

The biggest hoax of all: the 30 September Movement

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A diorama at the Museum of Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) Treason in Jakarta. Photo by Dr Antonio Rafael de la Cova.

Many Indonesians are worried about the damage that hoaxes and disinformation are causing to social cohesion in the country. Concerns first emerged during the 2014 presidential election and reached a fever pitch following the polarised 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. But these elections were just a practice run for the main event. Many observers expect a deluge of hoaxes in the months leading up to the 2019 presidential election.

Hoaxes are powerful, but dangerous, political tools. Politicians who rely on hoaxes are like factories that dispose of their toxic waste into the public water supply. They only care about profit, not the damage they cause.

The Ministry of Communication and Information has already begun making

Author



(<http://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/author/ariel/>)

Ariel Heryanto

(<http://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/author/ariel/>)

Professor Ariel Heryanto FAHA is the incoming Herb Feith Professor for the Study of Indonesia, Monash University. He is the author of *Identity and Pleasure: The Politics of Indonesian Screen Culture*, Singapore: NUS Press (2014).

[kominfo-hidupkan-mesin-pengais-konten-negatif](#) worth Rp 194 billion (A\$18.3 million), which will target pornographic content and hoaxes. Some 58 staff will work 24 hours a day to track problematic content, split over three shifts.

This is typical of many responses to the problem of hoax news. They deal with the problem superficially, on a case-by-case basis, and fail to get to the bottom of the issue. Combing through social media to censor hoax news is like trying to use an ointment to cure cancer – it won't do anything to treat the underlying problem. Many of the so-called "fake news" stories that have emerged in recent times could be considered "secondary hoaxes", made possible by the existence of a larger, more potent "primary hoax".

In the history of the Indonesian republic, it is difficult to find a more powerful or destructive hoax than the story of the [30 September Movement \(G30S/PKI\)](#). (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/30_September_Movement) The story of G30S/PKI was devastating in the extent of lies told, and the number of victims it affected. This was a hoax that was produced and disseminated by the state on a massive scale for more than three generations, since 1966. Civil society organisations and private firms were complicit in its spread.

There are two common misconceptions about hoaxes. First, although the word "hoax" is a relatively new term in the Indonesian lexicon, it would be wrong to assume that hoaxes have only become a problem over the past few years, with the rise of social media. Second, hoax news cannot be resolved or debunked simply by providing accurate information as an alternative, especially when nothing is done about the primary hoax.

Hoaxes that have targeted President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo and environmental activist Heri Budiawan demonstrate these problems.

Since running for president in 2014, Jokowi has often been the target of hoax news and smears. During the 2014 campaign he was accused of being a [Christian of Chinese descent](#), (<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/06/09/obor-rakyat-chiefs-apologize-to-jokowi-in-court.html>) and [he and his family have repeatedly been accused of having connections to communism](#). (<http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2017/06/06/13181581/jokowi.sebetulnya.saya.malas.menanggapi.soal.pki.ini.>) These allegations are rubbish and can easily be refuted. When these political attacks rely on potent myths about communism, however, they can't be ignored.

But any response appears incapable of countering propaganda that has been absorbed by the population for three generations. Even the most accurate facts

has said that he would “clobber” the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) (<https://www.antaraneews.com/berita/665925/jokowi-kalau-pki-bangkit-gebuk-saja>) if it rose again.

Perhaps by making such statements Jokowi is trying to appear firm or powerful. But for anyone who understands the roots of the problem, Jokowi’s statement simply reinforces the propaganda that he was trying to refute. He ended up reproducing the myth about the “danger of PKI”, a hoax that stems from the primary hoax about G30S/PKI.

No statements, slurs, or compliments have a natural power to damage or elevate an individual’s reputation. Such power must be constructed, cultivated, reproduced and maintained in public. This is true of all stories: be that about the “miracle” of camel urine (<http://www.bbc.com/indonesia/trensosial-42595630>) for health or the dangers of the PKI. The G30S/PKI hoax spread so widely because it was tightly protected by armed military officials and the thugs who were trained by them.

After being reproduced for more than a generation, the G30S/PKI hoax has become established, and has entered the national imagination and everyday language. Thugs and weapons are no longer needed to safeguard the myth from the threat of counter-narratives.

The G30S/PKI hoax is now accepted as fact. It has been widely accepted as if the PKI is a serious threat to the nation. As if communism is identical with atheism and is the enemy of religion. As if in 1965, the PKI rebelled against the state. As if members of the Indonesian Women’s Movement (Gerwani) that was affiliated with the PKI had an orgy at Lubang Buaya and mutilated the bodies of the kidnapped generals.

The primary hoax about G30S/PKI has provided fertile ground on which various kinds of other nonsensical hoaxes can flourish. Accusations that someone is “PKI” only carry political weight if the primary hoax is still accepted as unquestionable fact. It is enough to accuse someone of being PKI without needing an explanation of what is so bad about being affiliated with the party.

In this way, hoaxes can become like superstitions or beliefs. They are feared, without being understood, and cannot be countered by facts. As long as the G30S/PKI hoax remains a superstition, accusations of PKI can be easily thrown by anyone, at anyone.

The second demonstrative case involves environmental activist Heri Budiawan,

Marxism-Leninism, and demanded that he be sent to prison for seven years (<https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-timur/d-3799483/terdakwa-demo-palu-arit-di-banyuwangi-dituntut-7-tahun-penjara>).

This was only the most recent of thousands, maybe even tens of thousands, of similar cases. It won't be the last either, unless something is done about the primary hoax.

The case against Budi Pego was based on suspicions that he made a banner that included a hammer and sickle and used it in a demonstration against a goldmine in Tumpang Pitu Mountain, Banyuwangi, in April 2017. But prosecutors have been unable to produce the banner in court, leading to several observers questioning the validity of their indictment. It would be a shame if criticism of the indictment stops here.

A more reasonable question would be: What is the problem with such a banner if it exists in the first place? To equate preparing and publicly displaying a banner with a hammer and sickle with spreading communist teachings is just as silly as suggesting that corruption can be reduced if more anti-corruption banners are displayed in public.

One could go further. What is wrong with an ideology or discipline, including communism, being studied critically and openly? Studying communism does not necessarily mean that a person will become a communist. And even if they did, what would be the problem?

The question is not whether Jokowi, Budi Pego, or anyone else is a communist sympathiser. Rather, we should be asking: what is the problem with communism? What really happened in 1965? What type of myths did the state perpetuate and maintain across three generations? What was the goal, and what have been the social costs for the Indonesian nation?

What is the difference between believing that drinking camel urine is beneficial to health and listening to stories about the danger of the rise of the PKI in the twenty-first century?

This article was originally published as "[Dari Kencing Onta Sampai PKI](https://mojok.co/ariel-heryanto/esai/dari-kencing-onta-sampai-pki/)" (<https://mojok.co/ariel-heryanto/esai/dari-kencing-onta-sampai-pki/>) on mojok.co. It has been translated by Tim Mann and reviewed by the author.

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Melbourne Law School

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Room 726, Level 7, 185
Pelham St,
The University of Melbourne
Parkville 3010 VIC Australia

Phone: +61 3 83448581
Email: indo-at-melb@unimelb.edu.au

Editor: Tim Mann.
Editorial board: Professor
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