta Post*, 9 October 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/10/09/jokowi-dismisses-criticism-of-omnibus-jobs-law-as-hoax-news.html>

<sup>49</sup> Sastramidjaja and Rasidi, “The Hashtag Battle over Indonesia’s Omnibus Law”.

## THE CO-OPTATION OF CYBERSPACE AS AUTHORITARIAN INNOVATION

From the cases discussed above, we can identify a recurring pattern in the modus operandi of public opinion manipulation in the cybersphere:

- First, there is a sudden surge of online conversations, particularly on Twitter, on a topic that concerns a controversial government policy.
- Second, these online conversations congeal into and cluster around two competing narratives, one supporting the policy, the other opposing it. Initially, it appears undecided which of these narratives will dominate; however, as the cases of the KPK Law revision and the Omnibus Law demonstrate, often it is the oppositional side that initiates mounting cyber action.
- Third, in a matter of days, often in response to the oppositional action, there is a massive creation and rapid dissemination of online contents—particularly in the form of hashtags, memes and infographics—that support the government policy, outnumbering those opposing it.
- Finally, the pro-government narrative wins the online competition and becomes the only remaining, hegemonic narrative.

This pattern becomes a cycle, repeated with each new controversy around government policy. Yet the more this cycle is repeated, the less space it leaves for oppositional voices, particularly as the cyber troop operations become ever more sophisticated, normalized and enmeshed with state institutions with each new cycle.

Our research yields grim findings about the once hoped-for potential of the Internet as a free space for civil society to fight for their aspirations, demonstrating how the hopes are dashed by increasingly effective cyber troop operations at the service of ruling elites. In all of the cases discussed in this article, civil society efforts were ultimately defeated by cyber troops who managed to manipulate public opinion in favour of the government's policies. The success of these cyber troop campaigns has convinced Indonesian elites that the funding of cyber troops is an effective tool to sway public opinion. It is therefore very likely that they

will continue to employ cyber troops to promote their agendas, especially ahead of the 2024 elections.

The use of cyber troop operations to mobilize consensus and manufacture consent threatens to undermine the quality of public debate and democracy in Indonesia, because it not only feeds public opinion with disinformation, but also prevents citizens from scrutinizing and evaluating the governing elite's behaviour and policy-making processes. Thus, cyber troops represent an effective “authoritarian innovation” by which powerful actors “undermine democratic institutions and mobilize consensus for their agendas”.<sup>50</sup>

In the end, cyber troop manipulations of public opinion disprove the idealized notion of the Internet as a space that can promote democracy. Instead, the digital public sphere has been co-opted by actors supporting the agenda of the governing elite. This has worsened even further Indonesia’s democratic regression.

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<sup>50</sup> Nicole Curato and Diego Fossati, “Authoritarian Innovations: Crafting Support for a Less Democratic Southeast Asia”, *Democratization* 27, no. 6 (2020): 1006–20, p. 1006.

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