GNET-CENS Workshop

Online Agitators, Extremists and Counter-Messaging in Indonesia

Zoom, Tuesday 25 August 2020, 16:00-17:30 (Singapore)

The Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) is an academic research initiative backed by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), and convened by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London.

CENS organised and facilitated this event as part of our function as a core GNET member.

Summary

The Workshop discussed current developments regarding the use of social media by violent extremists, potentially subversive Islamists, and agitators on both sides of Indonesia's increasingly polarised political debate. This led into the presentation of fresh experiments to offer alternative narratives and amplify constructive messaging, particularly among young Indonesian influencers.

Our select list of participants brought a wealth of knowledge and experience to the discussion, which proved engaging and seemed likely to produce further conversations and potential collaborations moving forward.

Speakers

- **Dr Quinton Temby,** Visiting Fellow, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak, Singapore
- **Jennifer Yang Hui,** Associate Research Fellow, CENS, RSIS, Singapore
- **Rosyid Nurul Hakiim,** Editor-in-Chief, ruangobrol.id, Indonesia
- **Bahrul Wijaksana,** Country Director, Search for Common Ground, Indonesia

Participants

- **Dr Shashi Jayakumar,** Senior Fellow and Head, CENS, RSIS, Singapore
- **Raffaello Pantucci,** Visiting Senior Fellow, ICPVTR, RSIS, Singapore
- **Dete Aliah,** Director, Society Against Violent Extremism (SeRVE), Indonesia
- **Taufik Andrie,** Director, Yayasan Prasasti Perdamaian (YPP), Indonesia
- **Dr Mirra Noor Milla,** Associate Professor, Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Indonesia

- **Dyah Ayu Kartika,** Analyst, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), Indonesia
- **Jordan Newton,** Research Consultant (various organisations)
- **Diastikha Rahwidiati,** Senior Strategic Communications Advisor, Love Frankie, Indonesia
- **Tim Wilson,** Programme Coordinator, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)
- **M. Adhe Bakti,** Director, Centre for Radicalisation and Deradicalisation Studies (PAKAR), Indonesia
- **Sulastri Osman,** Research Consultant (various organisations)
- **Dr Noor Huda Ismail,** Visiting Fellow, RSIS, Singapore
- **Joseph Franco,** Research Fellow, CENS, RSIS, Singapore

Moderator

- **Cameron Sumpter,** Research Fellow, CENS, RSIS, Singapore

Presentations

Dr Quinton Temby, *Visiting Fellow, ISEAS, Singapore*

Quinton outlined recent dynamics regarding the use of social media by violent extremists in Indonesia.

The rise of mass social media and algorithms that prioritise and reward dramatic content, combined with a new form of jihadism was a difficult mixture for governments to address. Yet social media companies have become better at shadow banning users and extracting violent extremist content with artificial intelligence (AI) tools.

As in other parts of the world, the pro-ISIS Telegram ecosystem in Indonesia has been decimated in the past couple of years. New groups continue to pop up regularly but are also taken down relatively quickly. Whereas Telegram groups of ISIS supporters in Indonesia used to comprise 1000+ users, the average size today is probably around 200 accounts, before the group is discovered and blocked.

The tables appear to have turned, and the current period is probably a low point for social media radicalisation in Indonesia. There have been recent standout exceptions, however, such as footage of the MIT militants' funeral in Poso in April 2020, which was streamed on Facebook live and subsequently went viral.

Another notable development is that content previously spread from node to network, as individuals were able to post/broadcast to thousands of people on Facebook, for example.

Now sharing is more node to node within a small WhatsApp group, of close associates perhaps. That said, WhatsApp accounts have become vulnerable to penetration in Indonesia, and users regularly migrate to new platforms with similar functions.

The militant jihadi movement in Indonesia has therefore assumed even more of a cell-like structure, from the large loosely connected organisations and deep networks of previous iterations. Operational capacity has therefore become increasingly limited.

An interesting aspect to observe will be the ways in which key memes such as 'thogut' evolve through their adoption by different groups and on different platforms. This concept, for example, is already becoming normalised among ostensibly non-violent but hard-line Islamists in Indonesia.

Jennifer Yang Hui, *Associate Research Fellow, CENS, RSIS, Singapore*

Jennifer detailed the history and current activities of the Muslim Cyber Army (MCA), which is a loosely organised network of social media accounts which appeal to broad Islamist sympathies.

MCA emerged during the 'anti-Ahok' rallies in November and December 2016, in which Islamists demanded the Jakarta gubernatorial candidate be charged under blasphemy legislation. Supporters were urged to use whatever digital skills they possessed to wage an online war against their perceived enemies.

MCA's cyber activism sparked intolerant sentiment across Indonesia in the aftermath of Ahok's conviction and subsequent sentencing. A viral video from the Blasphemer Hunter Team (*Tim Pemburu Penista Agama*) encouraged viewers to report blasphemers, and a Facebook page doxed those believed to have insulted Islam – publishing their personal details and provoking vigilantism.

While MCA had largely lost its effective rallying point by 2019's presidential elections, the network continues to spread the perception that Islam is under threat in Indonesia and galvanises support for campaigns against pluralism and anything resembling secularism.

MCA's leadership operate in secret by coordinating on platforms such as WhatsApp and Zello (a push-to-talk app which facilitates private communication). More open social media sites allow the movement to reach new audiences and reinforce social and political positions through filter-bubbles and echo chambers, exacerbating the political polarisation emerging in recent years.

The promotion of divisive rhetoric and presenting the wider Muslim community as victims in an inevitable war with non-Muslims echoes what more extremist groups have been attempting. Intolerance towards opposing views increasingly manifests in attacks on political and religious outgroups, from public naming and shaming to the weaponization of the legal system.

The emergence, tactics and impact of the MCA also reflect movements that have emerged in quite diverse nations in recent years, as new platforms facilitate mass communication, distort objectivity and confuse amplification for fact. Whether the MCA represents merely an internet fad or something more subversive is an ongoing open question.

Rosyid Nurul Hakiim, *Editor-in-Chief, ruangobrol.id, Indonesia*

Hakiim described the short history and goals of the P/CVE oriented website, ruangobrol.id.

Having assisted with the reintegration of former prisoners convicted of terrorism offences for several years, activists behind Ruangobrol set up the online platform to create and promote alternative narratives for young Indonesians confronted with violent extremism. The idea was to train ten *ustadz* and ten former combatants in media communications and encourage them to become 'credible voices' who could unveil the realities of violent extremism.

Definitional ambiguity means the work is often like diving in murky water, but the platform tries to clarify concepts without pointing fingers at particular groups of people. A major aim is to create safe spaces for anyone interested or concerned about the associated issues. Users are prompted to engage with Ruangobrol staff through the website's chat function, which has even led to engagement with Indonesians currently trapped in refugee camps in Northern Syria.

One year ago, Ruangobrol started a pilot programme aimed at engaging people who seemed set to spiral towards violent extremism. They identify individuals on Facebook and classify them into different levels of radicalism, before attempting to interact with them through post comments and chat. The ultimate aim is to link people with suitable mentors offline, but they have so far encountered difficulty building the requisite trust.

Additional problems include their undercover accounts facing takedown measures from Facebook content moderators; the savviness of users who seem adept at identifying suspicious accounts; and the potential security risk of meeting people offline before revealing their true intentions. Female accounts tend to more successfully engage users, but this can also become problematic if a perceived romance develops.

Ruangobrol has three goals moving forward: Strengthening credible voices (both online and offline); evaluating the platform's message targeting through feedback analysis; and

grassroots efforts that encourage people to accept returnees/deportees/former prisoners as they attempt to re-join communities.

Bahrul Wijaksana, *Country Director, Search for Common Ground, Indonesia*

Bahrul stressed the importance of considering gender in P/CVE programming, online and off.

The increasing role of women has become an influential development in violent extremist activity in Indonesia over the past few years. Women have been seen in the past as background supporters or victims of male coercion, but they have now taken on much more pro-active roles in the movement – in terms of recruitment, radicalisation, fundraising and conducting attacks themselves.

Indonesia suffered shocking family suicide bombings outside two churches in East Java in 2018. In 2019, a woman detonated a substantial explosive device in a built-up neighbourhood in North Sumatra, killing herself, her child and destroying dozens of homes. Women have been arrested in the past two years while plotting attacks, and one teenaged girl allegedly convinced her whole family to travel to Syria for Jihad/Hijrah in 2016.

Over the past 10-15 years, social media has provided new space for women in Indonesia to express themselves, which has not traditionally been easy due to societal dynamics. More recently, online extremist propaganda has been manipulating gender issues, injustices and marginalisation, while claiming to offer pathways to empowerment.

With this in mind, Search for Common Ground Indonesia (SFCG) has developed a programme called GIRLS (an acronym for Generating Indonesian Resilience and Leadership Skills), which is focused on facilitating opportunities for young women. SFCG conduct social media analysis to target their messaging appropriately and currently work with ‘micro influencers’, or social media accounts with around 1,000 followers on Twitter or Instagram. Food and travel bloggers, for example, are encouraged to incorporate messages of tolerance and pluralism into their content.

Collaborating directly with young people is the only way to do this work. Government tends to be too slow and clunky to operate effectively in this space, which involves swiftly changing trends and specific language. Credibility is everything, and imitation is transparent.

Discussion[1]

Question:

The online environment appears to have changed quite substantially in Indonesia. Islamists dominated up to a couple of years ago – they had all the hashtags on Twitter; they were producing all the content.

But in the past 12-18 months we've seen a lot of pushback. Some of it has been constructive – such as the work of Ruangobrol and other positive content creators, but some of it has taken a dark turn. The tactics used by the MCA such as doxing and hacking are now being used by Jokowi supporters.

There are people that embrace positive values, such as those of Pancasila and tolerance etc., but some of the aggressive methods used and the stifling of descent is a bit troubling.

What impact are some of these pro-government buzzers having on alternative narrative work?

Response:

We've identified several accounts that are actually hacking us, and when we look at the account, we see that they have been created very recently, follow a lot of accounts, but have almost no followers themselves.

We'd like to research this further. When we put something up related to government, we've noticed that we receive attacks regarding that content. Facebook ad tools help us identify this type of thing.

There's now the hashtag #Buzzerp – the last two letters of which stand for Rupiah, meaning they get paid to buzz (agitate). They attack anyone who is critical of Jokowi and his government.

Actually, we don't have a political identity so we're not sure why they attack us! We've also been accused of being an agent of Indonesian government intelligence, by those who think we want to create problems among Islamists.

Online spaces have become so polarised that there's no room for discussion unless you are attacking or being attacked. There's no appetite for measured debate.

[1] Notes are not verbatim but are an accurate representation of the discussion, retained in a conversational style for readability.

Question:

Speakers described increasing polarisation – are we also seeing a polarisation of the Islamist space?

Response:

Polarisation has become worse since the Jokowi-Prabowo elections and the emergence of identity politics. Regarding violent extremists – even among the ISIS supporters, people are divided.

JAD are more militant, while JAK are a bit more moderate, or at least have different perspectives. Jemaah Islamiyah also have a different approach. Anti-Shi'a rhetoric, and even sometimes violence, has also become more common – so there are divisions everywhere.

Question:

We have been observing social media closely over the past several months and we haven't heard the term 'thogut' emerge much in recent conversations on the 'khilafa'.

Also, the pro- and anti-khilafa factions don't seem to have any interaction – they seem to be just talking in their own echo chambers.

We're seeing small accounts posting identical messages on the same day within a couple of hours of each other – usually from pro-khilafa accounts. The anti-khilafa accounts post derogatory (and often foul) language towards the pro-khilafa accounts.

Pro-khilafa groups have come up with some fairly sophisticated arguments – particularly regarding the government's handling of COVID-19. They describe how a caliphate would do a better job than the failed governance witnessed in recent months, and that a caliphate is a better economic system than capitalism because it cares more about the health and well-being of the people, rather than just money.

Answer One:

A key ISIS narrative from the very beginning was one of lifestyle and a better form of governance – a utopian vision.

But perhaps what you are seeing are Hizb ut-Tahrir (HTI) accounts, which are still big on Twitter, even though the group has been banned in Indonesia for a few years now.

It gets tricky when you are applying a CVE lens to a non-violent group, however intolerant. Where these arguments can and should fit into a wider democratic discourse is probably a wider, longer conversation.

Answer Two:

At Ruangobrol we focus on the ISIS definition of the khilafa, because of the violent means they are willing to use in order to achieve their end.

The khilafa term used by HTI and other similar groups are generally more engaging and intellectual. They see their struggle as a marathon rather than a sprint, and they're injecting softer debates which may receive more traction, but are not immediately dangerous.

We observe this rhetoric, but we maintain more of a focus on the violent extremists.

Question:

Do you ever receive backlash from your alternative narrative campaigns?

Answer:

We haven't had any real threats, but backlash through our public domain is common. Some people try to say that we are paid by government intelligence agencies or that we have intel officers working for us.

But also, some of the negative comments we receive are helpful, because they allow us to understand what engages people – even in negative ways. We take note of this sentiment and use it to inform our work.

Question:

How do you measure success in counter narratives?

Answer:

It is certainly difficult, particularly as evaluations generally require controlled parameters to measure impact, while programmes ideally need to be more free than rigid, evolving appropriately with trending discussions and platforms.

As Hakiim said, it's a marathon – for us too. We are not going to solve problems overnight, but we feel it is important to amplify positive narratives and empower constructive messages.

Question:

What does victory against online violent extremism look like? Indonesian ISIS supporters are constantly being harassed and forced to migrate to other platforms. They can't get their messages out to big audiences like before. Is it possible this is as good as it gets?

Answer:

Indonesia is a very politically polarised country right now (following last year's election), so anyone involved in P/CVE needs to think very carefully about programming so that it doesn't

exacerbate divides and provoke greater polarisation – possibly between Islamists and nationalists, to make a crude distinction.

Sometimes we've seen a convergence of violent and non-violent Islamists on certain topics and themes. The way that P/CVE potentially contributes to polarisation seems to be a bigger issue that any success it has in terms of preventing terrorism, particularly at the moment.

Closing thoughts from a participant:

COVID-19 has forced us to shift our real-world engagement online. This has been hugely challenging as it's happened so quickly and we're dealing with different target audiences, different spaces, and we've had to ask ourselves constantly, what can work?

And what really is the impact of doing things online as opposed to in-person? Can we measure the impact of this online work, when we are talking about specific target audiences? How can we sustain interactions rather than simply receiving reactions?