Giant Muslim Group Joins Fight Against Fake News

In Indonesia, world's biggest Islamic organization adds internet battle to its list of charitable duties

Thousands of Muslims held a demonstration in front of Indonesia's House of Representative in Jakarta last month to protest Jakarta Gov. Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, who is fighting blasphemy charges. PHOTO: DONAL HUSNI VIA ZUMA WIRE

By **SARA SCHONHARDT**
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JAKARTA—The world's largest Muslim organization is helping step up a battle in Indonesia to scrub the internet of fake news.

At first glance, a nearly century-old organization that normally focuses on things like maintaining Islamic boarding schools and funding hospitals wouldn't seem like the tech-savvy champion of such a cause.

But Nahdlatul Ulama, which claims 50 million members, has teamed up with information-technology experts and advocacy groups to debunk a flurry of sectarian hoaxes and false news reports that began circulating on WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter last year.

Their joint goal: to prevent fake news from feeding radical views that could undermine Indonesia's brand of moderate Islam and inflame sectarian tensions at a time when hard-line Islamists are gaining ground.

Fake news is a growing problem in Muslim-majority Indonesia, as it is in many other countries trying to come to grips with it. Facebook and Google, which were lambasted for doing too little to curb fake news during the U.S. presidential race last year, are rolling out initiatives aimed at slowing the spread of online misinformation by flagging false or hoax news articles for readers. Outside Indonesia, a slew of online sites have sprouted up to counter misinformation, including Politifact and Snopes.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo warned in December that fake news and divisive information wasn't part of the country's character, as his administration announced a push to curb it.

Among the false stories that spread furthest was a claim that tens of millions of illegal Chinese workers were coming to the country to take Indonesian jobs. Another story line claimed China was selling Indonesia contaminated chili seeds as a form of biological warfare, prompting the Chinese Embassy to describe the story as "very worrying."
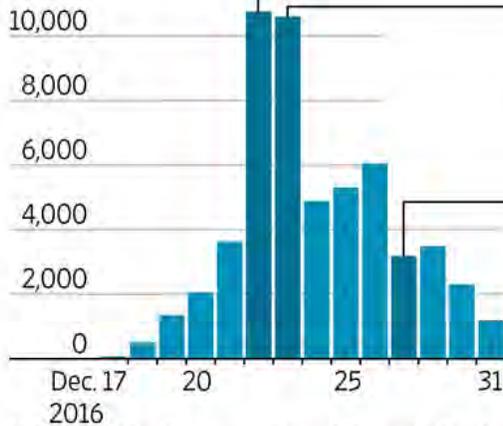
Fake news has played a big role in Jakarta's gubernatorial election. A doctored video of a speech by Gov. Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Christian of Chinese descent, led to demands among some Islamists that Mr. Purnama be tried for blasphemy for allegedly insulting the Quran.

He denies those charges and is battling them in court at the same time as the man who circulated the video faces trial for spreading misinformation. Mr. Purnama narrowly took the lead in a three-way race in February but the saga dented his approval rating ahead of April's runoff vote.

Chronicle of a Fake Report

Social media chatter amplified false reports starting in mid-2016 that millions of Chinese were illegally entering Indonesia and taking local jobs, peaking in December before Jakarta began to debunk the reports.

TWITTER CONVERSATIONS

Dec. 22: TV channels report entries of Chinese laborers through East Java.

Dec. 23: President Joko Widodo counters the rumors on twitter, clarifying that the government is trying to attract tourists, not workers.

Dec. 27: Police tweet they are searching for people spreading the false reports.

Note: Algorithm tracks mentions of the words 'worker,' 'work,' 'laborer,' 'China,' Chinese,' and 'Chinese' as a proxy.
Source: Ismail Fahmi via Drone Emprit

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Feeding the spread of fake news is the burgeoning use of internet and social media here, much of it on smartphones. Internet use rose by more than 50% last year and more than 40% of Indonesia's 250 million people use Facebook, Instagram and other social media, according to We Are Social, which monitors such use.

Nahdlatul Ulama stepped into this dynamic media landscape in December, joining a broader campaign to expose fake news. It got a grant from the Wahid Foundation, a moderate Jakarta-based Islamic research center, to fund contributors who help debunk hoaxes and refute radical messages.

Savic Ali, who heads Nahdlatul Ulama's webpage and social media accounts, said the organization's size and sway can help curb fake news from feeding intolerant views and fueling radical groups.

"This is encouraging Muslims to fight against non-Muslims," he said. "I see this as a big problem for our democracy, our society."

The group's articles will soon begin to be published on islami.co, a Nahdlatul Ulama-affiliated site that promotes peaceful Islam. Mr. Ali also plans to share articles with the group's media partners in radio, television and magazines.

Other groups are trying to coordinate their false news-busting efforts in Indonesia.

The Anti-Hoax Society, a volunteer effort that began on Facebook, uses crowdsourcing to debunk bogus news stories. Its co-founder, Septiajieko Nugroho, recently attended a global safety summit sponsored by Facebook in Washington to help the social media giant to improve its efforts at fact-checking, teaching digital literacy and promoting understanding.

An Indonesian tech expert, Ismail Fahmi, is providing data from his algorithm that maps social media conversations to government agencies and NGOs to show how fake news spreads.

And a local think tank, the Habibie Center, got a grant from Google parent Alphabet Inc.'s philanthropic arm to counter fake news by instead sharing stories of interfaith understanding. The group is building a website where young Indonesians can post videos, photos and stories about their interactions with different ethnic groups and faiths.

"Our concern is that there is going to be a tipping point that drives people to violence," said Ima Abdulrahim, the Habibie Center's director.

Nahdlatul Ulama's leadership, meanwhile, is counting on the group's sheer scale and community roots to extend the reach of such initiatives.

"This is not just about NU," said Yahya Cholil Staquf, general secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama's Supreme Council. "This is our responsibility as a society as a whole because hoaxes, false information, is not healthy for society."

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