

Disinformation, Hate speech and Incitement in Southeast Asia

Human rights activist and once Philippine legislator, Mong Palatino, recently wrote that “Internet restrictions, AI-driven disinformation, and mass arrests have intensified ahead of major elections across Asia.”¹ This is a sentiment being shared across the region as federal elections in countries including Indonesia occur in 2024. In sharing this statement,² Palatino noted several laws that had been amended in the region in 2023 that were being used “as censorship tools” in the lead-up to the elections, including laws in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Hong Kong. This censorship was being mixed with “buzzers” or “cyber-troops,” who are individuals or even corporations, that are employed to spread hoax news and disinformation, hoping to bolster political support at the expense of other parties and their representatives.³ There has also been a marked uptake in the use of AI, including, as reported by Palatino, a cloned video of a detained former prime minister of Pakistan, being used to address voters.⁴

In some cases, including in Bangladesh, this use of technology has incited violence, and it has also led to the arrests of people speaking out against the government via their social media posts.⁵ The violence in Bangladesh has also targeted journalists, with one journalist who was recording voting irregularities on his smartphone, bullied and his phone snatched, and the photos and recordings deleted.⁶ Those targeting the journalists appear to be working to a political agenda, with governments also blocking websites and social media posts that track, for example, politically motivated hate crimes in places such as India. The Indian government is being blamed for blocking the American site Hindutva Watch, which is an independent research programme that documents religious hate crimes in India. This blockage appears related to the blockage of their X site that, according to reports, was in violation of India’s problematic Information Technology Act.⁷

Aside from election worries, there has also been growing awareness of the ways social media is being employed to spread hate against Rohingya refugees who are reaching Indonesian shores. In the province of Aceh in Indonesia, fake news and disinformation about Rohingya refugees led to local Indonesians storming a refugee camp and forcing 137 Rohingya onto a truck; they were then taken to a government building and the abductees requested the government remove the refugees from the area. Ann Mayman from the UNHCR in Indonesia believes that hatred against the Rohingya appears “on multiple platforms, with similar messages and it was professionally [made] content. It was not made in a fisherman’s hut on a beach in Aceh. This was professionally-made and there were a lot of bots involved.”⁸ One example of a post, and one that has been prolifically spread in Indonesia, suggests the Rohingya influx to Aceh similar to the takeover of Gaza by the Israeli army, and that the Rohingya, while they claim to be Muslim, “do not look like real Muslims.”⁹

Recommendations

Southeast Asian governments should:

1. Realise the importance of fake news, hate speech and danger speech legislation, and implement this legislation in its civil and penal codes.
2. Work to recognise the difficulties associated with Chat GPT or GPT, when combined with deepfake and AI technology.
3. Work with the private sector, including social media sites and internet companies more broadly, to implement a range of generic policy measures across the region, rather than on a state-by-state basis.
4. Work with CSOs and NGOs at large-scale educational programmes for all ages and all users.
5. Learn from and work with the European Union and the European Council, and their partners, to implement measures to curb hate speech and danger speech in Southeast Asia.

¹ Mong Palatino, “Censorship, AI, disinformation, and repression undermine Asian elections in 2024,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, January 29, 2024, <https://hongkongfp.com/2024/01/29/censorship-ai-disinformation-and-repression-undermine-asian-elections-in-2024/>

² Ibid.

³ Annika Burgess and Hellena Souisa, “Inside the World of Indonesia’s Social Media ‘Buzzers’ Cashing in From Pushing 2024 election Propaganda,” *ABC News*, January 20, 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-01-20/political-buzzers-indonesia-election-misinformation-social-media/103298530>

⁴ Mong Palatino, “Censorship, AI, disinformation, and repression undermine Asian elections in 2024,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, January 29, 2024, <https://hongkongfp.com/2024/01/29/censorship-ai-disinformation-and-repression-undermine-asian-elections-in-2024/>

⁵ Anon., “Bangladesh: Repression, Security Force Abuses Discredit Elections,” *Human Rights Watch*, January 11, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/11/bangladesh-repression-security-force-abuses-discredit-elections>

⁶ Anon. “Bangladesh Ruling Party Supporters Use Violence to Obstruct Reporters During Elections,” *Reporters Without Borders*, January 8, 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/bangladesh-ruling-party-supporters-use-violence-obstruct-reporters-during-elections>

⁷ Yashraj Sharma, “Hate Crime Tracker Hindutva Watch Blocked in India Ahead of National Vote,” *Al Jazeera*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/31/hate-crime-tracker-hindutva-watch-blocked-in-india-ahead-of-national-vote>

⁸ Rebecca Ratcliffe, “The Online Hate Campaign Turning Indonesians Against Rohingya Refugees,” *Guardian*, January 18, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/18/the-online-hate-campaign-turning-indonesians-against-rohingya-refugees>

⁹ Ibid.