ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore |5 November 2019

Hoax and Misinformation in Indonesia: Insights from a Nationwide Survey

Ibnu Nadzir, Sari Seftiani and *Yogi Setya Permana**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A survey of nine provinces in Indonesia shows that among the cases of hoax and misinformation, public awareness was highest for three issues - the presence of millions of Chinese labourers in Indonesia, resurgence of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), and criminalization of the ulama by the government.

- The frequency of access to and the content of hoax and misinformation varied in correlation with educational background, geography, Internet access and local context.

- The more highly educated respondents tend to have higher exposure to hoax and misinformation cases. Similarly, respondents with Internet access are more likely to be familiar with cases of hoax and misinformation than those without such access. However, the data also indicates that higher education and better access to information provide no assurance against being deceived by hoaxes and misinformation. In fact, post-graduate respondents registered higher tendency to believe that the government was criminalising the ulama.

- Misinformation about the presence of millions of Chinese labourers in Indonesia is the most widely believed issue, especially in the urban areas, while the resurgence of PKI is the most widespread hoax in the rural areas.

* Guest writers, Ibnu Nadzir is a researcher at the Centre for Society and Culture – Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (LIPI), Sari Seftiani is a researcher at Centre for Population Studies – LIPI, and Yogi Setya Permana is a researcher at Centre for Political Studies - LIPI.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have been positing that hoax and misinformation play an important role in shaping polarization, especially during elections.[1] For example, some Indonesian politicians did express worry that the recent presidential election was influenced by a 'firehose of falsehood' propaganda.[2] Be that as it may, studies of hoax and misinformation in Indonesia remain limited.

This paper, based on a survey recently conducted in nine Indonesian provinces, examines the spread and the level of belief in cases of hoax and misinformation.[3] It was found that of the six cases of hoax and misinformation provided, three of them—namely the resurgence of PKI, the existence of millions of Chinese labourers in Indonesia, and the criminalization of ulama by the government—are consistently the most widespread in most provinces. We also found that the existence of millions of Chinese labourers in Indonesia was a piece of misinformation that people were most familiar with, and most believed in.

This report also suggests that educational background, rural/urban areas of living, and the degree of Internet access are associated with the exposure of hoax and misinformation in Indonesia. For example, the higher the educational level of the respondent, the more he or she knows about the three pieces of misinformation mentioned above. At the same time, however, differences in educational background did not show any significant variation in the tendency to believe in the misinformation. Equally interesting are the findings that the resurgence of PKI is the most known misinformation in the rural areas, while in the urban areas, it is the existence of millions of Chinese labourers in Indonesia that is the most known misinformation. Last, the study reveals that respondents with access to the Internet were most likely to be familiar with the cases of hoax and misinformation than those without access.

DEFINITION OF HOAX AND MISINFORMATION

Hoax is a popular term often broadly used to denote any false information. At the same time, the Indonesian government apparatus has often applied the term to dismiss any matter deemed detrimental to its political legitimacy. In the recent Papua case,[4] for instance, the TNI official *Twitter* account dismissed the news that seven civilians were shot to death as a hoax, despite confirmation of the event by several news outlets.[5] To bring some clarity to the matter, we differentiate between "hoax" and "misinformation" in our study.

Misinformation thus refers to *information that might contain some sliver of truth but has been modified or exaggerated.*[6] For example, we categorize the accusation that the Indonesian government intentionally criminalizes ulama as a piece of misinformation. The accusation is based on the fact that several ulama who had taken a stance against the government were charged for criminal transgressions. However, in instant messaging apps and social media, the premise was made that the government criminalized these ulama with the intention of curbing its critics. This framing had the clear objective of questioning the legitimacy of Jokowi's government. Hence, we categorize this accusation as misinformation.
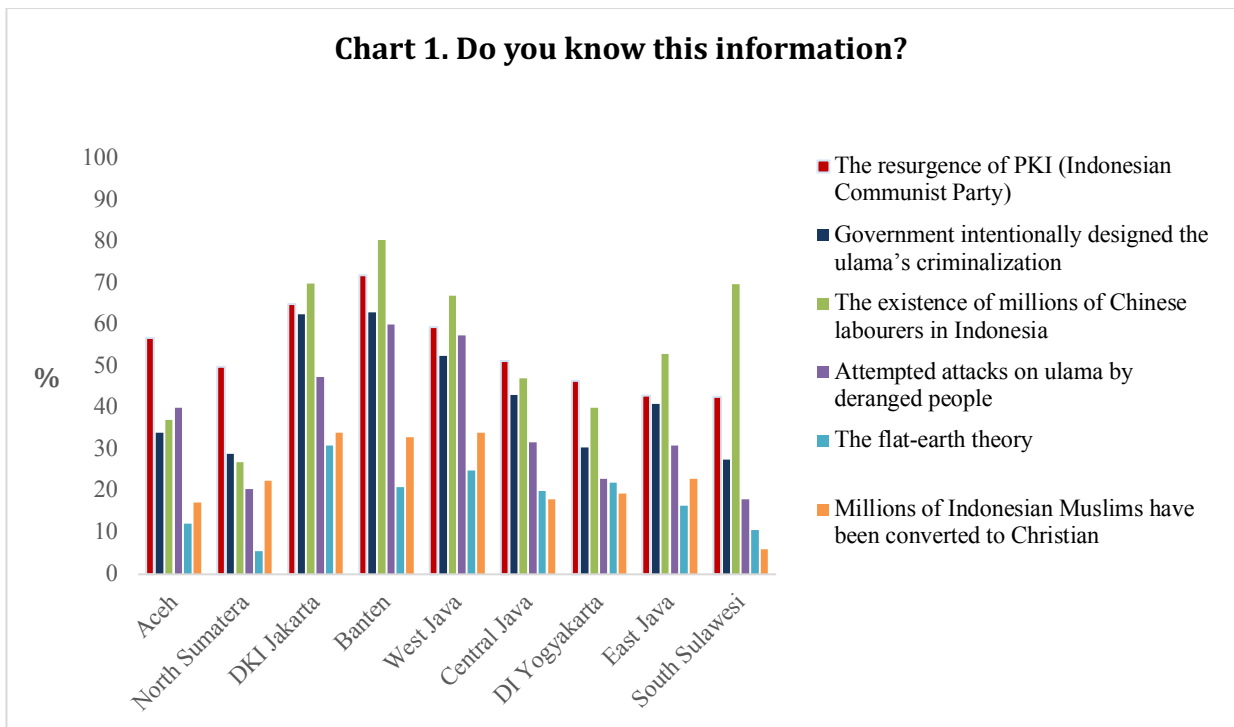
We define a hoax as *information that contradicts the facts*. While misinformation may be based on some truth, hoax applies only to information that has no basis of truth. In our survey, the category applies to paranoia on the resurgence of PKI under the leadership of Jokowi. We consider this as a hoax since the information has no verifiable fact to support it.

SPREAD AND BELIEF OF HOAX AND MISINFORMATION IN NINE PROVINCES

Using these terms, we were keen to map the spread of and belief in such cases. We based our dataset on the *Religious Freedom Survey* conducted by LIPI in nine provinces: Aceh, North Sumatera, Banten, DKI Jakarta, West Java, Central Java, DI Yogyakarta, East Java, and South Sulawesi.[7] These provinces were of special interest since several studies[8] had identified the regions to be hotspots for religious intolerance. Moreover, these provinces have 130.2 million registered voters or around 68.2% of the total registered voters in Indonesia.

In one section of the survey, we asked whether people in the region were familiar with hoax and misinformation (listed in the questionnaire in Chart 1). The cases chosen were a combination of past and contemporary misinformation and hoax[9] which included: (1) the resurgence of PKI; (2) the government intentionally criminalising the ulama; (3) the existence of millions of Chinese labourers in Indonesia; (4) attempted attacks on ulama by deranged people; (5) flat-earth theory;[10] and (6) millions of Indonesian Muslims being converted to Christianity. Flat-earth theory, unlike the others, did not have any bearing on the legitimacy of the government, but it is categorized as a hoax due to its rejection of established scientific facts.
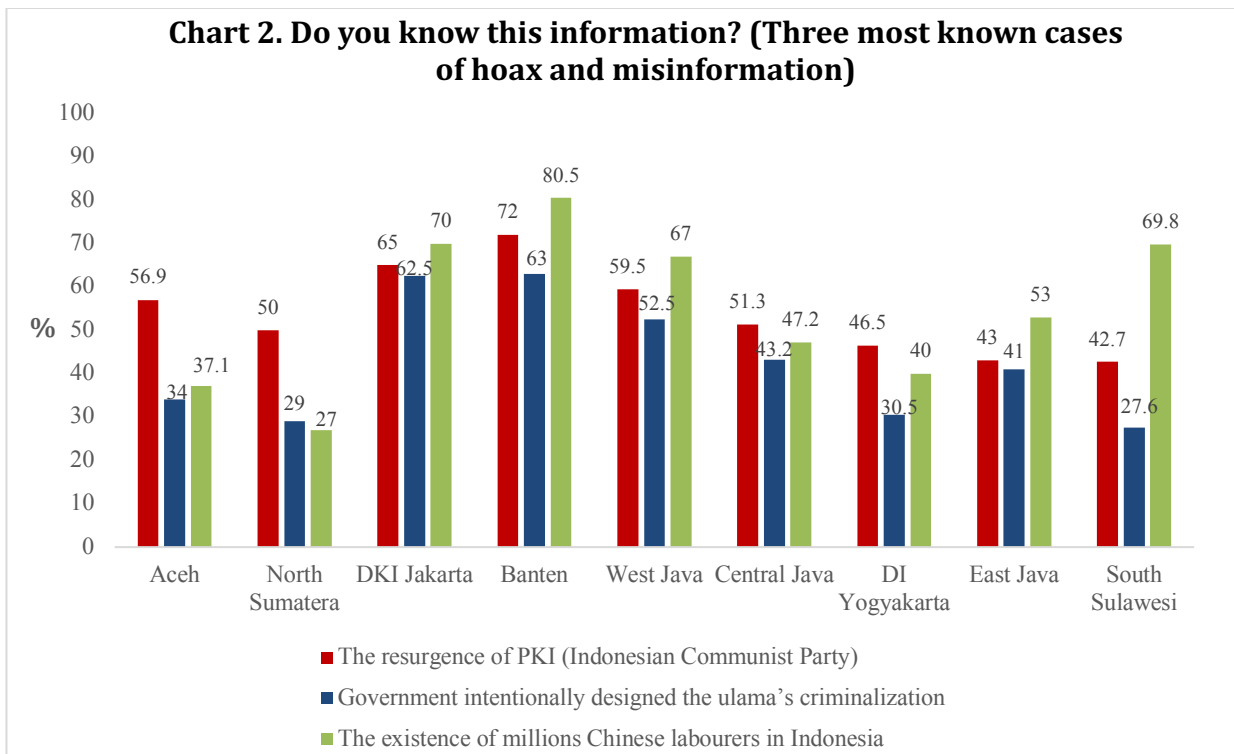
Among the nine provinces, the survey results show that Banten, DKI Jakarta, and West Java—not in any special order—are the three regions where citizens had had the highest exposure to almost every hoax and misinformation. This begs the question why these falsehoods were actively generated and propagated there. While the level of Internet access does contribute to the spread of hoax and misinformation, it is not the only factor. For instance, despite having the second-highest percentage of Internet use among households,[11] DI Yogyakarta still has relatively low familiarity with hoax and misinformation in comparison to other regions. Moreover, our findings also suggest that local context can be linked to why certain misinformation is more known in specific regions. The misinformation regarding Chinese foreign labourers, for instance, is exceptionally high in Banten and South Sulawesi. This finding is in line with previous data from a previous ISEAS survey showing that people in both regions have an unfavourable perception of Chinese as an ethnic group.[12] Particularly in South Sulawesi, familiarity with this misinformation is much higher than with any other issue. Banten[13] and Morowali (Central Sulawesi)[14] also have visibly high concentrations of Chinese labourers.

Chart 1. Do you know this information?

Source: Religious Freedom Survey, LIPI

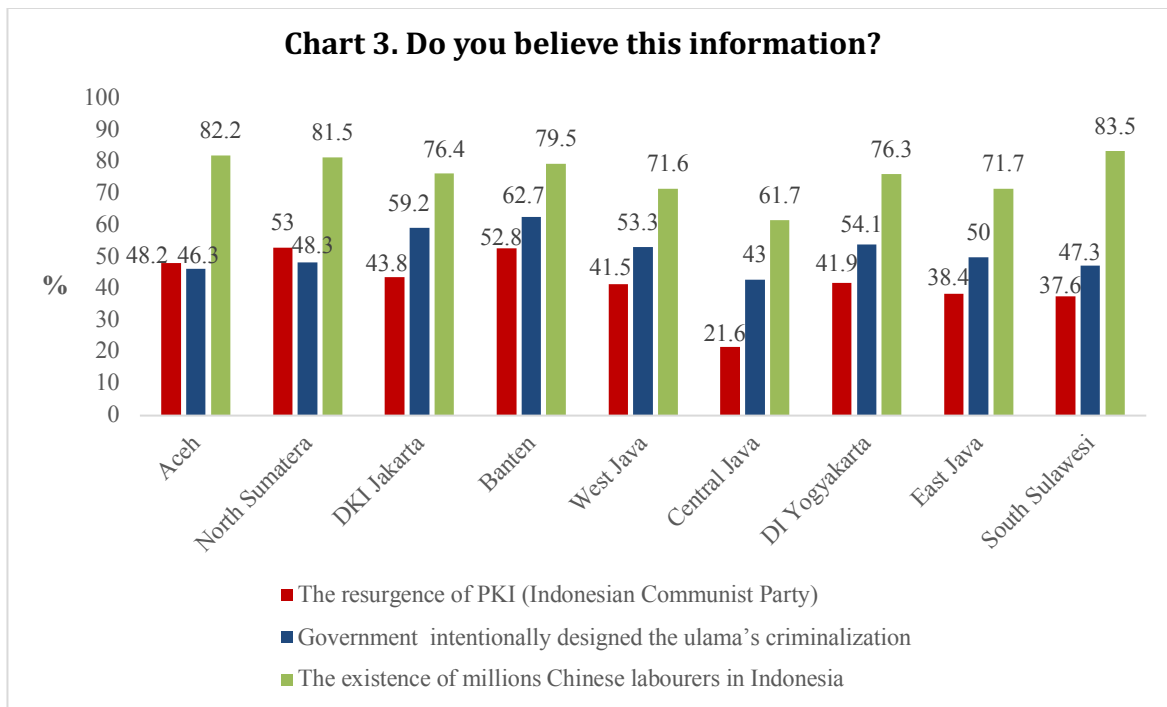## THREE MAJOR CASES OF HOAX AND MISINFORMATION

Of the six cases of hoax and misinformation provided, the three most known are: millions of Chinese labourers in Indonesia; the resurgence of PKI; and the criminalization of ulama by the government. In DKI Jakarta, Banten, West Java, East Java, and South Sulawesi, the misinformation of the existence of millions of Chinese labourers in Indonesia is the most widespread. More than fifty percent of respondents were familiar with this information in each of those regions. The resurgence of PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) is revealed to be the most known hoax and misinformation in the last four regions, i.e. Aceh, North Sumatera, Central Java, and DI Yogyakarta. While misinformation on the criminalization of ulama is not as much known as the two other hoaxes, the proportion of respondents familiar with this information is quite high. In fact, in DKI Jakarta, Banten, and West Java, more than fifty percent of respondents were familiar with it. The level of familiarity with these issues is not a surprise since the pieces of hoax and misinformation were spread on social media and instant messaging apps such as *WhatsApp*. Jokowi on several occasions had felt the need to officially dismiss these rumours. In August 2018, Jokowi provided clarification on the actual number Chinese foreign workers in Indonesia during his speech to MUI members.[15] In a meeting with NU members, Jokowi also denied the accusation of ulama criminalization by the Indonesian government.

Chart 2. Do you know this information? (Three most known cases of hoax and misinformation)
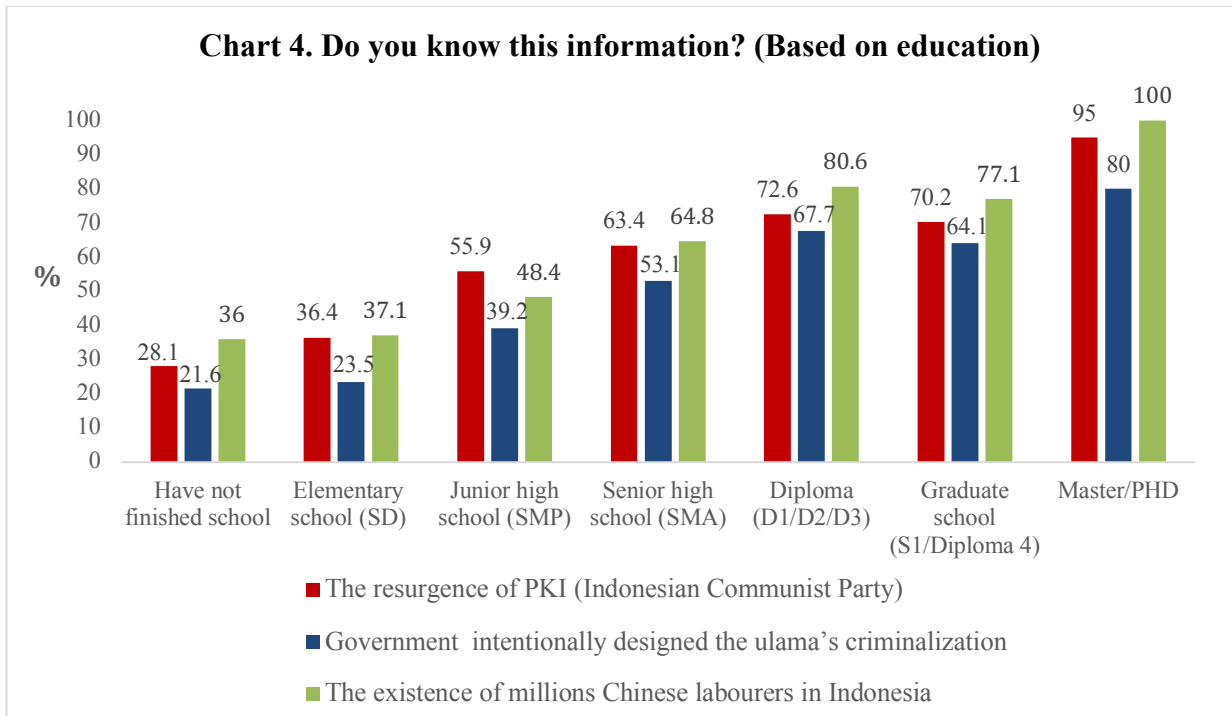

Source: Religious Freedom Survey, LIPI

Aside from the spread on social media, these cases of hoax and misinformation were actively propagated by influential political figures. The resurgence of PKI as the source of threat to the nation was prominent at the height of the *New Order*. Yet, the salience of the hoax in 2019 election could not be separated from the way figures such as Gatot Nurmantyo, as former TNI (Indonesian National Army) commander, raised the issue in national media.[16] Amien Rais, a senior politician from PAN (National Mandate Party), went even further and accused the government of supporting the resurgence of PKI.[17] A similar framing could also be found in the case of Fadli Zon, Gerindra's politician, who defended Bahar Bin Smith by saying that the ulama were criminalized by the government.[18]

Once we have established respondents' familiarity with these issues, we asked whether or not they believed in the cases of hoax and misinformation. Out of the three most known cases, we found that misinformation regarding the existence of millions of Chinese labourers in Indonesia is the most believed. In every region, more than 60% of those familiar with this misinformation believe it to be correct information. In Aceh, North Sumatera, and South Sulawesi, those who believe in it reached more than 80%. At the same time, while the hoax on the resurgence of PKI is also well known, the number who believe in it never reached beyond 53% in all nine regions. We assume that unlike the two other cases, the absence of supporting evidence made this particular hoax harder to believe. Meanwhile, aside from Aceh and North Sumatera, the percentage of those who believe in the government's criminalization of ulama is always in between those who believe in PKI and the Chinese labourer issue. Banten and DKI Jakarta have the highest percentage believing in this misinformation, at 62.7% and 59.2% respectively.

Chart 3. Do you believe this information?

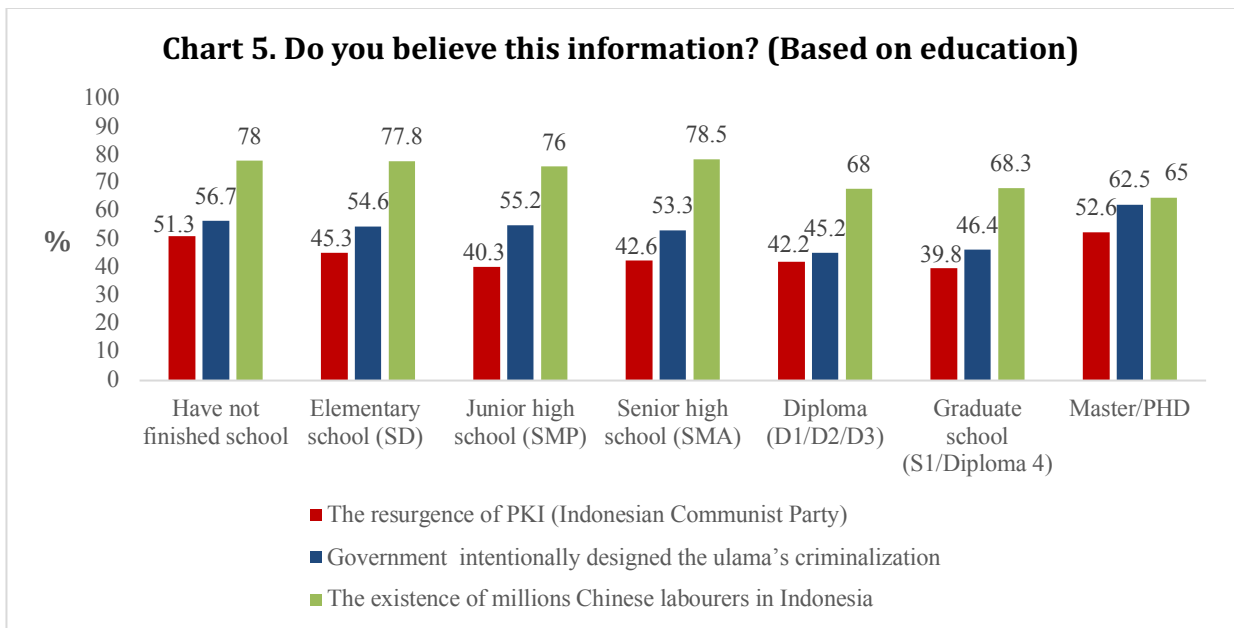Source: Religious Freedom Survey, LIPI

EDUCATION, INTERNET, AND LOCATION FACTOR

We also explore how education, the use of the Internet, and location background affect both exposure to cases of hoax and misinformation, and the propensity to believe these. As shown in Chart 4, respondents with higher education tend to have more exposure to hoax and misinformation. While the familiarity with these issues among those who do not have education never reached above 36 %, it reaches 67% among respondents with diploma degree and above. Among the hoax and misinformation, the existence of millions of Chinese labourers in Indonesia is consistently shown to be the most popular misinformation at every educational level. Incidentally, the misinformation is known to 100% of respondents with master or doctorate degrees.

Chart 4. Do you know this information? (Based on education)
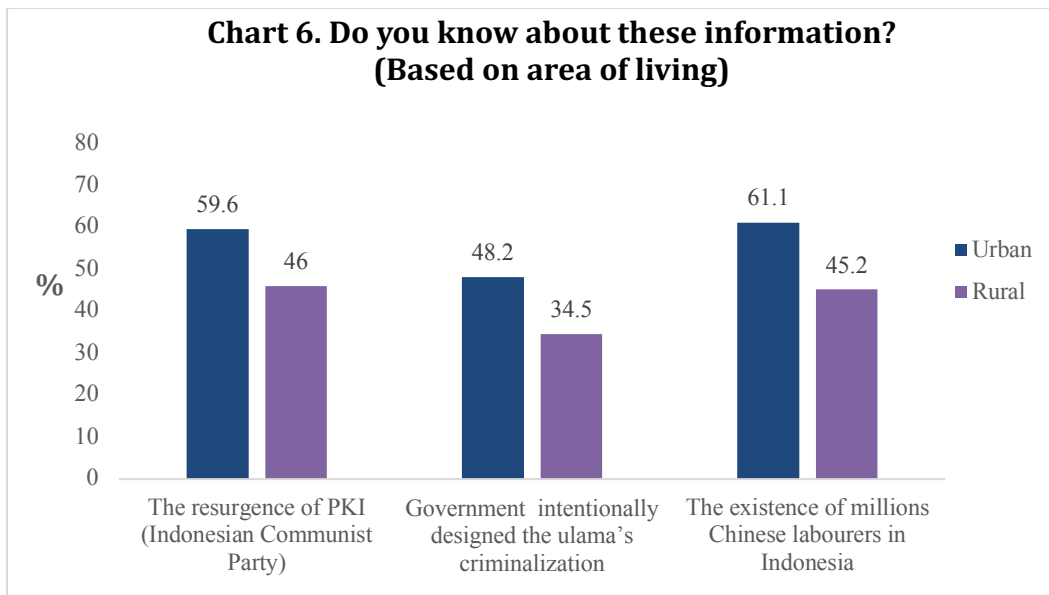

Source: Religious Freedom Survey, LIPI

A more interesting finding is that despite the association between education and familiarity with hoax and misinformation, education is not influential on how they perceive the issues. On every educational level, the belief rate on the resurgence of PKI is always the lowest. On the other hand, as we see in Chart 5, the misinformation on the existence of millions of Chinese labourers in Indonesia has the most percentage of believers. When we compare the levels of education, generally those with diploma degrees and above have a smaller percentage of believers on this issue than among other education groups. However, the difference is not significant enough for us to say that they have better capability for verifying information. Moreover, on other misinformation, like the ulama's criminalization, respondents with master degrees even have the highest rate of believers in comparison to any other education group.

Chart 5. Do you believe this information? (Based on education)
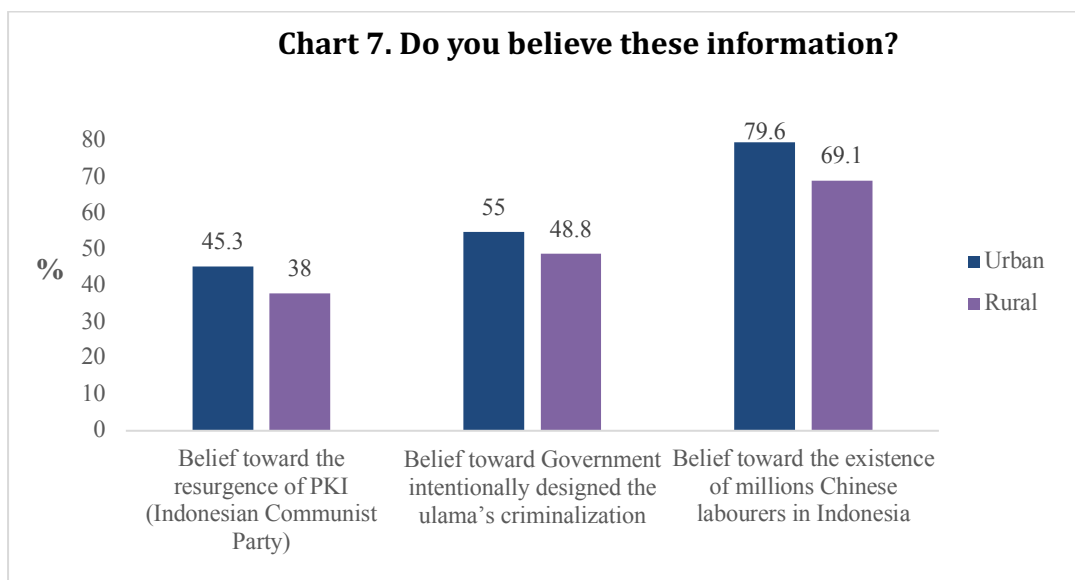

Source: Religious Freedom Survey, LIPI

This finding is important because education is often assumed to be the antidote for the spread of hoax and misinformation. Yet the data show that higher education does not necessarily make respondents more capable of spotting hoax and misinformation. This is seriously problematic since we know that people with higher education have better familiarity with different kinds of hoax and misinformation. Hence, it would appear that they are at higher risk of believing in more hoax and misinformation than those with lower educational backgrounds.

Based on geographical classification (urban-rural), as predicted, respondents living in urban areas are more familiar with the three pieces of hoax and misinformation than those living in rural areas. The higher familiarity among people in urban areas may be related to the ease of access to traditional media and new media like the Internet. The figure shows that less than fifty percent of respondents living in the rural areas are familiar with the three pieces of misinformation. Among the three, the resurgence of PKI is the most known misinformation in rural areas (46%). In urban areas, the most known misinformation regards the existence of millions of Chinese labourers in Indonesia (61%). Interestingly, respondents living in urban areas always have a higher rate of believers on the three issues. We have as yet no good explanation for this finding, and as with the educational factor, this questions the assumption that people in urban areas with better access to information are better in verifying information.
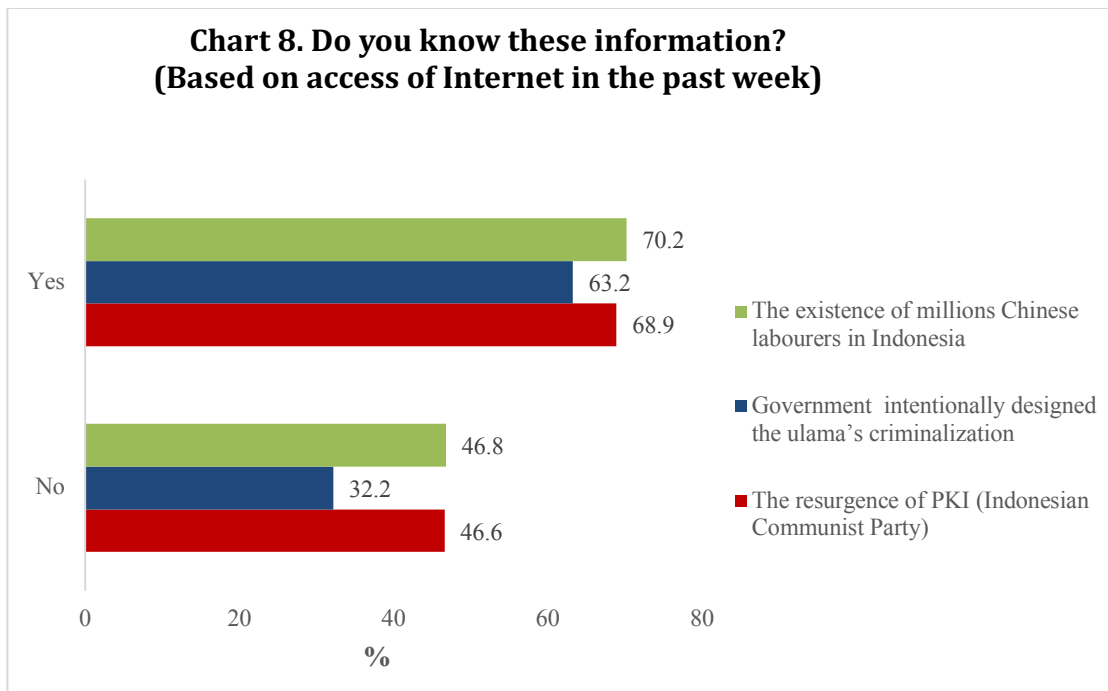
**Chart 6. Do you know about these information?
(Based on area of living)**

Source: Religious Freedom Survey, LIPI

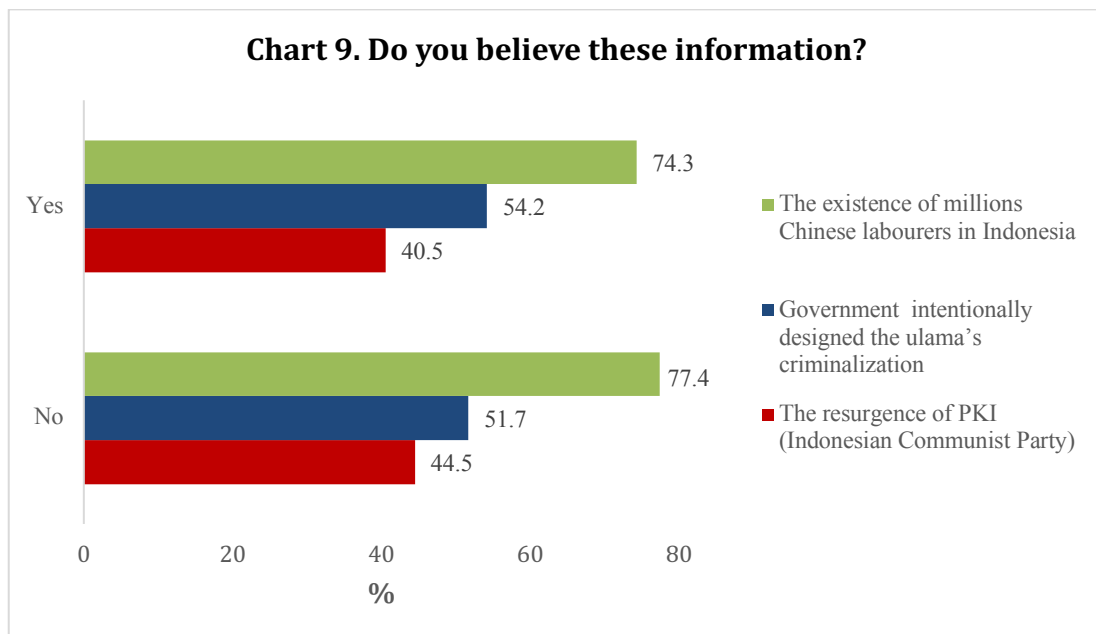**Chart 7. Do you believe these information?**

Source: Religious Freedom Survey, LIPI

The Internet is often assumed to be the ideal mode for spreading false information. To a certain extent, our findings support that assumption. In our survey, we asked whether our respondents accessed the Internet in the past week. The question is important for ascertaining whether or not the Internet is an integral part of the respondent's daily life. An avid Internet user will most likely have been using the Internet in the week preceding the survey. As we can see from the chart below, there is a 22.3 to 31% gap in the familiarity with hoax and misinformation between those who had accessed the Internet the preceding week and those who had not. In contrast, for those familiar with the three pieces of hoax and misinformation, the percentage of those who believe them as fact is almost identical regardless of their access to the Internet in the past week. In this regard, the Internet seems to play a role similar to education and geographical background. They may provide better access to information, and yet they do not necessarily make the respondents able to differentiate between hoax from factual information.

**Chart 8. Do you know these information?
(Based on access of Internet in the past week)**

Source: Religious Freedom Survey, LIPI

Chart 9. Do you believe these information?

Source: Religious Freedom Survey, LIPI

IMPACT ON INDONESIAN DEMOCRACY

To sum up, our data establish several findings that will be useful for further analysis on the spread of, and belief in, hoax and misinformation in Indonesia. From our survey, the resurgence of PKI, the existence of millions of Chinese labourers in Indonesia, and the criminalization of ulama by the government are the three hoaxes that the respondents are most familiar with. Misinformation regarding Chinese labourers in Indonesia has the highest percentage of believers. This is important because it questions the dominant perception that the spread of this hoax is mainly driven by religious sentiments. Furthermore, our consideration of educational background, geographical areas, and Internet use among respondents confirm an assumption about the propagation of hoax—those who have higher educational degree, or ones who live in urban areas, and the ones who accessed the Internet the past week are associated with higher exposure to hoax and misinformation. Nevertheless, these variables do not seem to inculcate a better ability in differentiating between false facts from hoax and misinformation.

Based on this survey, we confirm that neither higher education nor better access to information guarantee the ability of an individual to verify the truth of information he receives. It is even more problematic since the algorithm of many Internet platforms enables its user to easily spread hoax and misinformation. If the propagation of hoax and misinformation is not anticipated, in the long term the situation could pose a threat to Indonesian democracy. After all, the role of well-informed people in shaping and maintaining a healthy democracy is vital. In this regard, it is important to incorporate critical thinking and digital literacy into the educational curriculum to develop better abilities in evaluating information.

The actual effect of hoax and misinformation on society and Indonesian democracy remains unclear. Our survey findings are preliminary, and further research is necessary.

---

[1] Ross Tapsell, 'The Polarisation Paradox in Indonesia's 2019 Presidential Election', *New Mandala*, 22 March 2019, https://www.newmandala.org/the-polarisation-paradox-in-indonesias-2019-elections/; Quinton Temby and Benjamin Hu, Polarisation on- and off-line in Indonesia's 2019 Presidential Elections, Perspective: ISEAS (April 10, 2019) ; Liam Gammon, 'The Orang Gila Scare in Indonesia', *New Mandala,* 24 February 2018, https://www.newmandala.org/crazy-person-scare-indonesia/

[2] https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/02/04/jokowi-accuses-prabowo-camp-of-enlisting-foreign-propaganda-help.html accessed in 18 July 2019

[3] The survey was conducted from July to August 2018. It was aimed to assess public perception on religious freedom in Indonesia.

[4] https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4050055/kronologi-rusuh-di-deiyai-papua-hingga-sebabkan-3-orang-tewas accessed 10 September 2019

[5] https://tirto.id/rusuh-papua-di-deiyai-7-warga-sipil-tewas-tertembak-ehhB; accessed in 1 September 2019

[6] The definition is developed from previously discussed concepts of hoax, misinformation and political rumours. For further readings, see: Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *31*(2), 211–236. ; Bergmann,

E. (2018). *Conspiracy & Populism : The Politics of Misinformation*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. ; Kuklinski, J. H., Quirk, P. J., Jerit, J., Schwieder, D., Rich, R. F., Journal, T., & Aug, N. (2000). Misinformation and the Currency of Democratic Citizenship. *The Journal of Politics*, *62*(3), 790–816.

[7] In 2018, the survey was conducted using face-to face interview with 200 respondents on each province selected using multi-stage random sampling to obtain a sample of persons aged 17-64 years or married.

[8] Among these were studies from *Setara Insitute* and *Wahid Foundation*.

[9] Most of these cases of hoax and misinformation are representations of social grievances that we consider to be relevant during the period of survey. We choose not to focus on personal hoax addressed either to Jokowi or Prabowo and instead focus on hoax and misinformation that reflects on the social and political perception of the current condition in Indonesia.

[10] We include the flat-earth theory for several reasons. It is prominent in online banter particularly aimed at conservative religious minded groups. However, the hoax is even more important due to its anti-science characteristic which we consider the fundamental trait for the hoax itself.

[11] BPS. (2017). *Telecommunication Statistics in Indonesia*. Jakarta: BPS.

[12] Fossati, Diego; Hui Yew Foong, and Siwage Dharma Negara (2017). *The Indonesia National Survey Project: Economy Society and Politics*. No. 10. Singapore: ISEAS.

[13] https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4458424/viral-video-tka-di-cilegon-dihadang-begini-faktanya accessed in 31 July 2019

[14] https://lampung.tribunnews.com/2018/07/08/isu-puluhan-ribu-tenaga-kerja-asal-cina-di-morowali-terbongkar-dede-yusuf-beberkan-faktanya accessed in 31 July 2019

[15] https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2018/08/08/10590981/bantah-isu-serbuan-10-juta-tka-china-jokowi-sebut-hanya-23000-orang accessed in 18 July 2019

[16] https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2018/09/28/gatot-nurmantyo-beberkan-bukti-masih-ada-gerakan-pki-di-indonesia accessed in 19 July 2019

[17] https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-tengah/d-3926627/amien-rais-sebut-pemerintah-bangkitkan-pki-ini-kata-panglima-tni accessed in 19 July 2019

[18] https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4349977/habib-bahar-ditahan-fadli-zon-bukti-kriminalisasi-ulama accessed in 31 July 2019