

## RESEARCH PAPER

# Generative AI, Foreign Information Manipulation, and the Rohingya Narrative: Understanding the Risks to Political Stability in Southeast Asia

### PANEL 3

Regional Responses to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference

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# Generative AI, Foreign Information Manipulation, and the Rohingya Narrative: Understanding the Risks to Political Stability in Southeast Asia

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This article explores how generative AI, foreign information, manipulation, and interference (FIMI), and refugee narratives intersect in Southeast Asia, focusing on anti-Rohingya discourse in Indonesia. Despite high digital engagement, uneven digital literacy across the region increases vulnerability to disinformation that exploits ethnic, religious, and political divides. GenAI amplifies FIMI by producing persuasive, multilingual content that mimics authentic media, making false narratives more convincing and harder to detect. Using narrative and discourse analysis of TikTok videos, this study reveals how AI-generated and user-generated materials portray Rohingya refugees as threats by tapping into exclusionary narratives that frame them as “the other.” These narratives are not only socially divisive but also politically instrumentalized by certain actors to gain public support ahead of Indonesia’s 2024 presidential election. Algorithmic amplification and digital populism reinforced exclusionary views, while digital inequality limited critical engagement. These findings underscore how AI-driven disinformation, when embedded in exclusionary narratives and amplified during political moments, can destabilize democratic discourse and reshape public perception of humanitarian issues.




## Introduction

The intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and democracy reveals a paradox: while AI offers tools to enhance civic participation, policymaking, and inclusive governance (Murphy & Taylor, 2023; Suktam et al., 2025), it also poses serious threats to democratic integrity. AI can personalize political outreach and enhance access to information, yet it also risks undermining epistemic agency: the ability of citizens to access reliable information and make informed decisions.

Generative AI (GenAI), in particular, heightens this duality. Its capacity to produce hyper-realistic content, such as deepfakes and synthetic propaganda, facilitates the spread of misinformation, manipulates public perception, and erodes public trust (Allen & Weyl, 2024; Coeckelbergh, 2023; Feldstein, 2023; Ferrara, 2024). These risks are compounded by the concentration of GenAI development within a few dominant tech firms, raising concerns over centralized power, surveillance, and diminished accountability (Ulnicane, 2025). Without serious oversight or international norm and pressure, authoritarian regimes may exploit GenAI to expand control through surveillance and propaganda, shrinking civic space and suppressing dissent (Feldstein, 2023). In this context, responsible governance of AI technologies must prioritize transparency, democratic accountability, and equitable access. Thus, striking a balance between innovation and regulation is crucial to protect democratic stability.

Another emerging threat is foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), which leverages digital platforms to polarize societies and weaken democratic institutions (Ünver, 2023). In Southeast Asia, FIMI has been used to spread hostile narratives against refugees, particularly during the Rohingya crisis. Misleading portrayals cast refugees as threats or foreign proxies, reducing public support for humanitarian efforts.

This article examines the viral discourse around Rohingya refugees in Indonesia (late 2023–early 2024). During this period, a surge in negative and hateful content targeting Rohingya refugees circulated widely on social media platforms. According to an analysis by Drone Emprit, between 2–8 December 2023, mentions of "Rohingya" on platform X reached 47,672. This number was far outpacing related online news articles, which numbered 4,421 (Saputra, 2023). The volume spiked significantly starting 6 December, driven by accounts posting disinformation and hate speech. Although pro-refugee voices outnumbered the hostile ones, the latter had a disproportionate impact due to the use of anonymous messages spread by



influential fanbase or forum accounts with large followings. This technique amplified the reach of hostile narratives and helped push the issue into national debate (BBC Indonesia, 2023). In the run-up to the 2024 election, such content was weaponized to delegitimize political opponents and manipulate public opinion. These developments reveal how FIMI transforms humanitarian crises into political tools (Veronika & Tricesaria, 2023), distorting democratic discourse and masking ethical imperatives.

Adding to these challenges is the persistent digital divide, especially in the Global South. Limited digital infrastructure and low digital literacy hinder inclusive participation and exacerbate inequality (Helsper, 2021; Norris, 2003). In areas with poor connectivity, citizens are excluded from digital governance processes, weakening democratic legitimacy and fostering disenfranchisement (Warschauer, 2004).

This tension is particularly evident in Southeast Asia, one of the world's most digitally active regions, with over 460 million users and 80% internet penetration as of 2022 (ASEAN, 2022). The internet engagement in this region is considerably high: over four hours online daily in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand (Shaw, 2025). However, the deep disparities persist. Mobile broadband subscriptions vary dramatically, from 56.4 per 100 people in Lao PDR to 169.6 in Singapore, while fixed broadband access remains under 3 per 100 in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (OECD, 2023). These uneven patterns mirror broader developmental gaps: Singapore leads regional digitalization (Chiang, 2023), while others lag behind due to structural challenges. It means that although millions access social media and digital platforms regularly, many still face barriers in infrastructure, affordability, and digital literacy, particularly across rural-urban and income divides. These inequities not only limit inclusive digital participation but also increase vulnerability to disinformation and FIMI. Yet, ASEAN's responses, such as the ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy and ADMM (Benincasa, 2020; Lân, 2024), remain largely state-centric, underestimating how digital inequality itself poses a security risk by undermining regional resilience and exposing marginalized groups to manipulation (Latonero, 2018).


Digital literacy is essential for democratic inclusion. It equips individuals to critically assess online content, engage in public debate, and hold institutions accountable (Gounopoulos et al., 2020). While targeted digital literacy initiatives can empower marginalized groups (Aryal, 2024), technological solutions alone cannot resolve structural inequalities without broader socio-political reforms (Norris, 2003). In this point, a comprehensive strategy, centered on ethical AI governance, digital inclusion, media literacy, and institutional reform, is vital to ensure that digital technologies serve, rather than subvert, democracy.

## Theoretical Framework: Understanding FIMI as a Concept

FIMI is a concept that has evolved to address the growing complexity of digital threats originating from foreign actors. According to Proto et al. (2025), FIMI represents a policy-driven reframing of what was previously known as “disinformation” or “information warfare” (Hammond-Errey, 2019). This shift, led by the European External Action Service or EEAS (2023), positions information manipulation not merely as a media or regulatory issue, but as a strategic and security threat. This shift aims to distinguish harmful foreign activities from general false information and to enable more robust policy responses that align with national and regional security priorities. While the term has its institutional roots in Europe, the underlying dynamics of FIMI are not context-specific. Foreign interference, manipulative intent, and digital amplification, are increasingly global in nature, making the FIMI framework relevant and applicable to regions like Southeast Asia, where similar vulnerabilities and geopolitical complexities exist. Pastor-Galindo et al. (2025) further develop this concept by framing FIMI as a set of online strategies conducted through social media influence operations, characterized by their foreign origin and manipulative intent.

This article identifies several core elements as central to the FIMI concept. *First*, foreign origin is essential. The operations must be directed, coordinated, or materially supported by foreign states, quasi-state actors, or their proxies – as opposed to purely domestic activities (ATHENA, 2024; Hénin, 2023; Pastor-Galindo et al., 2025; Proto et al., 2025). *Second*, manipulative intent is key. FIMI efforts are designed as a strategic objective to alter, disrupt, or shape public opinion, behavior, or decision-making in the target society, usually to the detriment of democratic stability or security (Pastor-Galindo et al., 2025; Proto et al., 2025). *Third*, the tactics used are typically deceptive, covert, or subversive, such as false flag websites, inauthentic amplification via bots, or AI-generated synthetic media (Pastor-Galindo et al., 2025; Proto et al., 2025). *Finally*, FIMI differs from ordinary influence or public diplomacy by crossing the line into interference. It seeks not just to inform or persuade, but to distort and disrupt democratic processes, societal trust, or policy decisions (Proto et al., 2025). Based on these distinctions, an incident can only be classified as FIMI when it meets all of these criteria (Pastor-Galindo et al., 2025).

Those core elements clearly distinguish FIMI from related concepts. It does not include domestic misinformation, because only actions that are directed or coordinated by foreign actors qualify as FIMI. Nor does it include legitimate foreign advocacy, as FIMI requires the use of deceptive or coercive tactics; hence, transparent and truthful foreign communication



is not considered FIMI. Similarly, lawful persuasion or protected speech does not fall under FIMI, since it is defined not merely by foreign origin or viewpoint advocacy, but by malign intent and deceptive methods. Equally important, FIMI must be understood as more than just a matter of misleading content; instead, it functions as a tool of transnational political strategy. So, unlike classical propaganda, which typically aims to persuade, FIMI is designed to confuse, divide, and destabilize. Its logic is not to offer an alternative truth, but to erode public trust in facts altogether.


To understand the operational logic of FIMI, it is essential to examine the specific objectives behind such campaigns. According to the EEAS (2023), foreign information operations often follow a “5D” pattern: i) *dismissing* critics, ii) *distorting* narratives, iii) *distracting* public attention, iv) *dismaying* audiences through fear tactics, and v) *dividing* societies. These tactics are supported by increasingly sophisticated methods, including the use of deepfakes, doctored imagery, and the deployment of official diplomatic channels to disseminate false or misleading content. Amplification is often achieved through coordinated cross-platform strategies, targeting multiple communities simultaneously to maximize reach and impact. What makes FIMI particularly challenging as a geopolitical threat is its ability to operate in the legal and normative grey zones. Many FIMI activities are not explicitly illegal under national and international law, which complicates efforts to regulate or penalize them (Hénin, 2023). Additionally, FIMI is increasingly linked to other forms of hostile activity, such as cyberattacks, online harassment, or hate speech. The result is a complex web of manipulation that is difficult to trace and even harder to neutralize.

## Generative AI as FIMI Accelerator

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The rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has significantly transformed the way FIMI is carried out. GenAI amplifies FIMI’s scale, speed, and sophistication by automating the production of text, images, audio, and video content that is often indistinguishable from authentic material. This reduces the cost and effort needed to generate large volumes of disinformation, propaganda, and coordinated narratives, allowing malicious actors to operate with greater efficiency and reach (Goldstein et al., 2023; Schipper, 2025). For instance, AI can be used to mass-produce fake news articles, deepfake videos, or “pseudo-local” social media posts that mimic the language and style of real users.

In terms of persuasive impact, Stepanovna (2024) and Goldstein et al. (2023) argue that AI-generated content is often more convincing and harder to detect than earlier forms of disinformation, such as those produced by basic bots or troll farms. Studies by Imran et al.



(2025) show that propaganda created with large language models (LLMs) is perceived by audiences as equally persuasive as human-written content. Because these AI tools can imitate human tone and context, distinguishing fake content from real becomes increasingly difficult, even for trained fact-checkers and digital watchdogs.

Another major way GenAI influences FIMI is through *hyper-personalization*. GenAI enables micro-targeting, enabling rapid tailoring of disinformation to fit specific cultural, linguistic, and local contexts, especially in diverse regions like Southeast Asia (Goldstein et al., 2023; Schipper, 2025). It allows malicious actors to target niche communities by generating content in regional languages like Malay, Tagalog, or Indonesian, making the narratives more relatable and believable. This micro-targeting capability is further enhanced through real-time tracking of events and sentiment analysis, allowing narratives to adapt dynamically and exploit vulnerabilities in public perception.

Schipper (2025), in his research on GenAI and election disinformation in the Philippines, found that GenAI enables new forms of manipulation that go beyond traditional text-based disinformation. It allows the creation of synthetic audio, video, and images—such as deepfakes that mimic political figures or fabricate events—which make disinformation more emotionally compelling and harder to debunk. Often, these tactics are reinforced by automated amplification through bot networks (Uyheng & Carley, 2021), fake accounts known as “sock puppets”, or hybrid “cyborg” accounts managed jointly by humans and AI systems (Stepanovna, 2024; Wack et al., 2025; Woolley, 2022). These coordinated networks flood social media with manipulated content, reflecting a growing sophistication in how disinformation is created and spread, posing major challenges for governments, civil society, and technology platforms.

The algorithmic infrastructure of social media further exacerbates this problem. As Lim (2025) argues, platforms are not neutral spaces for democratic dialogue but systems driven by digital capitalism. Therefore, it is designed to reward content that is provocative, emotional, and polarizing. This creates a fundamentally unequal information environment, where political actors can exploit algorithmic incentives to reinforce dominant narratives, suppress dissent, or deepen division. Within this context, FIMI campaigns thrive not only by manipulating facts but also by exploiting social psychology. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), these campaigns often amplify in-group affiliations while portraying targeted out-groups as threats to collective well-being. Generative AI intensifies these dynamics by accelerating the production of emotionally charged content that dehumanizes, distracts, and divides. In Southeast Asia, this convergence of platform logics,

identity-based othering, and AI-powered amplification presents a serious challenge to democratic resilience and regional solidarity.

## GenAI-based FIMI on Rohingya Refugees in Southeast Asia


The following sections explore how digital technologies and disinformation shape exclusionary narratives surrounding the Rohingya in Indonesia and Malaysia. Drawing on recent studies from 2020 to 2025, this analysis highlights emerging scholarly efforts to understand how refugee-related discourse is produced, circulated, and politicized online. This section also gives attention to TikTok, as a key site of narrative formation, where emotionally charged content and algorithmic amplification interact to influence public sentiment and political positioning.

### Narrative Analysis: The Roots of Anti-Rohingya Social Media Discourse in Disinformation

Across Indonesia and Malaysia, contemporary social media discourse about Rohingya refugees is marked by a strikingly negative tone: one that is not only hostile, but also deeply shaped by misinformation and the circulation of hoaxes. Recent studies reveal with increasing clarity how the construction and amplification of exclusionary narratives about the Rohingya are interwoven with digital rumor and falsified claims (Bala & Lumayag, 2021; Dahana, 2025; Fernandez, 2020; Munirah et al., 2025; Nuthihar et al., 2024; Ramadhani et al., 2024; Rashid & Saidin, 2023).

The strongest evidence for this phenomenon comes from Dahana's (2025) study that systematically mapped Twitter/X conversations about Rohingya refugees in Indonesia. Through a social network analysis of over 80,000 tweets, this work demonstrates that negative public sentiment is closely intertwined with the circulation of information of dubious veracity, which are mass media reports or hoax information that describe the bad behavior of Rohingya refugees (p. 206). Here, the cycle of negativity is not an organic reflection of pre-existing social attitudes alone, but rather is propelled by the persistent spread of sensationalized or fabricated claims, widely shared by both influencer individuals, bots, and influential media-like accounts (Dahana, 2025, pp. 204-206).

This finding of direct and explicit coupling between negative sentiment and hoaxes is echoed, albeit more implicitly, in other studies employing discourse and narrative analysis. For instance, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of YouTube comments and videos about



Rohingya refugees in Indonesia reveals recurrent narratives that label the Rohingya as “illegal immigrants”, “lewd”, “dangerous” (Ramadhani et al., 2025, pp. 249–251), or even “potential colonizers like Israel” (pp. 259–260). While this study doesn’t trace the provenance of each trope to specific hoaxes, the prevalence of factually questionable claims and the moral intensity of these frames, often dehumanizing or apocalyptic in tone, point strongly to a discursive atmosphere saturated with misinformation and conspiratorial undertones.

In the Malaysian context, analysis of Twitter discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic found similar patterns. Here, resentment toward the Rohingya was magnified in digital “echo chambers” where the distinction between refugee and undocumented migrant all but vanished and hostile speculation flourished (Rashid & Saidin, 2023). The absence of accurate information and the rapid, uncritical recirculation of sensational claims fuel a climate where exclusionary narratives thrive. Although this study does not systematically map individual hoaxes, it is clear that confusion, rumor, and misattribution are driving public perceptions, particularly around hot-button topics like resource allocation, “special treatment”, or alleged criminality.

Further, research examining the spread of online hate speech in Malaysia during the pandemic details how populist political rhetoric, deployed by local leaders, sets the tone for waves of digital hostility—each wave targeting different “outgroup” populations, with Rohingya refugees a prominent focus (Fernandez, 2020). While these narratives may originate in elite discourse or media stories, their spread and transformation online are strongly associated with rumor and misinformation ecosystems. Here, the lines between genuine anxiety, structured “othering”, and rumor-driven hostility are frequently blurred.

On visually oriented social platforms like TikTok and Instagram, the explicit mapping of misinformation is less frequent, but narrative content analysis nonetheless finds that user rejection of Rohingya refugees is often framed in alarmist terms—security, legality, economic burden—that are familiar from broader online hoax cycles in Indonesia (Munirah et al., 2025; Nuthirah et al., 2024). The evolution of Acehnese public opinion from empathy in 2015 to pronounced rejection by 2023-2024 on these platforms coincides with the ascendance of national security and crime narratives, frames well known from both documented hoaxes and traditional rumor-mongering in the regional press and social media spheres (Munirah et al., 2025). Instagram discourse analysis similarly uncovers novel forms of symbolic and interactive rejection, where meme culture, sarcastic suggestions, and alternate proposals echo the logic and language of viral misinformation, even if the individual posts are not traced to an original hoax source (Nuthirah et al., 2024).

In quantitative studies using sentiment analysis or topic modeling, the overwhelming trend is toward negativity, with rejection of Rohingya refugees increasingly tied to fears about crime, economic strain, or cultural threat (Ahammad et al., 2024; Aulia & Sriani, 2025; Istiqomah & Budi, 2024). While these works do not analyze narratives or the specific role of misinformation in framing public sentiment, their findings are consistent with the themes repeatedly weaponized in false or misleading digital narratives about refugees.

These studies illustrate a disturbing cycle: negative narratives about Rohingya refugees are not merely spontaneous expressions of local anxieties but are actively generated and amplified through digital misinformation and hoaxes. Viral rumors and sensational content shape public discourse, reinforcing and spreading existing prejudices both online and offline. In Indonesia and Malaysia, social media narratives surrounding the Rohingya are increasingly shaped by these false claims, as demonstrated by social network analysis and supported by critical discourse and narrative analysis, highlighting how deeply misinformation has penetrated the digital public sphere.

## **GenAI FIMI about The Rohingya on Indonesian TikTok videos**

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A casual search using the keyword “Rohingya” on TikTok yielded at least nine videos that portrayed the Rohingya ethnic group in a strongly negative light. TikTok is used here as the source of analysis because it is among the most widely used social media platforms in Indonesia (Kemp, 2025), particularly popular for its algorithm-driven virality and reach among younger demographics. While these TikTok videos were not part of a systematically collected dataset, they offer insight into the broader narrative landscape on social media. Three of these videos were generated using GenAI tools, while the remaining six were traditional user-edited content.

Despite differences in production style, the narratives they circulated were strikingly similar. The Rohingya were repeatedly framed as ungrateful outsiders, often described as taking advantage of Indonesia’s hospitality. One video showed a man—claimed to be a Rohingya refugee—appearing dissatisfied with the food in front of him (Hamparansajada, 2023). The caption in the video reads: *“Beredar video pengungsi Rohingya protes diduga karena porsi nasi terlalu sedikit”* (“A video is circulating of a Rohingya refugee allegedly protesting because the portion of rice was too small”). This video gained 4,152 Likes, 321 Comments, and 763 Shares, regardless of the lack of verification about the man’s identity or the context behind his reaction (Picture 1). Despite the lack of clarity, the clip was used to reinforce negative stereotypes, portraying refugees as ungrateful and undeserving of aid.



**Picture 1. A man, claimed to be a Rohingya refugee, appeared dissatisfied with his food**  
(Source: Hamparansajada, 2023)

Another video (Picture 2) featured recurring visuals of Rohingya refugees arriving by boat on the shores of Aceh, attracting 3.807 Likes, 309 Comments, and 289 Shares. It included a caption that read, "*Rohingya semakin tak terkendali*" ("the Rohingya are becoming increasingly out of control"), framing the situation as a national crisis. The video had no narration or voiceover, instead relying on overlaid text that said: "*jangan kasih kendor tetap menyuarakan di sosmed karena pemerintah menunggu kita diam maka mereka juga akan diam selamanya*" ("don't back down, keep speaking out on social media, because the government is waiting for us to stay silent so they can stay silent forever") (Cahaya\_gemilang22, 2023). This statement reveals a deeper layer of digital populism at play. It positions social media users as watchdogs, implying that the state cannot be trusted to act in the public's interest unless pressured by citizen outrage.

This narrative creates an environment where anger and distrust toward both refugees and the government are amplified. It casts silence as complicity, and noise as patriotism. In doing so, it mobilizes public opinion through a sense of urgency and perceived moral obligation. By embedding this call to action in emotionally charged, anti-refugee content, the caption becomes more than just text—it operates as a political signal that frames the refugee crisis as a battle between "the people" and a passive, indifferent state.

Another video questions the role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR (Picture 3). The narrator in the video explains that UNHCR is an agency that supports Rohingya refugees and introduces Thomas Vargas as its representative (Awaanstory, 2023). The narration is delivered in a neutral tone and ends with a message encouraging viewers to continue advocating for humanitarian values. However, the caption placed over the video reads, *"UNHCR & siapa dalang pengungsi Rohingya?"* ("UNHCR and who is the mastermind behind the Rohingya refugees?"), a framing that invites viewers to interpret the content with skepticism. This video successfully gained more than 92.900 Likes and almost 2.000 Comments and Shares, respectively. Although the narration itself does not suggest anything controversial, the choice of caption opens space for doubt about the agency's intentions.




**Picture 2. Rohingya refugees arriving in Aceh by boat**

(Source: Cahaya\_gemilang22, 2023)



**Picture 3. UNHCR's portrayal as the "mastermind" of Rohingya refugees**

(Source: Awaanstory, 2023)



Meanwhile, the GenAI-based videos we found were especially notable for their use of AI-generated voiceovers and digitally manipulated visuals, which lent a sense of authority and professional polish to otherwise unverified or misleading narratives. One example features a video that uses synthetic visuals, AI-generated narration, and AI-produced voiceover to present a distorted historical account, portraying the Rohingya as a group that once harmed native populations, thereby justifying present-day exclusion and hostility (Picture 4), attracting over 51,200 Likes and more than 3,500 Shares. Rather than depicting them as victims of persecution, the video reframes the Rohingya as outsiders responsible for past violence and unrest (Alasroban\_225, 2023). By invoking historical grievance—whether real or fabricated—the video fosters suspicion and resentment, redirecting public sentiment away from empathy. It contributes to a broader digital pattern of “othering”, where refugees are blamed for their displacement, thus they “deserve” exclusion. This form of moral reversal can transform humanitarian concern into nationalistic and religious hostility, making exclusion appear not only acceptable but righteous.

Drawing on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we can understand how such exclusionary narratives reinforce the process of *othering*: portraying the Rohingya as fundamentally different, inferior, and even threatening. This form of identity-based exclusion solidifies an in-group/out-group logic that not only erodes public empathy but also fosters antagonism toward those who are already marginalized.

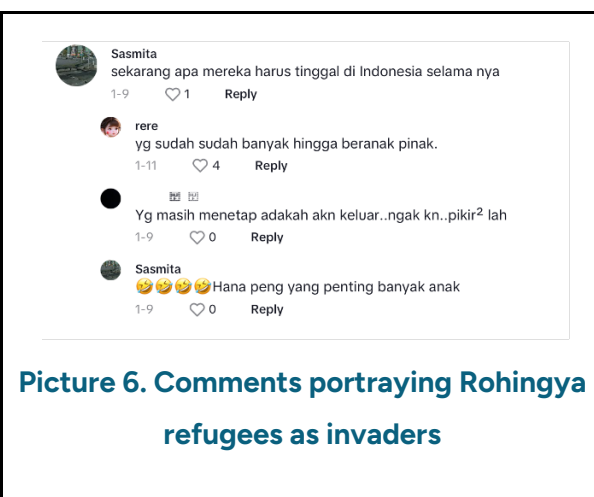
What is particularly troubling is that these narratives were delivered in fluent Indonesian, making them easily accessible and persuasive to local audiences. By overcoming language barriers, the videos repackaged anti-Rohingya rhetoric in a form tailored to Indonesian viewers, helping to normalize and justify hostility. While the origin of these narratives remains unclear, they reflect the stance of actors who oppose the Rohingya. In this context, GenAI serves not just as a content creation tool but as a vehicle for adapting and amplifying exclusionary ideologies across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

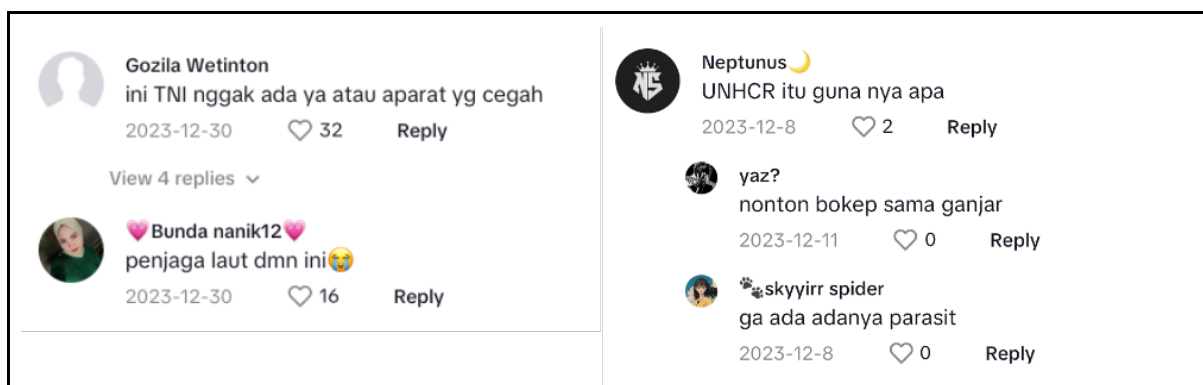


**Picture 4. A GenAI-generated video frames Rohingya historically guilty to local communities in Myanmar**

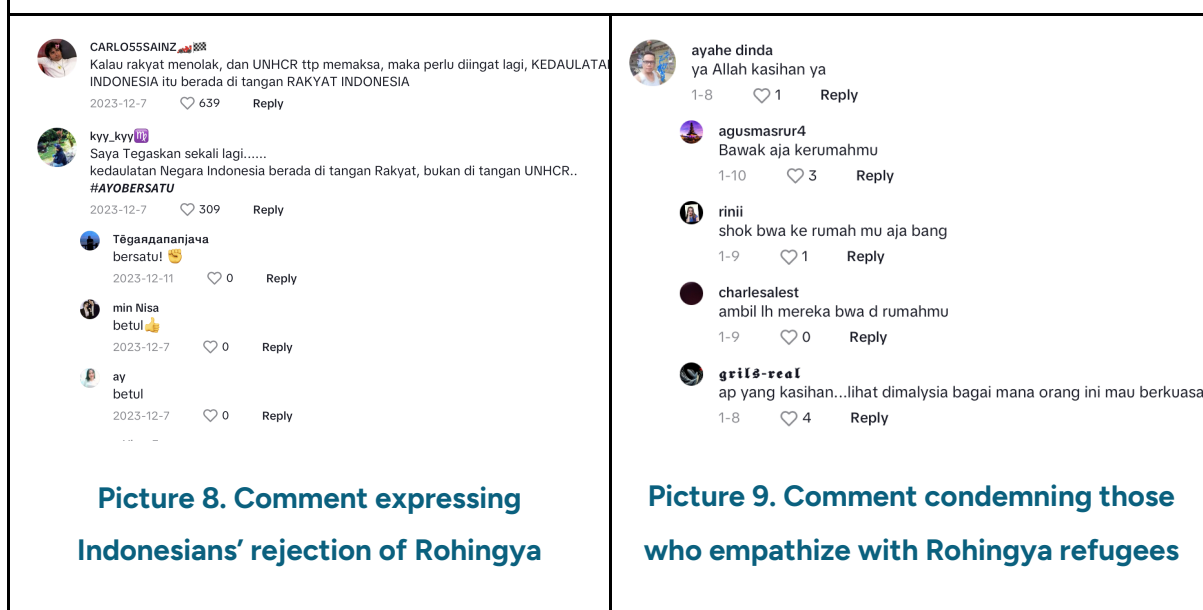
(Source: Alasroban\_225, 2023)

A recurring pattern across all nine videos was the widespread circulation of unverified and inflammatory claims, which gained traction in the comment sections. These responses were saturated with calls to expel the Rohingya, often portraying them as ungrateful guests who abused Indonesia's hospitality (Picture 5). Many commenters voiced alarm over the idea that the Rohingya were "invading" the country—entering but never leaving—framing their continued presence as a threat to national sovereignty (Picture 6). Others questioned the credibility of both the Indonesian government and international actors like UNHCR, accusing them of neglecting the will of the people (Picture 7). Several comments invoked themes of national unity and popular sovereignty, asserting that "the Indonesian people reject the Rohingya" (Picture 8).





**Picture 7. Comment questioning Indonesian government and UNHCR's credibility in handling Rohingya refugees**



Some users expressed sympathy toward the Rohingya refugees, but these comments were often met with aggressive backlash from others (Picture 9). This dynamic illustrates how exclusionary narratives dominate digital spaces, where expressions of humanitarian concern are framed as naive, ridiculous, and misguided. What emerges is a climate shaped by tribal moralism, xenophobia, and populist rhetoric. These discourses combine suspicion toward institutions, ethnic majoritarianism, and a populist claim to defend sovereignty, reinforcing logics that operate well beyond the digital sphere.

The observation in this section is based on a small and non-systematic sample; nonetheless, it highlights an important trend: narratives about the Rohingya often rely on unverified information, with GenAI playing a visible role in the disinformation infrastructure. On platforms like TikTok, where engagement is rewarded over accuracy, GenAI does not just

reproduce existing narratives—it amplifies them, embedding them more deeply into public discourse. In the case of the Rohingya, this amplification contributes to the hardening of public opinion, eroding empathy, and legitimizing exclusionary attitudes towards the refugees. GenAI thus acts as a force multiplier in the broader ecosystem of FIMI, not only spreading harmful content but reinforcing the political logics behind it. Although the full origins of these narratives are difficult to trace, their consistency with broader disinformation patterns suggests that they may be politically motivated and, in some cases, manufactured by foreign or anonymous actors seeking to shape public opinion. This positions them within the framework of FIMI, as the content not only targets a marginalized group but also intervenes in domestic political dynamics. As will be discussed in the next section, the strategic circulation of these narratives may influence voter sentiment and shift political discourse in ways that align with the interests of specific political actors.

## Politicizing the Rohingya: FIMI in Indonesia's 2024 Election


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The exclusionary discourse against the Rohingya is not merely a social issue; it has real consequences for regional solidarity and migration policies across Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, these narratives were politicized in the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election, with the presence of Rohingya refugees used as a tool to gain electoral advantage.

In late November 2023, a video circulated widely across Indonesian social media platforms showing a Rohingya refugee receiving a food donation but reportedly asking for more. The video, published by *Tribun Palembang* (2023), quickly went viral with the caption "*dikasih nasi, minta lebih*" ("given rice, asked for more"), sparking public anger. Many Indonesians expressed frustration, accusing the refugees of being ungrateful and demanding. The video served as a flashpoint that reignited national discourse around refugee hospitality, entitlement, and economic burdens, especially amid ongoing domestic challenges.

The virality of this video coincided with statements made by the then Defense Minister and presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto during his visit to Aceh late in 2023. In addressing the increasing number of refugee arrivals, he stated that while Indonesia should remain humane, the country must prioritize its citizens (Detik News, 2023). He asserted that it would be unfair for Indonesia to bear the entire burden of hosting Rohingya refugees, suggesting that such responsibility should be shared globally through the United Nations and other international institutions (Dirgantara & Prabowo, 2023; Tempo, 2023).

Prabowo's response is emblematic of a nationalist and populist political narrative, especially when seen in the context of the 2024 presidential election. His choice of language,



emphasizing “fairness” and “*rakyat sendiri*” (“our own people”), resonates with voters facing economic hardship and disillusionment with the international community. The timeline suggests strategic timing: the viral video appeared on November 30, 2023, and Prabowo’s statements followed less than a month later, at a time when public sentiment was already heated. By December 27, anti-Rohingya protests erupted in Aceh, involving student demonstrators demanding refugee repatriation. Although these protests may have been locally organized, international observers such as the UNHCR noted that online misinformation likely exacerbated tensions (BBC Indonesia, 2023), as also reflected in the TikTok videos discussed above.

Another example of how the Rohingya issue entered the political arena can be seen in the backlash against Anies Baswedan, Prabowo’s main rival in the 2024 presidential election, on TikTok. A TikTok user created a video using the platform’s “stitch” feature (which allows users to clip and respond to existing videos) that included a clip of Anies stating his intention to protect Rohingya refugees (Candill123, 2023). In the stitched video, the user condemned Anies’s stance on the refugees. The video received 445,400 views, 17,100 comments, and 15,400 shares. Among the top comments, one of the most liked and replied to said, “*aku dukung wak ni jadi presiden ajalah*” (“I support this guy—the TikTok user—to become president”), indicating support for the user’s criticism against Anies. Another popular comment read, “*Alaaaah niisss nissss*”, expressing mockery or skepticism toward Anies Baswedan.

These examples suggest that the Rohingya refugee became politically instrumentalized. By taking a firm but nationally sympathetic stance, Prabowo positioned himself as a candidate who is both pragmatic and responsive to public concerns. His statements can be interpreted not only as a reflection of domestic priorities but also as a tactical move to consolidate support from conservative and nationalist voters. In electoral contexts, refugee and immigration issues are often used to rally voters through emotive appeals to sovereignty, fairness, and national well-being. Thus, while Prabowo did not directly incite anti-refugee sentiment, his rhetoric arguably aligned with and validated the anxieties circulating online and on the ground. Meanwhile, public backlash against Anies illustrates how expressions of humanitarian solidarity can be reframed and politicized in the digital sphere to discredit candidates. The speed and scale of public reaction also show how emotionally charged content, even when user-generated, can reinforce existing political divides and penalize moderate or inclusive positions. Although Indonesia has long hosted Rohingya refugees on


humanitarian grounds, these cases demonstrate how quickly such efforts can become politicized, especially when electoral incentives align with public discontent.

The timing and tone of the viral video and political statements discussed above suggest a pattern where disinformation helped set the stage for politically expedient narratives. These dynamics are not always organic. According to Pastor-Galindo et al. (2025), FIMI involves the deliberate use of deceptive tactics by foreign actors to confuse, divide, or destabilize societies, often by exploiting existing social tensions. Unlike traditional propaganda, which seeks to persuade, FIMI operates through disorientation, undermining shared facts and public trust.

In the case discussed in this article, the direct attribution to a foreign actor remains difficult, especially for ordinary users with limited digital literacy. However, the coordinated, emotionally charged nature of the Rohingya discourse online is consistent with tactics associated with FIMI. The spread of exclusionary narratives about the Rohingya on TikTok—most of which are rooted in disinformation—as well as the backlash against public figures who express support for Rohingya refugees, reflect patterns of manipulation that go beyond organic public opinion. These narratives are politicized and weaponized in ways that align with the defining characteristics of FIMI as outlined by Pastor-Galindo et al. (2025): they are deceptive, emotionally charged, and strategically deployed to confuse, divide, and destabilize democratic discourse. Rather than offering persuasive arguments, such content erodes public trust, exploits identity-based tensions, and reframes humanitarian concerns as political threats, thereby serving transnational agendas through opaque, coercive means.

## Conclusion

This article discussed how exclusionary narratives about the Rohingya are largely rooted in misinformation, amplified by the capabilities of GenAI, and further entrenched by the digital divide across Southeast Asia. Limited digital literacy and unequal access to trustworthy information have made marginalized populations more vulnerable to emotionally manipulative and misleading content. GenAI accelerates the production and spread of FIMI about Rohingya, especially with social media features such as automatic translation that help GenAI-based FIMI bypass language barriers and allow transnational dissemination of Rohingya narratives. Furthermore, when these narratives are instrumentalized for political purposes, they not only deepen polarization but also undermine regional solidarity and obstruct efforts toward refugee protection, peacebuilding, and coordinated humanitarian response.



While the exclusionary discourse around the Rohingya aligns with tactics associated with FIMI, direct attribution to a specific foreign actor remains difficult, especially for ordinary users navigating a digital environment marked by low media literacy and limited transparency. In Indonesia's case, the complexity is compounded by weak regulatory frameworks and slow institutional responses, which struggle to keep pace with the speed and scale of online disinformation. Meanwhile, social media platforms have little incentive to intervene decisively, as emotionally charged and polarizing content drives engagement and, consequently, revenue. This asymmetry between the difficulty of attribution, slow regulation, and platform profit motives, creates a fertile ground for FIMI activity to thrive, regardless of whether the original source is foreign or domestic.

The Rohingya discourse illustrates how easily local grievances and identity tensions can be manipulated and politicized within this vulnerable digital ecosystem. Left unchecked, these forces can erode trust in democratic institutions, inflame identity-based conflict, and weaken ASEAN's collective capacity to uphold human rights. Addressing these risks requires more than technical regulation—it calls for a region-wide commitment to inclusive digital governance, cross-border cooperation, and the protection of vulnerable communities from the weaponization of disinformation.

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in the Asia-Pacific: Actions and Adaptations

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