Unity in Diversity? Addressing Disinformation and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in Southeast Asia

PANEL 3 | Regional Responses to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference

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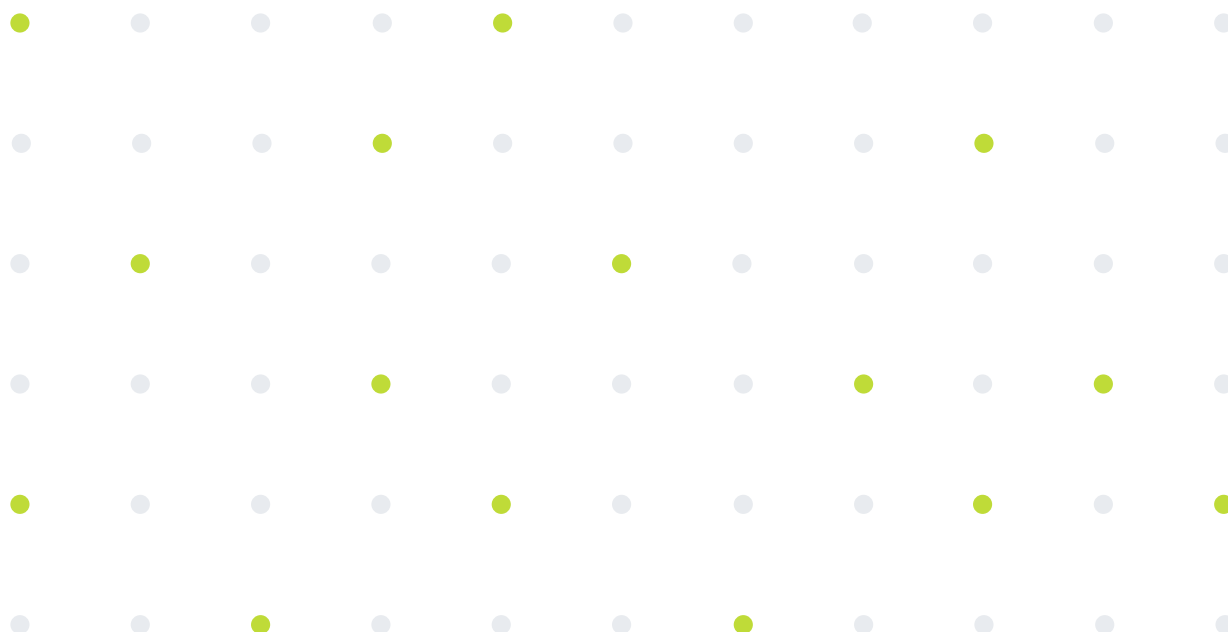
Unity in Diversity? Addressing Disinformation and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in Southeast Asia

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The Internet and digital technologies were once heralded for their ability to promote more open access to information and to provide broader means of communication between governments and the general public. However, the 'dark side' of the political use of digital media is evident in the surge of online disinformation. Online disinformation has then evolved into a broader, more sophisticated, and sinister form: foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), which can be further amplified by the use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Southeast Asia was not spared from this phenomenon. This paper examines the issues of online disinformation and FIMI within the region. It discusses contributing factors behind online disinformation and FIMI, their sociopolitical impacts, and prospective counterstrategies at the domestic and regional levels. The shift from disinformation at the domestic level to a more transnational, regional scale through FIMI warrants action from governments, civil society, regional bodies such as ASEAN, and international groups to enhance information resilience, promote digital and media literacy, and develop robust legal and institutional frameworks capable of addressing both domestic and foreign threats to information integrity.

Introduction

The Internet and digital technologies were once heralded for their ability to promote more open access to information and to provide broader means of communication between governments and the general public. At present, politicians and governments have incorporated different forms of digital media in electoral campaigns, public service delivery, and other governance processes. However, global developments have also shown how the Internet, social media, and other forms of digital technologies can be weaponized for political gains. Online platforms are being utilized to boost electoral campaigns, not only in democracies but also in authoritarian regimes.[1]

The 'dark side' of the political use of digital media is also evident in the surge of online disinformation. Disinformation is defined as "fabricated factual content that is deliberately disseminated with an intention to obscure the truth, covertly influence public opinion, or produce specific behaviors."[2] Disinformation is often produced and disseminated by coordinated networks of online accounts that may either be bots or human influencers. Southeast Asia has been particularly affected by the spread of online disinformation, particularly during elections: examples include the Philippines in 2016 and 2022[3]; Malaysia in 2018[4]; and Indonesia in 2019[5] and 2024[6]. Outside of elections, there was rampant online disinformation regarding the use of vaccines and other health-related issues during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The disinformation problem in Southeast Asia was initially and predominantly a domestic issue driven and spread by internal actors such as politicians and domestic cyber groups. However, the (mis)use of digital technologies has evolved into a broader, more sophisticated,

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[1] Marco Bünte, "Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Resilience in Southeast Asia: The Role of Social Media," in *From Grassroots Activism to Disinformation: Social Media in Southeast Asia*, eds. Aim Sinpeng and Ross Tapsell (ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021), 192.

[2] European Commission, "A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: Report of the independent High-level Group on fake news and online disinformation to the European Commission." 2018, https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6ef4df8b-4cea-11e8-be1d-01aa75ed71a1

[3] Aries Arugay and Maria Elize Mendoza, "Digital Autocratization and Disinformation in Philippine Elections." In *Oxford Intersections: Social Media in Society and Culture,* ed. M Laeeq Khan (Oxford Academic, online edition, 2025).

[4] Niki Cheong. "Disinformation as a Response to the "Opposition Playground" in Malaysia." In *From Grassroots Activism to Disinformation: Social Media in Southeast Asia*, eds. Aim Sinpeng and Ross Tapsell. (ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021).

[5] Masduki. "The Politics of Disinformation in Indonesia (2014-2019)" In *Politics of Disinformation: The Influence of Fake News on the Public Sphere*, eds. Guillermo López-García, Dolors Palau-Sampio, Bella Palomo, Eva Campos-Domínguez, and Pere Masip. (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2021).

[6] Ross Tapsell. "It's Time to Reframe Disinformation: Indonesia's Elections Show Why." *Centre for International Governance Innovation*, March 7, 2024, https://www.cigionline.org/articles/its-time-to-reframe-disinformation-indonesias-elections-show-why/

and sinister form: foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). The European External Action Service (EEAS) defines FIMI as "a pattern of behavior that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures, and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory."[7] From this definition, FIMI has the following core elements: first, it is perpetrated by external actors, whether state or non-state, of foreign nature (e.g., government bodies, cyber groups); second, it is inherently manipulative and intentionally aimed towards political processes such as elections and undermine values such as beliefs about democratic norms; and lastly, it operates through covert, coordinated, and often deceptive means.

FIMI is heavily reliant on the use of digital media technologies, utilizing tactics such as the spread of disinformation, hacking and/or digital surveillance, and more recently, the use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). GenAI is formally defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as "a category of [artificial intelligence] AI that can create new content such as text, images, videos, and music."[8] Within the context of disinformation and FIMI, GenAI can be used to generate inauthentic news content and 'deepfakes' or fake images or videos that feature or resemble real individuals, oftentimes political figures.

The continuous evolution of the information disorder – from disinformation to FIMI and its accompanying tactics – presents great challenges to Southeast Asia. The proliferation of manipulated or deceptive information can negatively shape public opinion, disrupt political processes, erode trust in institutions, and deepen polarization.[9] This paper examines the issues of online disinformation and FIMI within the context of Southeast Asia. This paper discusses contributing factors behind online disinformation and FIMI, their sociopolitical impacts, and prospective counterstrategies at the domestic and regional levels. The shift from disinformation at the domestic level to a more transnational, regional scale through FIMI warrants action from governments, civil society, regional bodies such as ASEAN, and international groups to enhance information resilience, promote digital and media literacy,

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[7] European External Action Service. "Information Integrity and Countering Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference (FIMI)." 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/information-integrity-and-countering-foreign-information-manipulation-interference-fimi_en

[8] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. "Generative AI", (n.d.), https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/generative-ai.html

[9] Jonathan Ong and Ross Tapsell. "Mitigating Disinformation in Southeast Asian Elections: Lessons from Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand." NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 2020. www.stratcomcoe.org/mitigating-disinformation-southeast-asian-elections

and develop robust legal and institutional frameworks capable of addressing both domestic and foreign threats to information integrity.

Disinformation and FIMI in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia provides fertile ground for the spread of disinformation and FIMI due to the interplay of the following factors: high digital connectivity of the population coupled with media literacy issues, socioeconomic disparities, existing domestic divisions and geopolitical tensions, and institutional weaknesses. These contributing factors that make the region vulnerable to disinformation and FIMI are compounded in more sinister and sophisticated ways by GenAI. Understanding the interconnectedness of these contributing factors is crucial for developing effective strategies to counter disinformation and FIMI.

GenAI: Boon or Bane?

The rise of generative AI (GenAI) has added a new layer of complexity to the (dis)information landscape. According to the OECD, GenAI gained global attention in 2022 with the vast and rapid use of large language models or LLMs. These LLMs are defined by IBM as "AI systems capable of understanding and generating human language by processing vast amounts of text data."[10] LLMs such as ChatGPT are capable of responding to user prompts in a human-like manner, mimicking actual conversations with a real human being. GenAI tools can also generate visual content (i.e., images and videos) based on user prompts. These tools are now used across different industries and fields such as finance, education, business, and even politics.

The rise of new technologies is often initially met with optimism, yet actual cases of the weaponization of the Internet and social media platforms show that this optimism needs to be guarded against human motivations. In the political sense, GenAI can potentially threaten democracy by fueling polarization if used by political actors to manufacture sentiment and deceive the public through inauthentic content.[11] This was evident in the case of Russian interference in the 2016 United States presidential elections.[12] In Southeast Asia, China is seen as a top FIMI threat actor with AI capabilities.[13] During the recent 2024 Indonesian

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[10] IBM. "What are large language models (LLMs)?" 2023. https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/large-language-models

[11] Sarah Kreps and Doug Kriner, "How AI Threatens Democracy." Journal of Democracy 34, no. 4 (2023): 122-31, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.a907693

[12] Kreps and Kriner, "How AI Threatens Democracy."

[13] European Union External Action Service. "3rd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: Exposing the Architecture of FIMI operations." 2025.

elections, GenAI tools were extensively utilized by the campaign of Prabowo Subianto, an ex-military general associated with human rights violations. Prabowo's campaign used AI-generated cartoon icons of himself which, according to analysts, constitutes an attempt to "rehabilitate his tainted image."[14] The disinformation problem and FIMI attacks can be amplified by GenAI tools given the intent to deceive and evade detection. GenAI tools are continuously being enhanced to resemble human activities (e.g., voice and facial features), thus making it more difficult for individuals to distinguish real from fake, unlike when presented with outright falsehoods. The use of GenAI ultimately lowers the barrier to entry for disinformation campaigns with its ability to produce convincing fake content at a larger and more rapid scale. At present, global and regional experiences show that the use of GenAI in political matters such as electoral campaigns presents more of a challenge than an opportunity to maximize these new technologies.

Connected but Divided: Digital Connectivity and Media Literacy

Southeast Asia is home to countries with the most active social media users in the world. However, these high levels of digital connectivity are not matched by adequate levels of digital and media literacy, leaving segments of the population susceptible to manipulation and belief in false information. According to the We Are Social report, the global average time spent using the Internet on mobile phones is three hours and 45 minutes per day in 2024. Several countries in Southeast Asia – the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia – logged Internet use time higher than the global average. These four countries also registered longer social media use than the global average of two hours per day.[15] Other variations of Internet penetration data point to the same pattern: a significant portion of the Southeast Asian population is connected to the Internet, and most are avid social media users. While high Internet use per se is not inherently problematic, the issue becomes more complex when viewed alongside the region's uneven levels of media and digital literacy. In March 2024, the ASEAN Foundation released its research findings on digital literacy in the region, revealing a disparity that needs to be addressed. Part of the findings point to Thailand as the poorest performer in terms of individuals possessing high critical thinking skills, while Singapore

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2025/EEAS-3nd-ThreatReport-March-2025-05-Digital-HD.pdf

[14] Nuurrianti Jalli and Maria Monica Wihardja. "Election Integrity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Lessons from Indonesia." Fulcrum, June 25, 2024. https://fulcrum.sg/election-integrity-in-the-age-of-artificial-intelligence-lessons-from-indonesia/

[15] Sue Howe. "Social Media Trends and Habits in Southeast Asia." Meltwater, January 1, 2025. https://www.meltwater.com/en/blog/social-media-trends-habits-southeast-asia

excels across different indicators of digital literacy.[16] Countries that suffer from low levels of media literacy in the midst of high Internet penetration are at a higher risk of being victimized by disinformation and FIMI. For example, a March 2025 survey in the Philippines shows that 65 percent of its adult population find it difficult to spot 'fake news'.[17] The Philippines has also been suffering from an 'education crisis' as illustrated in the country's performance in international assessments such as the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM), where "nine out of ten Grade 5 Filipino students could not understand what they were reading."[18] The Philippine government has made pronouncements that this education crisis needs to be addressed, yet serious reforms have yet to be implemented. The rise and use of GenAI in the Philippines aggravates the 'fake news' problem among Filipinos. In June 2025, an AI-generated video of a Filipino student allegedly opposing the impeachment trial of the vice president went viral on Facebook. This was then shared and reposted by an incumbent senator. When criticized for being deceived by AI, the Philippine senator responded that there is nothing wrong with sharing an AI-generated video as long as it is not for profit.[19] This incident shows how GenAI has enabled the creation of seemingly convincing false content. With differing levels of media and digital literacy, the ability to detect disinformation – whether outright ones or AI-generated – becomes even more limited.

Socioeconomic Disparities

Income inequality, uneven access to quality education, and digital divides in Southeast Asia also contribute to susceptibility to disinformation and FIMI. These issues allow professional disinformation networks to grow, especially when participating individuals and groups are driven by economic necessity. For instance, the hiring of digital workers to spread disinformation and/or aid FIMI is considered a source of livelihood in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. In the Philippines, these individuals and groups are called "trolls"; in Indonesia, they are called "buzzers", and they are "cybertroopers" in Malaysia. The treatment of "trolling" as a form of digital labor legitimizes the creation and spread of online

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[16] The ASEAN Foundation. "ASEAN Foundation Unveils Research Findings on Digital Literacy, Spotlighting the Digital Divide Across the Region." PR Newswire, April 15, 2024. https://en.prnasia.com/releases/apac/asean-foundation-unveils-research-findings-on-digital-literacy-spotlighting-the-digital-divide-across-the-region-443250.shtml

[17] ABS-CBN News. "Most Filipinos say 'fake news' on internet a 'serious' problem — SWS." ABS-CBN News, March 13, 2025. https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/nation/2025/3/13/most-filipinos-say-fake-news-on-internet-a-serious-problem-sws-1240

[18] JC Punongbayan. "Addressing the Philippines' Education Crisis." Fulcrum, December 16, 2024. https://fulcrum.sg/addressing-the-philippines-education-crisis/

[19] Bonz Magsambol. "Sara Duterte: Nothing wrong with sharing AI video opposing my impeachment." Rappler, June 16, 2025. https://www.rappler.com/philippines/sara-duterte-nothing-wrong-sharing-ai-video-opposing-impeachment/

disinformation. A key work[20] revealed the so-called "architects of networked disinformation" in the Philippines, wherein industry workers in public relations (PR) and advertising firms are hired by politicians and their campaign teams to manufacture mostly false online content. Similarly, the hiring of buzzers in Indonesia is slowly being accepted as a 'normal' practice in the political campaigning industry.[21] In the case of the 2018 Malaysian elections, the ruling party Barisan Nasional (BN) hired cybertroopers during the campaign.[22]

The Philippine context presents a compelling explanation as to why such industries tend to exist and flourish in some countries while not being evident in other, more developed ones. The Philippines is known as a global labor exporter in the form of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) and digital workers employed by foreign companies. Global labor export is often attributed to economic reasons, particularly the search for better job opportunities abroad.[23] Digital labor is now considered a major industry in the country and a source of livelihood for many Filipinos.[24] It is therefore not surprising that these tech-savvy workers would be engaged in disinformation campaigns and FIMI. This blur between legitimate digital work and disinformation labor was evident last April 2025, when the Philippine Senate launched an investigation into reports that the Chinese embassy in Manila had hired local 'trolls' and 'keyboard warriors' through a domestic PR firm.[25] This incident highlights how FIMI threat actors such as China can tap into local digital industries and exploit existing economic structures for their political gain. The Philippine experience shows how socioeconomic disparities can contribute to the attractiveness of digital labor in general, and 'trolling' in particular, as a means to earn a living, especially if key issues such as income inequality and low wages are left unaddressed.

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[20] Jonathan Ong and Jason Cabañes. 2018. "Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines." Newton Tech4Dev Network. https://newtontechfordev.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ARCHITECTS-OF-NETWORKED-DISINFORMATION-FULL-REPORT.pdf

[21] Muninggar Sri Saraswati. "The Political Campaign Industry and the Rise of Disinformation in Indonesia." In From Grassroots Activism to Disinformation: Social Media in Southeast Asia, eds. Aim Sinpeng and Ross Tapsell. (ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021).

[22] Cheong, "Disinformation as a Response to the "Opposition Playground" in Malaysia."

[23] Jeremaiah M. Opiniano and Alvin P. Ang. "The Philippines' Landmark Labor Export and Development Policy Enters the Next Generation." Migration Information Source, January 3, 2024. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/philippines-migration-next-generation-ofws

[24] Pamela Combinido and Curato, Nicole. "Curing "Patient Zero": Reclaiming the Digital Public Sphere in the Philippines." In From Grassroots Activism to Disinformation: Social Media in Southeast Asia, eds. Aim Sinpeng and Ross Tapsell (ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021).

[25] Hana Bordey. "Chinese Embassy contracted PH-based PR firm to allegedly hire trolls in 2023." GMA Integrated News, April 24, 2025. https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/943808/chinese-embassy-contracted-ph-based-pr-firm-to-allegedly-hire-trolls-in-2023/story/

Domestic and Geopolitical Divisions and Tensions

Southeast Asia is also home to peoples of diverse cultures, ethnicities, languages, and religions. However, this diversity has unfortunately become the source of domestic divisions and tensions that political actors have exacerbated for self-serving interests. These points of division have been tapped by politicians in several electoral campaigns in the region, such as Indonesia's Prabowo Subianto in his 2019 presidential run against Joko Widodo (Jokowi), where he presented himself as a fierce "champion of Islamic values and interests."[26] Prabowo capitalized on the support of conservative Islamists who are discontented with Jokowi. During the 2019 campaign, Prabowo supporters accused Jokowi of being "a closeted communist, ethnic Chinese, or Christian in order to dissuade devout Muslims from voting for him."[27]

Perpetrators of disinformation and FIMI have weaponized domestic issues to sow public distrust, deepen polarization, and advance certain political agendas.[28] Online disinformation has contributed to deepening social divisions and further polarization: in Indonesia, this is more pronounced in terms of religious lines (e.g., Chinese-Christians vs. Muslims); whereas in Thailand, disinformation narratives invoke nationalism (e.g., pro- and anti-monarchy). GenAI, especially deepfakes, can potentially amplify these divisions through the spread of seemingly authentic content that uses local languages and context-specific references that make them appear more persuasive and harder to debunk.

In addition to domestic issues, disinformation and FIMI in Southeast Asia are increasingly shaped by geopolitical tensions. Threat actors, whether foreign or domestic, can exploit sensitive international issues. In Malaysia, an AI-generated deepfake video of a conversation between United States President Donald Trump and Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim went viral on different social media platforms in March 2025. In the video, the two world leaders were allegedly discussing sensitive geopolitical issues.[29] For cybersecurity experts in Malaysia, the spread of these kinds of videos involving top politicians can pose a threat to

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[26] Ehito Kimura, Ratri Istania, Afrimadona, Rafif Pamenang Imawan, and Dimas Ramadhan. "Authoritarian Nostalgia and Democratic Decline in Contemporary Indonesia." Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs 43, no. 3 (2024): 384-408, https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034241252452

[27] Alexander Arifianto. "Jokowi wins second term as Indonesian president, but the Islamist challenge remains." Australian Strategic Policy Institute, May 22, 2019. https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/jokowi-wins-second-term-as-indonesian-president-but-the-islamist-challenge-remains/

[28] Ong and Tapsell, "Mitigating Disinformation in Southeast Asian Elections: Lessons from Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand."

[29] Bernama. "Deepfake AI videos of politicians addressing sensitive issues threaten national security – Expert." The Sun Malaysia, March 13, 2025. https://thesun.my/malaysia-news/deepfake-ai-videos-of-politicians-addressing-sensitive-issues-threaten-national-security-expert-IM13796284

national security if they continue to go unchecked. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States engaged in FIMI in the Philippines by spreading false information about the Chinese-made vaccine Sinovac.[30] This operation was aimed to undermine confidence in the vaccine, then the most available in the country, with effects on public sentiment towards China amidst the territorial dispute in the West Philippine Sea and tense US-China relations.

Institutional Weaknesses

Southeast Asia has a "complex relationship with democracy."[31] This is shown in the authoritarian pasts of countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia with the Marcos Sr. and Suharto regimes, respectively; the illiberal democratic turn in Malaysia; and the rule of the military junta in Thailand. These democratic deficits leave countries vulnerable to both domestic and foreign disinformation, especially when the institutions tasked with safeguarding information integrity, such as the media, are weak, politicized, or underdeveloped. Weak legal and regulatory frameworks and other institutional weaknesses further hinder effective responses to disinformation and FIMI. In the region, some governments either lack resources or the political will to address disinformation, and in some instances, state actors themselves utilize these tactics.

For example, in Thailand, "fake news" has been securitized and is often treated as a national security threat under the military junta.[32] Spreading 'fake news' is framed as a justification for military intervention, which has been used to silence critics and suppress dissent. Similarly, the weaknesses of some electoral and media institutions in the region also contribute to a country's vulnerability to FIMI. The Philippines still lacks a robust institutional framework to address disinformation, despite years of being hounded by coordinated disinformation tactics, especially during its 2016 presidential elections. In 2020, Facebook took down hundreds of China-linked accounts whose online activity is concentrated in the Philippines.[33] These China-linked accounts engaged in online discourse on sensitive political issues in the

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[30] Chris Bing and Joel Schectman. "Pentagon ran secret anti-vax campaign to undermine China during pandemic." Reuters, June 14, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-covid-propaganda/

[31] Emy Ruth D. Gianan. "Disinformation Trends in Southeast Asia: Comparative Case Studies on Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines." Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 25 no. 1 (2020): 1-27. https://doi.org/10.22452/jati.vol25no1.2

[32] Janjira Sombatpoonsiri. "Securitizing "Fake News": Policy Responses to Disinformation in Thailand." In From Grassroots Activism to Disinformation: Social Media in Southeast Asia, eds. Aim Sinpeng and Ross Tapsell (ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021).

[33] Helen Davidson and Carmela Fonbuena. "Facebook removes fake accounts with links to China and Philippines." The Guardian, September 23, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/sep/23/facebook-removes-fake-accounts-with-links-to-china-and-philippines

country, such as red-tagging or the branding of government critics as communist sympathizers. Facebook removed these accounts on the basis of violating its policies against "coordinated inauthentic behavior on behalf of a foreign or government entity."[34] Despite this incident, substantive governance mechanisms to address cyber threats coming from China or any other foreign perpetrators are still missing in the Philippines.

There has also been a decline in public trust towards media outlets as accountability mechanisms. In Indonesia, widespread distrust toward mainstream media outlets has led citizens to turn to private messaging platforms where there is minimal regulation and fact-checking.[35] These platforms are not only difficult to monitor, but they may also be seen as more trustworthy and authentic by those who are disillusioned with traditional media. This turn towards alternative sources of information can be weaponized by FIMI actors to further sow seeds of distrust.

Crafting Domestic and Regional Responses to Disinformation and FIMI

A key problem in Southeast Asia in terms of vulnerability to disinformation and FIMI is the complexity of its member-states' political, social, and economic contexts, leading to varying domestic responses and challenges in crafting a 'one-size-fits-all' regional response. The principle of non-interference that prevails in ASEAN also prohibit member-states from directly interfering with others' domestic affairs. Despite these key issues, it remains possible to exert efforts at the domestic and regional levels through the sharing of best practices in terms of enacting robust legal regulatory frameworks, engaging in multistakeholder collaboration, and investing in media and digital literacy and civic education.

Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

A robust and comprehensive legal and regulatory framework is necessary to address the spread of disinformation and FIMI attacks that may be amplified by GenAI. These frameworks can be the basis of systemic reforms to address the abovementioned institutional weaknesses. At the domestic level, these frameworks must account for context-specific nuances and aim to strike a balance between regulation, accountability, and respect for [democratic] rights. Academics and experts have warned against strict "anti-fake news" laws

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Gianan, "Disinformation Trends in Southeast Asia: Comparative Case Studies on Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines," 14.

that can be weaponized by political actors to stifle legitimate dissent and diverse views. The securitization of 'fake news' in Thailand shows how such laws can be targeted towards citizens who criticize the government instead of key players behind disinformation and FIMI. The criminalization of disinformation in Indonesia has also been criticized as potential threats to free expression, especially given the vague definition of what constitutes "false news and statements."[36] To ensure that legal mechanisms are effective without being repressive, regulatory policies should guard against potential overreach on the part of government. This is where multistakeholder collaboration can play a role. These policies should also focus on key players behind the creation and spread of disinformation and FIMI, such as those behind coordinated disinformation campaigns and marketing firms that accept 'trolling' offers from political clients. Electoral laws must also include stricter provisions for transparency in campaign finance, especially those potentially coming from foreign sources. Advertising and marketing firms must also be held accountable if they participate in the creation and spread of manipulated content. Any regulatory framework must also establish clear lines of engagement and points of collaboration with tech platforms, such as in instances of investigations of criminal behavior coursed through these platforms, enforcement of existing rules and regulations (e.g., age limits for user account creation), and protecting user privacy. Within the region, there is an ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics which provides recommendations to member-states on how to "design, develop, and deploy AI systems responsibly."[37] It acknowledges the risks of using GenAI to spread false content and engage in fraudulent online behavior.

Multistakeholder Collaboration

The complexities of the disinformation problem and FIMI attacks require a multistakeholder response involving governments, civil society actors (e.g., academic institutions, think tanks, media groups), the private sector, and regional and international bodies. Governments remain at the forefront since they are most familiar with domestic contexts, apart from their advantage in terms of resource capabilities. However, governments must be guarded against potential abuse of power by involving relevant actors and incorporating accountability mechanisms in the process of combating disinformation and FIMI. One of the most immediate lines of defense against disinformation and FIMI is proactive prevention of the

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[36] Yogi Bratajaya and Daron Tan. "Criminalization of disinformation threatens freedom of expression." The Jakarta Post, November 27, 2023. https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2023/11/27/criminalization-of-disinformation-threatens-freedom-of-expression.html

[37] ASEAN Secretariat. "ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics." ASEAN, 2024. https://asean.org/book/asean-guide-on-ai-governance-and-ethics/

spread of false narratives. This can be done through partnerships with digital platforms to flag and label AI-generated content. Governments and platforms can collaborate to craft content moderation policies that do not suppress the freedom of expression, such as watermarking of AI-generated content. Civil society actors such as media groups, nongovernment organizations, and academic institutions can help in tracking disinformation trends, producing data-driven analyses to inform government policy, and implementing public information campaigns and educational initiatives to raise awareness about disinformation and FIMI. Fact-checking initiatives such as #FactsFirstPH and Tsek.PH in the Philippines and Mafindo in Indonesia are examples of collaborative efforts between civil society and the private sector, which have been instrumental in debunking disinformation in their respective countries. Moreover, the private sector, regional bodies, and international groups can further support governments and domestic civil society actors through investments in media literacy programs, provision of technological and technical tools and expertise to monitor and analyze disinformation campaigns and FIMI, and other capacity-building measures. These multistakeholder collaborations can hopefully fill in the resource gaps in countries with uneven economic development, income inequality, and stark digital divides.

Media, Digital Literacy, and Civic Education Initiatives

The key to countering disinformation and mitigating the impacts of FIMI, especially those driven by GenAI, is to equip the citizenry with skills to assess the accuracy and credibility of information presented to them. Citizens across different age groups and sectors, especially the vulnerable and marginalized ones, must also learn how to navigate the evolving digital landscape. AI-generated content is becoming more realistic since tools are rapidly evolving in terms of features, scope, and resemblance to human characteristics and behavior. Public information campaigns on how to spot AI-generated content usually advise viewers to pay attention to the image or video details, especially body parts such as hands. However, detection is becoming increasingly challenging. At present, GenAI tools tend to produce improved results as their models get trained with more sophisticated data on human features. These developments call for education initiatives that go beyond detection at the surface level. Public awareness campaigns supported by different stakeholders should also be inclusive and mindful of different age groups, linguistic communities, and socio-economic backgrounds. A regional example is the ASEAN Digital Literacy Programme (2022-2024),

funded by Google and the ASEAN Foundation, which seeks to empower youth-led grassroots awareness campaigns against disinformation.[38]

Citizens who are unable to critically assess the authenticity of information are highly susceptible to disinformation campaigns, especially when the manufactured narratives align with their preexisting biases and grievances. Educational institutions are expected to take the lead not only in literacy initiatives but also in strengthening civic education. Strong foundational skills in reading, writing, comprehension, and analysis should be cultivated across all educational levels. Teachers and other relevant actors must receive adequate training to implement these educational initiatives. Globally, Finland is a leading example of how media literacy can be integrated into formal education through a core national curriculum, where students are able to detect fact from fake even at an early age.[39] Moreover, educational initiatives must also consider the civic dimensions of disinformation and FIMI. These campaigns seek to exploit domestic ethnic, religious, or regional divisions and geopolitical tensions. For example, in Myanmar, Facebook played a role in the proliferation of disinformation hate speech against the Rohingya minority.[40] A strong civic education program that highlights the importance of diversity, awareness of social issues, and a better understanding of the country's social, economic, and political landscape can make citizens less susceptible to the polarizing tactics of disinformation and FIMI actors.

Conclusion

Discussions on how to craft an effective regional response to disinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), and the emerging threats posed by generative AI (GenAI) must begin with a clear understanding of the interplay of factors that shape these challenges. This article tackled how high digital connectivity amidst unequal levels of media literacy, socioeconomic disparities, domestic and geopolitical tensions and divisions, and institutional weaknesses make some countries in the Southeast Asia region vulnerable to disinformation and FIMI. These vulnerabilities have real and harmful effects on the everyday lives of the people, whether it is in terms of undermining democratic processes such as elections, deepening social and political divisions along the lines of religion and

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[38] ASEAN Digital Literacy Programme Team. "Fighting Disinformation and Misinformation: Digital Literacy for the Young and Marginalised." The ASEAN Magazine, March 23, 2023. https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/fighting-disinformation-and-misinformation-digital-literacy-for-the-young-and-marginalised/

[39] European Association for Viewers Interests. (n.d.). "Finnish National Curriculum on Media Literacy: A Global Model for Education." https://eavi.eu/ml-in-finland/

[40] Gianan, "Disinformation Trends in Southeast Asia: Comparative Case Studies on Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines."

ethnicity, to fueling geopolitical tensions. GenAI tools can amplify these sensitivities by blurring the line between what is real and not. ASEAN member-states differ in terms of their experiences with these contributing factors, and a key issue in crafting a regional response lies in their differing political, economic, and social contexts. Differences in institutional capabilities (i.e., quality of electoral institutions and other relevant government agencies tasked with monitoring cyber issues); socioeconomic conditions (i.e., labor conditions, quality of education); and political relationships with FIMI actors (i.e., differences in terms of relations with countries such as China) further complicate the issue. An overarching, all-encompassing, and top-down regional response against these issues is therefore not feasible in Southeast Asia given the diverse character of the region and the principles of non-interference and consensus that prevail in ASEAN.

Still, a series of domestic responses that incorporate lessons and best practices from the region offers countries a fighting chance against disinformation attacks and FIMI threats. Each of the proposed sets of response strategies corresponds to different contributing factors. Robust legal and regulatory frameworks can facilitate structural reforms to address institutional weaknesses. Multistakeholder collaborations between governments, the private sector, civil society groups, and regional and international bodies can serve as checks to potential overreach of government power in the enactment of regulatory policies. These can also potentially bridge socioeconomic gaps by pooling resources and expertise. Lastly, investments in media and digital literacy and civic education can empower citizens to be more responsible producers and consumers of information and increase their resistance against divisive and false narratives. There are countries within the region that are outperforming others in terms of educational milestones (e.g., Singapore), while there are those lagging behind (e.g., Philippines). This is where the crucial role of regional platforms like ASEAN lies, by facilitating dialogue, sharing best practices, and providing support for capacity-building measures, especially in resource-constrained member-states. The fight against online disinformation, FIMI, and the threats of GenAI requires concerted efforts from different stakeholders at both the domestic and regional levels. Though an overarching, top-down regional framework is unlikely, the region can still play a key role in enhancing domestic responses. Despite varying contexts, it is a shared responsibility among states to ensure that citizens are empowered to think critically, institutions are regarded as trustworthy and capable, and narratives that inform public discourse are truthful and resilient against manipulation.

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Faculty of Social and Political Sciences
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