

Disinformation, Hate speech and Incitement in Southeast Asia

Hate speech and danger speech remain a potent risk in Southeast Asia, with minority groups still the target of prejudice and who are most at risk of being the victims of incitement. As in the previous few years, much of the hurtful rhetoric found across the region is being spread on social media.

In Indonesia, the spread of hate speech was recently fuelled by actions in Sweden. A recent torching of the Koran by far-right Swedish activist, Rasmus Paludan, sparked widespread anger amongst the Muslim community globally, including in Indonesia. Social media posts in Indonesia following the burning called for a violent response, but of the protests that did erupt in places such as Jakarta, protests remained peaceful.¹ Yet this incident, posted to social media, reveals how hate speech and hate-filled rhetoric from one side of the world has a powerful impact elsewhere, and can lead to an outburst of violence as a result.

In a recent article from Article 19, technology companies such as Apple and Microsoft have been shifting their operations away from China, due to concerns “about tensions between the US and China and COVID-19-related shutdowns imposed by the Chinese authorities.” While a business option, Article 19 sees this as an opportunity for these companies to “reset” their human rights agenda, helping with the curbing of hate speech. Until now, large companies such as Microsoft have been very much compliant to Chinese government requests, to the detriment of persons’ human rights.² Article 19 are calling on companies to use this shift away from China to better respond to human rights infringements these companies might have been implicated in helping commit. This includes upholding freedom of the media, and freedom of expression.

In New Zealand, with the resignation of Jacinta Ahern, the nation’s proposed hate speech laws have been withdrawn under the new government, Prime Minister Chris Hipkins suggesting a need to “refocus” on the economy. The proposed law was initially intended to incorporate groups not included in the current legislation (which only covers race), such as religion, sexuality, and gender, though the new law was only to include religion. The other minority groups had been controversially removed from the proposed bill, resulting in much backlash and debate in New Zealand.³

Recommendations

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 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.
3. Ensure public education about hate speech and its risks in inciting violence.
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 its partners to implement measures to curb hate speech and danger speech in Southeast Asia.

¹ Editorial Board, “Don’t Take the Bait,” *Jakarta Post*, Feb. 3, 2023,

<https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2023/02/03/dont-take-the-bait.html>

² Michael Caster, “China: Tech Giants’ Pivot Out of China can Usher in a Human Rights Reset,” *Article 19*, Jan. 10, 2023, <https://www.article19.org/resources/china-tech-giants-pivot-can-usher-human-rights-reset/>

³ Tess McClure, “New Zealand Government Under Fire after Shelving Christchurch Hate Speech Reforms,” *Guardian*, Feb. 9, 2023,