"It really has the potential to cause problems!"

Interview with Irendra Radjawali about the influence of information, pseudoscience and media on the governor election in Jakarta 2017

von Manuela Hinderhofer

The author is currently studying International and Cultural Business Studies (BA) at the University of Passau with focus on South East Asia. Her exchange programme at the University Atma Jaya Yogyakarta in Indonesia for 6 months in 2016 during the governor pre-election raised her interest in the country Indonesia, the gubernatorial election 2017 in Jakarta as well as the case of Ahok.

As part of the OPEN-SOUTH EAST ASIA workshop in Bonn, Irendra Radjawali gave us his opinion on the progress and media effectiveness of information in Jakarta. Radja is an Indonesian activist who has been in contact with the people during the governor elections and gave us an insight into the mobilization of the demonstrations.

Manuela Hinderhofer (M. H.): What was the critical turning point in the Ahok case?

Irendra Radjawali (I. R.): Personally I think, the moment of the uploaded edited video really twisted the situation. Probably, if his comment had not been changed and the video had not existed, the situation would not have been so crazy.

M. H.: To what extend did social media and other internet platforms play a role in triggering the Anti-Ahok sentiment? Who are the people spreading the fake news in your opinion?

I. R.: I don't think that only online social media were responsible for the Anti-Ahok sentiment. Of course, it played both a big and a critical role because of our digital culture, which tends to be getting more and more instant and fast. The group behind the ones against Ahok was using social media as their platform to organize people for the protests and the Anti-Ahok movement. But they were also organizing themselves offline to attract people to work for them. The groups against Ahok tend to mention millions of people, who took part in the protests. But in reality, they comprised only a maximum of 700.000 participants. If you ask me, they could mobilize that amount of people because there was an offline movement included. So, I don't think only social media by itself could have had such a huge impact and big numbers of protesters at the 4th November in Jakarta.

M. H.: How did you experience the atmosphere in Jakarta?

I. R.: I was in Jakarta during the first protest, in the southern part. It was dependent on where you were in Jakarta. The people in South-Jakarta knew that there was something going on, that there were Muslims on the street protesting. It was not as if they did not care but they kept their daily life going as usual. But where I felt significant differences, was in the usage of *WhatsApp*. In Jakarta, during the time of the protests the immense utilization of *WhatsApp* gave the impression of something big going on. For example, I was part of a *WhatsApp* Group of my University friends. Feeling sad of not being able to join the demonstrations, my friend expressed his emotions by texting "I am not the chosen one." Taking part in the protest seemed to be a holy gift from god. Many people regretted that they could not join the demonstrations. Based on our observations, I would say that mostly the middle and the upper-middle class were represented which means the educated ones. Therefore, contrasting the common point of view, everyone – the poor and the rich from Jakarta and even from Bogor, Tangerang or Bekasi were part of the demonstrations in the Indonesian capital.

M. H.: Who were the people behind those demonstrations?

I. R.: Firstly, the *Islamic Defenders Front* FPI *(Front Pembela Islam)*. Secondly, the politicians who were already against Ahok before the blasphemy allegation. Actually, some of the military or ex-military people were behind the movement as well. The FPI was the main group pulling the strings behind the Anti-Ahok sentiment but the question is, how can the FPI be so brave if there's no power behind them?

M. H.: Was the Ahok case a question of religious or rather political issues?

Irendra Radjawali in conversation with Svenja Hübinger and Manuela Hinderhofer on the OPEN SOA Workshop in Bonn, Germany. © Nadja Kützing, Forum Internationale Wissenschaft

I. R.: I would argue that behind all these incidents, it was a political power play but where religion also played a role. Ahok's opponents used religious and ethnical aspects as their instruments to abuse their power. But please remember that there are many other Anti-Ahok groups, which I am also part of, which do not refer to religious principles. The opponents are not against him due to Ahok's Chinese or Christian background but because of his rather aggressive approach on developing Jakarta. For example, the evictions of the poor people in the slums as well as the construction of the artificial islands called reclamations. But on the other hand, this Anti-Reclamation movement was also influenced by a prominent Muslim person, Amien Rais, the leader of *Muhammadiyah*, one of the two biggest Muslim organizations in Indonesia. He turned the resistance against these artificial islands into a resistance against Chinese business men. As you see, the political aspect is the main issue followed by arguments of religious and ethnical aspects.

M. H.: Do politicians in Indonesia use religion as a kind of capital?

I. R.: Some of the big political parties are still hesitant of using a religious strategy but that does not mean that they will not use it in future. Now, they probably don't want to be seen as racists but earlier speeches of some of the prominent politicians from the big parties have already shown a tendency of bringing up this topic.

M. H.: Was the opening of the internet and the evolvement of social media platforms after the fall of Suharto rather a danger or a blessing for Indonesia?

I. R.: My generation struggled under Suharto and the internet was something luxurious. There were probably only two institutions around 1993/94 in Indonesia with internet access – one of it was my University in Bandung. After Suharto stepped down and the reformation happened, the internet was a little more open, more accessible. Maybe also due to the development of new technologies and the opening of the market. Nowadays, I would argue that it is a curse for the Indonesian state. Maybe I am exaggerating but in the current situation it is definitely not a blessing for Indonesia. People are not able to filter the information which is very instant. I would not say that Indonesia is not ready for this development. In my opinion, it is not a matter of readiness but a matter of the way people deal with such changes regarding their cultural imprint, their social framework and their political culture. And in Indonesia the reality is, that the old conservative way of thinking in hierarchy and sexism is still prevalent. That is the reason I don't think of it as a blessing. It really has the potential to cause problems in my opinion.

M. H.: Do groups like the FPI use social media to promote a controversial view of the religious world like in Ahok's case?

I. R.: I would say yes. Online social media was not filled by proponents of diversity and tolerance. It was mainly filled by the extremists as our research can say so far. So yes, the FPI used it and there was no rival or no fighting back. They rather used social media for propaganda purposes than for recruiting people. Researches have shown that the recruitments stay offline and are still current. Additionally, apart from propaganda through social media, social media users were kept under surveillance. In my opinion, they observed the people reading the propaganda in order to choose which one to recruit or approach offline. Therefore, they use the social media in two different ways: spreading out their propaganda and monitoring users to get candidates for their intention.

M. H.: Which state interventions could be implemented in Indonesia to avoid or reduce the so-called fake news regarding the internet and social media?

I. R.: At the moment, I think the reaction of the government regarding fake news is banning them. But in my opinion, this is a wrong approach. I would argue the better approach is the one of a working together. The Indonesian government should work together with different groups of the society – Muslim groups, Christian groups, youngsters or others. It is important to create collectives which work together trying to frame the news. It is important that they make networks possible. In that way, the process of recognizing the fake news can be faster and probably more precise or accurate than the current solution of giving it to experts or consultants. What I have in mind is that neither the government nor the society can manage this problem on their own. They must work together! ◼