



Global Network  
on Extremism & Technology

# Radical Right Activities in Nusantara's Digital Landscape: A Snapshot

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# Executive Summary

**T**his report outlines and analyses 14,615 English, Malay, and Tagalog-language accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Discord, Telegram, and Instagram associated with radical right politics posted online by far-right activists, alt-right communities, and those who, actively or passively, support their extreme ideology of nationalism, cultural, and religious conservatism in Maritime Southeast Asia. It explores how themes and narratives from across the world, including global current affairs, and conspiracy theories that are intertwined with local-level grievances attract, recruit, and motivate their followers to propagate and legitimise their reactionary hyperbole.

## Key Findings

- Radical right communities across Maritime Southeast Asia are active online and reactive towards political events.
- Three types of radical right communities were identified, all of which demonstrated preference divergence for certain social media platforms due to their own political objectives and operational security.
- Five key themes from these communities' discussions have been identified: civilisation, economics, politics, religion and the social fabric.
- In total, this report identified 14,615 messages containing keywords associated with antisemitism, cultural imperialism and historical revisionism, among others.
- Two of the three movements studied for this report have demonstrated their use of targeted harassment tactics via trolling and swarming.



# Overview

In November 2020, law enforcement officers detained an unidentified 16-year-old teenager under Singapore's Internal Security Act for allegedly plotting to kill Muslims in two mosques on the second anniversary of the deadly 2019 Christchurch attacks.<sup>1</sup> An ethnic Indian of the Protestant faith, the Singaporean youth had made plans to assault the Assyafaah and Yusof Ishak mosques, both of which are located in the Woodlands residential neighbourhood. This gesture was meant to pay tribute to Brenton Tarrant, the gunman who broadcast his massacre at two Christchurch mosques in New Zealand in 2019 live on Facebook.<sup>2</sup> The Singaporean teenager had bought a military vest as well as a machete over the internet. Following the arrest, regional security experts described the case as an instance of "reciprocal radicalisation".<sup>3</sup>

It is essential to note that contemporary extreme right ideologies have an extensive pre-war history; their current revival is gaining momentum because they are seen as the rational explanation of and solution for today's political and social crises.<sup>4</sup> Because of this, right-wing extremism and its concomitant far-right ideologies is the least understood type of ideologically motivated violent extremism in the Southeast Asian region.<sup>5</sup> As much as it is very tempting to suggest that contemporary right-wing extremism is a form of reaction or response to militant Islamist extremism and violence that has been troubling this region, that would be an oversimplification of a more complex issue. This report analyses the types of far-right narratives shared among members of different online sociopolitical movements in Southeast Asia using sample datasets collected from popular social media platforms frequented by each group's followers.

When it comes to the war of words, narrative is always central – whether in the form of extremist messaging to appeal to potential recruits, or state-crafted campaigns designed to undermine political opponents or economic rivals. As such, in today's digital and inter-connected world, the media space has been transformed into a battlefield of narratives and counter narratives.<sup>6</sup> There are numerous diverse hateful ideological movements online across the ideological spectrum, ranging from the far-right to the militant left, and they do not

1 "Detention of Singaporean Youth Who Intended to Attack Muslims on the Anniversary of Christchurch Attacks in New Zealand," Ministry of Home Affairs, accessed 11 March 2022, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/press-releases/detention-of-singaporean-youth-who-intended-to-attack-muslims-on-the-anniversary-of-christchurch-attacks-in-new-zealand/>.

2 Amalina Abdul Nasir and Vidia Arianti, "Christian Far-Right: Copying Jihadist Extremism?" S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (Nanyang Technological University, 15 March 2021), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/christian-far-right-copying-jihadist-extremism/>.

3 Amy Chew, "Far-right vs Islamists: A Vicious Circle of Extremism in Southeast Asia?," South China Morning Post, 6 February 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3120789/far-right-vs-islamists-vicious-circle-extremism-southeast-asia>.

4 H. Maruta, "Fasisme," *Iqtishaduna: Jurnal Ilmiah Ekonomi Kita* (2015), <https://ejournal.stiesyariahengkalis.ac.id/index.php/iqtishaduna/article/view/60>.

5 Munira Mustafa, "Right-Wing Extremism Has Deep Roots in Southeast Asia," GNET, 14 July 2021, <https://gnet-research.org/2021/07/14/right-wing-extremism-has-deep-roots-in-southeast-asia/>.

6 P. F. Wallner, "Open sources and the intelligence community: myths and realities," *American Intelligence Journal*, Spring/Summer 1993, 19-24.

simply exist in one space or a single platform. Different groups and movements have very different preferences for the platforms they want to frequent.

The most common and visibly dominant online hate group largely consists of politically-conservative nationalist actors using tactics such as concerted online hatemongering, gas-lighting, and targeted harassment to simply overwhelm detractors with numbers. They target and “swarm” (or pile-on) anyone online who is bold enough to publicly criticise their favourite politicians, candidates, or political parties. This is an all too common way to intimidate and silence their opponents and at the same time allow themselves to speak over others in promoting their own core values and beliefs. Many social media platforms are failing to curtail this toxic behaviour by allowing malicious actors, both real and bots, to thrive and promote their bad politics in these spaces.<sup>7</sup> The main challenge here is largely due to the nuanced language and cultural context i.e., dog whistles; social media’s artificial intelligence (AI) and support staff members can only do so much to manage the problem.

There are also various pan-Asian movements online that resemble many fascist white supremacist groups in the US and Europe. While the membership of these movements tends to comprise a mix of identities and nationalities, they must nonetheless be of Asian ethnicity to be part of the “in-group”. Their core ideology is their desire to establish a fascist Asian ethno-state with nationalist Asian chauvinist values regardless of religion. They share certain global geopolitical aspirations that is not too dissimilar from Japan’s “Asia for Asians” policy of the late 1930s and 1940s which not only led to war in the Pacific and serves now as the primary inspiration for these contemporary fascist nationalist Pan-Asian movements.<sup>8</sup> These groups also have preference-divergence for various matters, much like “conventional” militant groups, and are embroiled in in-fighting drama through bitter meme wars among themselves. Some of them even splinter to form new movements or align to other, better established groups. These groups tend to belong in more covert chat spaces where they can monitor those joining their channels and who’s who within the ranks of their membership to ensure their support is genuine.

This study analysed three social media movements linked with extreme right-wing activities online. Such activities were carried out by right-wing extremists and those who support their philosophy of nationalism and religious conservatism, whether actively or passively. This study also investigated how themes and narratives from across the globe, such as US political discourse, Russian disinformation and conspiracy theories, are combined with real-life local grievances in order to appeal to similarly aligned followers to help to disseminate and legitimise reactionary speech.

<sup>7</sup> See also how “bot hate” was weaponised in the case of Philippines at the start of Covid-19 pandemic. Joshua Uyheng and Kathleen M. Carley, “Bots and Online Hate during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Case Studies in the United States and the Philippines – Journal of Computational Social Science,” SpringerLink (Springer Singapore, 20 October 2020), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42001-020-00087-4>.

<sup>8</sup> Eri Hotta, “Pan-Asianism and Japan’s War 1931-1945,” 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230609921>.

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# 1. The Malay Archipelago's Digital Landscape

In the context of Southeast Asia, it is crucial to understand that the region's online violent extremism is not a simple binary phenomenon pitting Islamists and far-right against each other, but instead a spectrum of ideologies. There is no singular movement or subculture of an online community belonging to one dominant or minority race group. Their conflict cannot be simplified as a binary opposition between violent ideologies such as Islamist against non-Islamist or believers versus non-believers. Building on the fluidity of ideological spectrum, it is worth recognising that there are numerous distinct hostile ideological groups present online – from the far-right to the militant left to anarchists. Moreover, they do not coexist in one space or on a single platform. Like most savvy mainstream political parties on the ground, many of these fringe movements maintain presences across various social media platforms, not only to spread their ideology and narrative, but also to drive up membership and support. This report will focus mainly on the evolving information environment within the Maritime Southeast Asia.<sup>9</sup>

In comparison to “conventional” extremist threats such as the Islamic State (IS), right-wing extremism and far-right movements are among the region's least recognised security risks. The reasons for this are threefold: Firstly, it is partly due to the movement being widely conceptualised as a uniquely Western phenomenon associated primarily with European skinheads, neo-Nazis, and US white supremacist militia members. Second, as the far-right are yet to resort to violent tactics, they are not considered a credible threat at present. Finally, many of their reactionary sentiments, generally described as “anti-wokeness”, are widely shared and normalised among the general population. To give just one example, the term “woke”, itself originating from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and popularised by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, has seeped into the vocabulary and consciousness of young, progressive and urban Southeast Asian activists active online in their quest for increased autonomy and self-definition.<sup>10</sup> As a result, many reactionary rightists in Southeast Asia reject the notion of “wokeness” as a “Western export” unsuitable for the *Nusantara*<sup>11</sup> culture and tradition, understood to be modest and amenable. This contributed to an increase in the propagation and use of regressive and divisive language, or “anti-wokeness”, in recent years as a pushback against this controversial movement. More importantly, the nature of the internet ecosystem and the use of digital technologies have aided in the cross-pollination of violent ideas and language.<sup>12</sup>

9 Brunei, East Timor, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore constitute Maritime Southeast Asia.

10 Aja Romano, “A History of ‘Wokeness,’” Vox (Vox, 9 October 2020), <https://www.vox.com/culture/21437879/stay-woke-wokeness-history-origin-evolution-controversy>.

11 For the context of this report, “Nusantara” refers to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the southernmost part of Thailand, the Philippines, Brunei, and East Timor. See also Hans-Dieter Evers, “Nusantara: History of a Concept,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 89, no. 1 (2016): pp. 3-14, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ras.2016.0004>.

12 “When Women Are the Enemy: The Intersection of Misogyny and White Supremacy,” Anti-Defamation League, accessed 11 March 2022, <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/when-women-are-the-enemy-the-intersection-of-misogyny-and-white-supremacy>.

Rather than treating the phenomenon as a distinctively Western-centric issue, the changing political landscape marked by rising polarisation and divisive populist groups supporting the use of violence to accomplish political aims should be recognised as a global security concern. Social media platforms like as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and 4Chan are critical for the growth of these movements.<sup>13</sup> The use of digital technology, as well as the structure of the digital ecosystem, has assisted in the cross-pollination of violent ideas and political discourse. Furthermore, ungoverned cyberspace is where these actors can freely sow propaganda and disseminate relentless misinformation and incessant conspiracy theories in the form of incendiary Facebook posts, provocative Twitter threads, attractive Instagram photos, and highly stylised subversive memes, among other forms of communication.

Fundamental to our understanding of how to address ideologically motivated extremism online is to also study how and why various groups and individuals use certain platforms and the measures that are (or are not) in place to address their activities. Different groups and movements have different preferences for the platforms they choose to frequent. Their activities may include sharing political rhetoric and producing manifestos, as well as enticing and influencing new members to expand their growth. For instance, extreme right-wing activists and far-right actors tend to favour “established” platforms such as Facebook and Twitter because they give them legitimacy, authority, and traction. Facebook’s privacy settings also enable the creation of closed groups in which the group’s moderators may grant new members access, delete individuals, define ‘rules,’ and monitor people who use the group.

On the other hand, Twitter’s algorithm supports self-created and self-curated echo chambers, in which individuals are surrounded by like-minded followers who (on the whole) agree with one another. Tactically, Twitter’s features can also be leveraged as a “policing” tool – a means by which the in-group polices rules, norms, narratives, ideology, and language – through the use of anonymous accounts or bot farms, which frequently devolve into ad hominem assaults and pile-ons with no fear of repercussions other than being banned from the site, which can easily be circumvented by simply creating a new account.<sup>14</sup> Fringe actors sharing explicitly illegal or hateful content prefer Telegram, where content moderation is less restrictive.<sup>15</sup> The three narratives presented in this report demonstrate the wide range of far-right and alt-right politics, as observed through the material they share on social media and instant messaging platforms.

13 Max Mason, “Social Media Connections Fuel Right-Wing Extremism: AFP,” Australian Financial Review, 25 April 2021, <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/social-media-connections-fuel-right-wing-extremism-afp-20210425-p57m8f>.

14 Antonia Timmerman, “Trolling, Doxxing and False Arrests: How Governments Are Using Tech to Intimidate Critics in Southeast Asia,” Rest of World, 20 January 2022, <https://restofworld.org/2022/trolling-doxxing-false-arrests-online-intimidation/#/this-outlet-investigated-a>.

15 Rani Molla, “Why Right-Wing Extremists’ Favorite New Platform Is So Dangerous,” Recode (Vox, 20 January 2021), <https://www.vox.com/recode/22238755/telegram-messaging-social-media-extremists>.

## 2. Definitions and Current Regional Policy Responses on Online Extremism

There is a common misconception that terrorism and extremism are interchangeable, but they are not synonymous. Although extremism and terrorism can be linked, they may also exist independently. “All terrorists are extremists, but not all extremists are terrorists,” as the adage goes. Presently, the most reached for definition would be JM Berger’s assertion which defined extremism as, *“the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group”*<sup>16</sup>. In other words, if you do not share any common traits with the dominant “in-group” (such as identity, nationality, gender, or religion), you will always be othered, and seen as a mere “guest” who does not belong. The assertion that extremists “say” whereas terrorists “do” is flawed since extremists have been known to perpetrate violence (i.e., hate speech campaigns, genocide, segregation, etc.) that may or may not be classified as terrorism. Fundamentally, the latter transcends the border between rhetoric and action and poses a threat to national security.

From the policymaker’s position, the perpetual dilemma is that governments and democratic societies cannot simply label someone as an extremist because they have an opposing point of view to the one espoused by the institution or community. However, depending on the policy perspective, the threshold for what constitutes extremism usually involves harm or encourages the use of non-democratic approaches to achieve a result. There is an argument to be made that an extremist is someone who would (or may) resort to violence or urge others to use violence in order to eliminate the presence of anyone they believe does not belong in a certain space in order to protect its “purity”. Typically, in the case of right-wing extremists, this space is revered as the “homeland” of the person who occupies it.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, from the Southeast Asian security perspective, government agencies and stakeholders including social media companies in the region have been placing more importance and attention on producing counter-narratives to fight Islamic State (IS) propaganda.<sup>18</sup> This is mainly because militant Islamists have been a persistent regional security issue for the last forty years. Given the residual trauma in the wake of the Marawi Siege in 2017<sup>19</sup>, the fight against IS has conditioned many Southeast Asian security apparatus to overestimate the threat

16 J. M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018).

17 Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

18 Chin, “Malaysia’s Counter-Messaging Centre to Counter Narratives of Terrorists, Extremists – DPM,” Borneo Post Online (Borneo Post Online, 8 November 2016), <http://www.theborneopost.com/2016/11/09/malaysias-counter-messaging-centre-to-counter-narratives-of-terrorists-extremists-dpm/>.

19 In May 2017, around 500 Islamist militants led by the Maute Group and supported by foreign combatants stormed and captured Marawi City, Mindanao, in the southern Philippines, under the banner of the Islamic State. The siege, which lasted five months, resulted in massive community displacement.

of and devote much of their resources to address "IS radicalisation".<sup>20</sup> Such countries as Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have each produced their own National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (NAPPCVE), but the core of these plans is focused on targeting Islamist ideology and radicalisation. The way these national action plans were structured serves only to underscore the fact that state actors are limited by their own rules and impressions of what is "acceptable and appropriate", while extremists are more flexible and free-flowing and are constantly evolving.

The other often-overlooked problem is that, even if internet corporations make great efforts to remove terrorist or militant group materials from their online platforms, the same cannot be said for their ability to moderate hate speech, especially when it comes to regional content.<sup>21</sup> According to reports, major social media corporations have reneged on their pledge to free speech so they could continue to operate in the region.<sup>22</sup> Because a lot of the hate speech are aligned with pro-government views, these corporations have sacrificed their social responsibilities to appease their Southeast Asian government clients, ultimately silencing voices of criticisms against the *status quo*.<sup>23</sup> The consequence of this corporate decision has been the worsening of communal fractures in the region, which they have somewhat acknowledged.<sup>24</sup>

For the purposes of this study, extremism is defined as "any opposition to basic values, such as democracy, the rule of law, individual autonomy, and mutual respect and acceptance of different identity, faiths and beliefs".<sup>25</sup> In order to establish a definition for far-right politics, this report refers to the conceptualisations of the far-right proposed by Benjamin Lee: "A narrative of racial and/or cultural threat to a 'native' group arising from perceived alien groups within a society."<sup>26</sup> It is important to appreciate that right-wing radicalism differs from extremism in that the former is not clearly anti-democratic, while the latter is marked by an outright anti-democratic position. Both share the underlying philosophy of exclusivist nationalism, which openly opposes egalitarianism.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, it is important to appreciate that the alt-right is different from the far right in that the alt-right is a political movement that embraces radical right values while rejecting mainstream conservatism.<sup>28</sup> Right-wing extremism will be the umbrella term to describe movements and beliefs that subscribe to politics motivated by radical right or far-right and alt-right values.<sup>29</sup>

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- 20 Prashanth Parameswaran, "What's behind the Philippines' New Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism?," *The Diplomat* (The Diplomat, 23 July 2019), <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/whats-behind-the-philippines-new-strategy-for-countering-violent-extremism/>.
- 21 "Violent Conflict, Tech Companies, and Social Media in Southeast Asia," The Asia Foundation, 28 October 2020, <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/violent-conflict-tech-companies-and-social-media-in-southeast-asia/>.
- 22 Brandon Paladino, "Democracy Disconnected: Social Media's Caustic Influence on Southeast Asia's Fragile Republics," *Brookings* (Brookings, 9 March 2022), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/democracy-disconnected-social-medias-caustic-influence-on-southeast-asias-fragile-republics/>.
- 23 Andreyka Natalegawa and Kyra Jasper, "Controlling the Information Space: Big Tech and Free Speech in Southeast Asia," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 7 March 2022, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/controlling-information-space-big-tech-and-free-speech-southeast-asia>.
- 24 Hannah Kuchler, "Southeast Asian Censors Test Mettle of Social Media Groups," *Financial Times*, 24 May 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/c87c4364-3c43-11e7-821a-6027b8a20f23>.
- 25 The concept for this definition was drawn from both Berger's and the UK government's definitions and reconfigured for this research. See also: Chris Allen, "Extremism in the UK: New Definitions Threaten Human and Civil Rights," *The Conversation*, 13 October 2021, <https://theconversation.com/extremism-in-the-uk-new-definitions-threaten-human-and-civil-rights-157086>.
- 26 Benjamin Lee, "Overview of the Far-Right" (Lancaster: Gov.UK, 2019).
- 27 Cécile Simmons et al., "Reciprocal Dynamics Between Australia's Political Fringes On Twitter," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 28 October 2021, [https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Reciprocal-dynamics-between-Australias-political-fringes-on-Twitter\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Reciprocal-dynamics-between-Australias-political-fringes-on-Twitter_FINAL.pdf).
- 28 "Alt-Right," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed 11 March 2022, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right>.
- 29 Bernt Hagtvet, "Right-Wing Extremism in Europe," *Journal of Peace Research* 31, no. 3 (August 1994): pp. 241–46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/425375>.

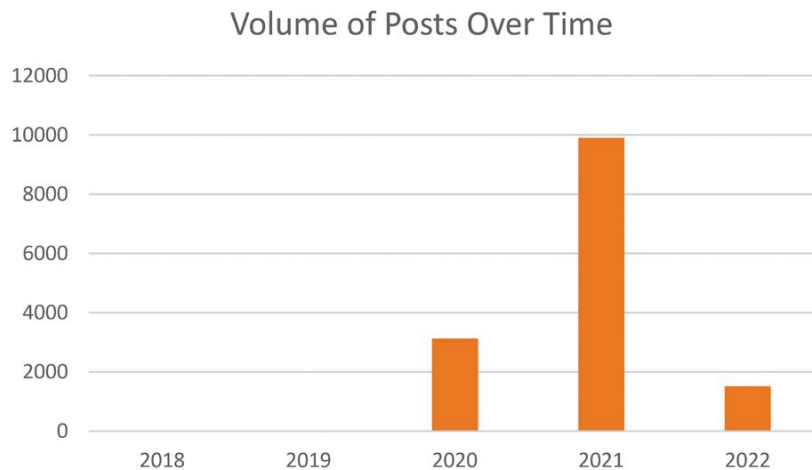
### 3.Methods

Using a combination of methods including snowballing, this report involves cross-platform social media data collected between the end of 2019 and early 2022, primarily focusing on channels and/or accounts or individuals who promote and exhibit latent extreme right-wing ideology. This timeframe was selected to reflect how the state-mandated lockdowns enforced in early 2020 as a counter-measure to Covid-19 fuelled anti-migrant sentiment online.<sup>30</sup> The data was collected from various platforms and stored, including content showing how different extremist groups would express their ideological values even if they belong in the same or similar spectrum.

#### Data Description, Sample Selection and Data Collection

This study identified and collected 14,615 posts from Twitter, seven Telegram channels, ten Discord channels, five Facebook pages and three Instagram profiles. In order to gather information, researchers identified and performed manual scrapings of Twitter's API for relevant accounts, keywords and hashtags. Chat transcripts were downloaded from Telegram channels affiliated with racist and fascist pan-Asian movements, the members of which identify as being from Maritime Southeast Asia. Posts were manually collected from Facebook, Discord and Instagram. The analysis focused on identifying significant issues raised by far-right activists who are promoting supremacist views, actively whitewashing history, glorifying alternative narratives, reimagining history or envisioning a future of a "pure homeland". Aside from the English language, sources were also gathered in the Malay, Indonesian and Tagalog languages. After collection, the samples were divided into five broad categories for narrative analysis: civilisation, economics, politics, religious and social. Following that, a thematic analysis was conducted to discover recurring topics.

<sup>30</sup> Jasmine Chia and Han Poh Yong, "Amid Covid-19 Crisis, Southeast Asia's Migrant Workers Fall through the Cracks," *The Diplomat* (The Diplomat, 1 April 2020), <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/amid-covid-19-crisis-southeast-asias-migrant-workers-fall-through-the-cracks/>.



**Figure 1:** The graph above illustrates the evolution of the number of posts over time. The data collected from far-right communities in 2021 reveals a substantial rise in comparison to previous years, which was likely fuelled by the Covid-19 outbreak, which resulted in national movement restriction orders to manage the pandemic across the region.

Narrative Themes	
Civilisation	Mentions of topics focusing on historical or cultural superiority, or well-known historical despots.
Economics	Mentions of discriminative economic-based policies, such as immigration.
Politics	Mentions of terms associated with contemporary politics with policies addressing statehood, Constitutional rights, pre-Independence history.
Religious	Mentions of terms or keywords associated with religion, and highlighting its superiority. Examples may include Islam, Hindu, Christianity etc.
Social	Mentions of terms or keywords associated with racism, discrimination, and xenophobia such as immigration and refugee issues. These would also include justification for race-based politics, references to dominant group supremacy, antisemitism, gender-based discrimination, and arguments for 'positive discrimination'. Example includes Chola, Rohingya, and New Economic Policy (NEP) affirmative actions.

**Figure 2:** The table above outlines the five broad categories identified for Narrative Analysis.

## Limitations with Data Collection

A full evaluation of the far-right is constrained by several challenges:

- Online presences are often scattered over many accounts. For instance, prominent members of specific movements may have their own accounts, or support may be dispersed throughout many lesser accounts.
- Because these movements' organisational structures are often informal and flexible, determining their official membership is challenging.
- Audience motivations are not always obvious, and they do not always signify ideological allegiance since their engagements with polemical subjects are sometimes the consequence of visceral reactions.
- The research was hampered by linguistic constraints in relation to the Filipino material, which necessitates a thorough understanding of local contexts and politics.
- The most virulent far-right groups choose clandestine social media platforms such as Telegram and Discord, making data consolidation impossible. Because of this, it is also impossible to determine their exact demographics.



**Figure 3:** Social media sources for data collection. Data were manually scraped from Twitter, Facebook, Discord and Instagram. Chat transcripts were exported from Telegram.



## 4. Analysing the Data and Findings

The following case studies examine three separate and distinct movements that operate across multiple online platforms; two of the movements were chosen to demonstrate how dominant far-right in-groups are unconcerned about the consequences of openly spewing hate speech, whereas the fringe alt-right movement prefers anonymity and evasion of scrutiny due to their opposition to mainstream politics.

### Case Study 1: Malaysia's Online Extreme Ethnonationalists

Far-right political groups in Malaysia which exist in the form of ethnonationalist movements are deeply intertwined with religious supremacy, given that Malay Muslims are the largest dominant group in the country. The core far-right movement in Malaysia puts forward the idea that Malaysia is the homeland for Malays, and Islam is the supreme religion above all others, and is also the natural religion for native Malays through their tenuous historical linkages with the Middle East. Malay far-right activists use various social media platforms and content formats to propagate and enforce these views by being hostile to and encouraging hostility towards anyone who questions *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) or promote either liberal, progressive, and egalitarian values. Their large presence online allows Malay ethnonationalists to dominate the social media spaces, particularly on Twitter and Facebook, to control the messaging and narratives without any fear of repercussions. Individuals and groups belonging to this movement maintain several profiles across multiple platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, Telegram, and Instagram to drive engagement and grow their membership and follower count. Due to the nature of the digital ecosystem, managing several social media accounts across multiple platforms enables them to disseminate their message and amplify their narratives further through the benefits of cross-pollination.

Malay far-right members online have been known to hold strong traditionalist views on culture and gender with very chauvinistic leanings. There have been cases where some of these reactionary right actors would intentionally provoke a polemical discourse simply for the opportunity to openly belittle and put down women, or to assert their status and privilege of being Muslim in a country where Islamic institutions are part of the government. Additionally, this allows them to identify women (or any other minorities) who speak out in order to set them up for future targeted harassment. They are also notorious for othering or marginalising migrant workers or refugees such as Nepalese, Bangladeshis, and Rohingyas, which they reference as "PATI" (Malay: "*pendatang asing tanpa izin*" or "illegal immigrants") as the hostile out-group.

The online culture wars in Malaysia often involve the deployment of cyber troopers (cytros) and trollbot armies to control and manage the online discourse to enforce certain narratives and distort public perception.<sup>31</sup> There have also been instances where “micro-celebrities”, colloquially known as “online influencers”, would act as vanguards to lead and influence the discourse. To further contaminate and disrupt the information environment, these legions of cytros and trolls would also operate through swarming tactics to intimidate dissenting voices, especially when specific topics get more attention in an attempt to dominate the narrative.<sup>32</sup> In fact, some parallels can be drawn between cytros and school prefects.<sup>33</sup> It remains unclear whether these cytros are approached, recruited or self-validated to join the in-group to become part of the noise within their echo chamber. Given their strong presence online, what is certain is that Malay far-right actors are not worried about receiving any backlash.

## Case Study 2: Far-Right in the Philippines

There seems to be a burgeoning online populist bandwagon in the Philippines, partly spurred by President of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte's undemocratic right-wing populist politics.<sup>34</sup> Since taking office as president in 2016, Duterte's strong and uncompromising brand of “Asian Values” has succeeded in reviving authoritarian nostalgia in the Philippines.<sup>35</sup> Duterte's unrestrained anti-socialist sentiments, as well as his tough stance on the war on drugs, have substantially impacted Asian geopolitics in terms of reactionary movement. The brutal red-tagging practice used by the radical right in the country to silence dissidents and human rights advocates, a tactic that has its roots in America's “red scare,” which includes accusing them of being “communists” or “terrorists” on Facebook posts, is an example of their violent pushback against values seen as “leftist”, such as socialism and communism.<sup>36</sup>

The growing far-right movement also defines itself by embracing and promoting former President Ferdinand E. Marcos' “True Filipino Ideology” as their brand of Philippines fascism, which is primarily found on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. In 1982, Marcos' “True Filipino Ideology” asserted that martial rule was essential as a reaction to the “communist menace authorised by international law.”<sup>37</sup> The Philippines “Fascist Party,” which describes itself as the country's first established far-right organisation, was founded on 4 May 2021, and seems to be modelled after the country's very first fascist party, Young Philippines, which was founded on 7 January 1934.<sup>38</sup>

31 Derrick A Paulo, “Meet the Fake News Trolls Who Influenced US and Indonesian Polls for Money,” CNA, accessed 11 March 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cnainsider/trolls-fake-news-industry-elections-veles-malaysia-indonesia-us-904676>.

32 Mark Anthony V Ambay III et al., “Dystopia Is Now: Digital Authoritarianism and Human Rights in Asia,” *Global Campus Human Rights Journal* 3 (2019): pp. 269-285, <https://doi.org/http://doi.org/20.500.11825/1575>.

33 Malaysian schools are modelled after the British educational system, in which pupils or students who are entrusted with limited authority are responsible for enforcing discipline on their cohortmates. These are prefects.

34 Walden Bello, “Rodrigo Duterte: A Fascist Original,” Rappler, 2 January 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/157166-rodrigo-duterte-fascist-original/>.

35 Bonn Juego et al., “Human Rights against Populism: A Progressive Response to the Politics of Duterte and Mahathir,” Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 28 December 2018, <https://th.boell.org/en/2018/12/28/human-rights-against-populism-progressive-response-politics-duterte-and-mahathir>.

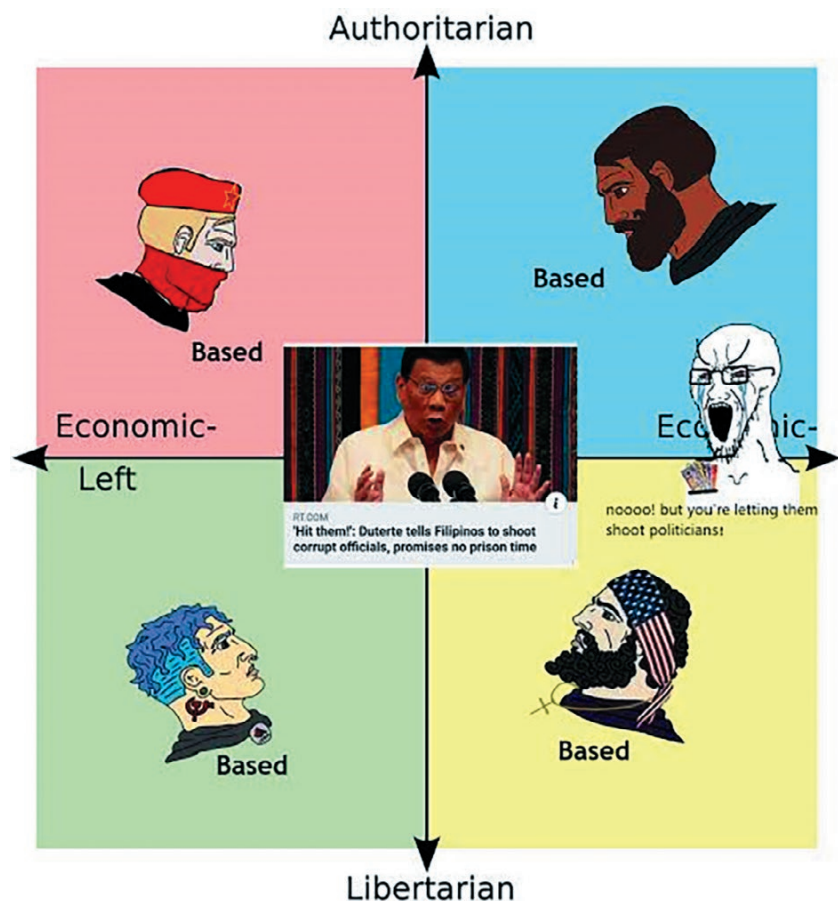
36 “Philippines: End Deadly ‘Red-Tagging’ of Activists,” Human Rights Watch, 20 January 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/17/philippines-end-deadly-red-tagging-activists>.

37 Ferdinand E Marcos, “The True Filipino Ideology,” Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 12 May 1982, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1982/05/12/essay-by-president-marcos-entitled-the-true-filipino-ideology/>.

38 “Filipinos Launch a Fascist Party; ‘Young Philippines,’ Complete with Salute, Is Formed by Manuel Roxas. Clean Government’ AIM Leader, Saying the Group Will ‘Bow to No Man,’ Scores Quezon Liberty Plan.,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, 8 January 1934), <https://www.nytimes.com/1934/01/08/archives/filipinos-launch-a-fascist-party-young-philippines-complete-with.html>.

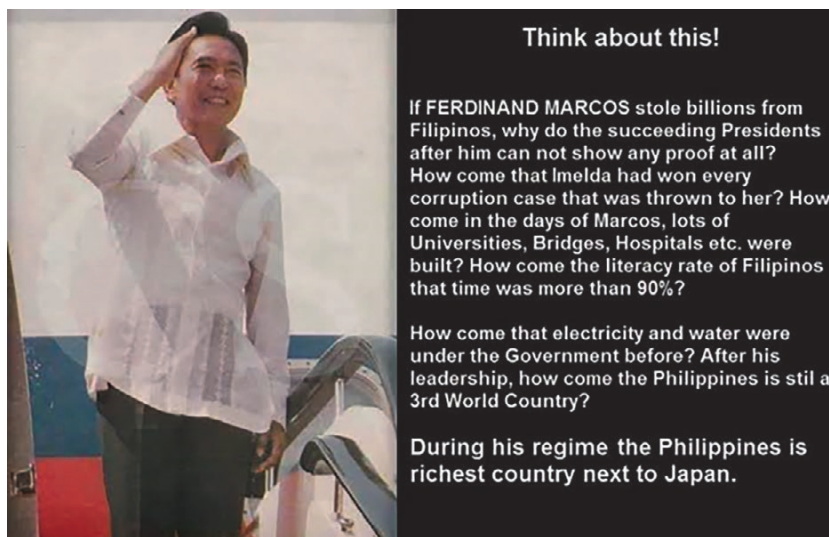
It is impossible to determine how many persons are behind these accounts, however they have not had enough time to grow, and have just a small number of followers at the time of writing.<sup>39</sup> When one considers the country's history with the left-leaning Communist Party of the Philippines and New People's Army (CPP-NPA), which attempted to overthrow the Philippine government in favour of a proletariat-led state, it is no surprise that these self-identified Filipino reactionary rights profess to be proud nationalists who strongly reject politics and values of the left, such as socialism and communism. They are also deeply antagonistic to liberal values.

One of the movement's most distinguishing characteristics is that it is very pro-police and military – its adherents have extremely idealised views of military culture – among other things. The major narratives shared by Filipino far-rights are mostly centred on being pro-regime (Marcos) and whitewashing state violence and brutalities perpetrated by Marcos' dictatorship by explaining and excusing his brutalities. Like the far-right groups in the United States, the Filipino far-right has appropriated the vocabulary and lexicon of the country. Many of these vitriols are coded in the form of memes in order to appeal to a younger generation.



**Figure 4:** Example of a far-right Filipino meme's political compass. The meme mocks the "Crying Liberal" for protesting, while everyone else supports Duterte's proposal to execute corrupt officials.

<sup>39</sup> It is doubtful that they are a formal organisation, given their apparent amorphous appearance and content tone.



**Figure 5:** Example of a far-right Filipino meme whitewashing Marcos' regime.

### Case Study 3: Pan-Asian Nationalist Coalition

Several alt-right factions, including the contemporary Pan-Asian fascist movement, seem to be forming a new online ecosystem in the Southeast Asian digital environment. These Pan-Asian fascist alt-right movements are unique from the previously stated organisations in that their proponents are more varied and less homogeneous. Their inception seems to have been influenced by the imperialist concept of the WWII Japanese Empire – the “Co-Prosperity Sphere” — the establishment of a self-sufficient Asian bloc via cultural and economic cooperation, free of Western hegemony.<sup>40</sup> They are made up of transnational alt-right activists from all around Southeast Asia, and even East Asia. Those from Maritime Southeast Asia who participate in these spaces identified themselves as being from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines — with the Filipinos being members of their own alt-right movement too, which has been defined above, in Case Study 2. While they pass off their channels as “esoteric/schizo shit-posting” as a disclaimer, the theme of discussions seems preoccupied with race.

Although they share the same fascist philosophy and Pan-Asian aspirations of their fantasy Asia, as well as an openness to international cooperation and collaboration, their aims remain fundamentally nationalist at their core. Pan-Asian movement activists strongly espouse the slogan “Asia for Asians”. They are reactionary populists that promote a pan-Asian nationalist front that draws similarities with the Europeans who adhered to Hitler’s idea of a Master Race during the 1930s and 1940s. A broad membership contingent on the Asian identity is welcomed, and the group holds the belief that Asians should be politically and socially dominant. While they allow “whites” in their space “as long as they know their place”, they remain outrightly hostile towards black people and Jews.

40 Hota, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931-1945*, 199-223.

While the Pan-Asian ideological movement is composed of a loose network of alt-right activists and followers, they are less amorphous and have a well-established hierarchical structure unlike the Malay ethnonationalists and the Filipino far-right online. Inspired by the Nazi Germany Wehrmacht, they designated the “Chancellor” as the major leadership figure, followed by “National Leaders” for each nation that they represent. Many of these radical rights appear to take themselves very seriously, since they have created their own library of manifestos and political writings, which address their idealised Pan-Asian future with frequent allusions to World War II and its economic and social institutions. Memes are their modern iteration of propaganda posters and postcards, being funny only to those “in” on the joke, while nonsense or irrelevant to others.

Unlike the previous two overt far-right and alt-right groups, the Pan-Asian nationalist coalition appears to prefer to remain anonymous, even to each other. Their blatant anti-monarchy, anti-government, and anti-constitution beliefs are likely to be the driving force behind their desire to keep their channels and talks secret. They are also vehemently misogynistic and made it their policy to not allow women in the channel. They would even exchange information on women who happened to cross their way who they identified as “feminists” or “race-traitors”, and they would plan specific harassment campaigns against them by swarming their Instagram pages, for example.



**Figure 6:** Image collected from one of the fascist Pan-Asian channels on Telegram showed one of its members performing a Hitler salute with the caption, “ASIA FOREVER”.



## 5. Topic Analysis

One of this report's aims was to understand the most common scope and substance of topics frequently discussed within these far-right spaces using qualitative analysis. Following the five broad categories, the samples were analysed further to identify the most frequent themes that appear in their discussions. Five of them were identified: Antisemitism, Western Hegemony and Political Leadership, Law and Order, Historical Revisionism and Cultural Purity.

### 1. Antisemitism: The "Jewish Conspiracy"

*"Just shut your mouth, descendent of Prophet's killer...  
descendant of Shabbat people trying to deceive their own  
God's commands!"*

(Anonymous Twitter user)

Antisemitism is a prevalent theme in these far-right debates on all of these sites. Even though it is likely that many of them may have never met a Jew, antisemitism thrives throughout Southeast Asia as a result of widespread and popular misconceptions that Jews dominate America. Numerous Malay far-right populists are antisemitic because they believe Islam is under constant threat by the Jewish bogeyman, who actively seeks to undermine intrinsic Islamic values and Muslims' sphere of influence throughout the world, whom they denigrate as "*Yahudi laknatullah*" ("goddamned Jews"). Additionally, they believe that Judaism, Zionism, and Israelis all refer to the same thing. Similarly, the alt-right shares hostility for the Jews, whom they refer to as the "enemy" and "race traitors." They think that Jewish people obtain power by dubious means and are responsible for the "subjugation of America". It is plausible that this opinion stems from their idealisation of Hitler's Nazi ideology. They also believe that Jews ruined Germany and were directly responsible for the birth of Communism.

### 2. Western Hegemony and Political Leadership

*"Putin is based."*

(Anonymous Telegram user)

American politics is a popular topic for discussions amongst these far-right and alt-right actors. There are strong anti-American and anti-west sentiments shared by the audience in these chambers of far-right and alt-right outrage. Malay far-right populists view America as a morally bankrupt and hypocritical major power, responsible for many conflicts across the Middle East and Afghanistan that contributed to their destabilisation and devastations, chief amongst them being the Palestinian struggle. In contrast, the Pan-Asian alt-right members simply attributed America's fragility to its liberal democratic foundations under Jewish domination and its affiliation with Israel. These far-right and alt-right activists lauded Russia's recent large-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Putin is seen as a powerful alternative super leader capable of contending with Western hegemony and

influence on an equal basis. Their mutual affinity for Putin stems from the fact that Putin represents anti-liberalism, publicly rejects the existence of LGBTQ+ people, and because of their hatred for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Jewish ancestry. Additionally, their admiration for Putin is due to their preference for strong leaders; they believe that tyrants with unlimited authority are capable of building empires, therefore they think Putin can restore Russia to its former glory.

### 3. Law and Order: Policing and Military Culture

*"They make women seem a lot superior than they actually are."*  
(Anonymous Telegram user)

All three movements believe that the police are responsible for maintaining order, while the military is responsible for protecting the country. While all three groups seem to idealise law enforcement and military culture as benchmark for measuring a nation's power, they also hold complicated and divided views on them. They claim that, as a result of high-level corruption, contemporary police and military are no longer "tough" homeland guardians or as successful as they might be. While Malay ethnonationalists value policing, they believe that police resources are being squandered by being assigned as "Praetorian Guards" to the country's governing classes. Similarly, the alt-right believes that police officers are unreliable and fall short of their responsibilities because they are answerable to higher authority with whom they disagree. They believe that nations will become more unsafe as a result. Additionally, they see the military institution as weak, owing to the fact that they open their recruitment to women. They are adamantly opposed to women serving in combat capacities, whilst Malay ethnonationalists are apathetic to women serving in the military. They are all nostalgic for pre-World War II imperial military traditions such as Ancient Sparta, the Japanese Imperial Army, and the German Wehrmacht. Their conversations often centre on military history.

### 4. Historical Revisionism

*"We hope our Tamil (Indian) friends will not use the Chola sacking of Kedah as an excuse for claiming that pre-Islamic civilization Kedah belonged to them."*  
(Twitter influencer)

Another frequent occurrence in far-right discourse is the distortion of significant historical events in order to promote or exaggerate the accomplishments of a certain culture or country in order to justify their status as "supreme" or the legitimate claimant of the land. Their discussions are often inundated with members sharing "historical nuggets" and their own interpretations of historical events. In radical right Malay discourse, historical revisionism has been pervasive. Far-right populists would spread erroneous information about Malaysia's true history to glorify the Malay kingdom. Recently, there has been an emerging online campaign with the goal to whitewash and erase indigenous Malay people's Hindu antecedents, which these ethnonationalist activists have pejoratively dubbed as "Chola Ideology", alluding to the history of 1025 Chola sacking of the

Srivijaya Kingdom in the Malay Archipelago and conquered Kedah.<sup>41</sup> They would refer to anyone who opposes or counters their narrative as “*geng Chola*” (Chola gang), “*puak Chola*” (Chola tribe) or “*pejuang Chola*” (Chola champion). Members of this movement are aggressively advancing assertions that the ancient Malay kingdoms were Islamic and that they were never historically Hindu or vanquished by a Hindu dynasty. Similarly, Pan-Asian alt-right members also assert the belief that there is a “separate place for every race, and every race has a homeland”, while promoting their own versions of “pure homelands” to strengthen their identities because they believe purity is the metric to determine a nation’s might. They would use Europe to demonstrate their point on Europe’s lost potential due to multiculturalism.

## 5. Cultural Purity: Anti-minority and Xenophobic Narratives

*“In general, whites and Asians have the same enemies: n\*\*\*\*s, Jews, Muslims/Arabs, faggots, etc... So it makes full sense to unite about it. Also, it doesn’t make any fucking sense to have hostility between Asians and whites. We both have amazing cultures.”*

(Anonymous Telegram user)

Posts concerning members of marginalised populations, such as immigrants (often migrant workers), are frequently xenophobic in tone, reflecting the racist far-right’s ideas about multiculturalism being a threat to the natives of the homeland. Any vocal opposition to systemic discrimination against minorities or migrant workers would immediately be labelled as “*budaya BLM*” (“BLM culture”). Because of this, the BLM movement became a commonly discussed subject. Far-right activists in this sphere see BLM activists as “radicals” and portray the movement as a type of “extremism” the authorities must eradicate. Malay-ethnonationalists treat the protest movement with suspicion, owing to their engrained prejudice towards black people, and regard BLM ideology and “woke culture” as incompatible with Malay-Muslim principles. Alt-right reactionaries have a far more vehement and caustic attitude against BLM and “woke culture.” In their opinion, “whites make better allies than blacks” because “n\*\*\*\*s are the slaves of Jews” who are in perennial victimhood, and are dead against race-mixing, calling those engaged in interracial relationships as “race-traitors”. They also subscribe to the concept and practice of eugenics for race purifications. Across the board, both of these far-right and alt-right actors have very mixed attitudes towards religion. Both Malay (Islam) and Filipino (Christianity) far-right activists use religion as their yardstick for purity, while the Pan-Asian alt-rights are divisive particularly where Abrahamic religions are concerned.

<sup>41</sup> To understand the significance of the 1025 Chola invasion of Kedah in Malay history, see: Hermann Kulke, Vijay Sakhuja, and K Kesavapany, eds., “Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia,” 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789812309389>.



## 6. Conclusions

This report demonstrated how the extreme right movement is a worldwide phenomenon, not simply a Western one. Not only are the radical right communities active online, but they also influence political developments in their own countries across Maritime Southeast Asia by promoting their own populist interpretations and narratives. Each of the extreme right communities covered in this study has proven how their understanding of global current events has shaped their political ideas and narratives, hence impacting their own local grievances, and they are not afraid to harass their opponents. Their overt and covert internet actions are heavily influenced by their ideology and political objectives, which have a bearing on their operational security. Additionally, this report demonstrates that their political discourses prioritise the preservation of politically dominant cultural identity and country. To address this effectively, policymakers must consider addressing hateful movements holistically rather than just targeting a single ideology, regardless of whether they dress themselves as a radical religious or political nationalist movement. Additionally, policymakers must reconsider their definition of cyberspace in order to improve their policies on media literacy while ensuring online user safety and resiliency in this volatile information environment. Policymakers would also gain a better understanding of how these fringe online subcultures can manifest as violent grassroots movements if they made an effort to contextualise and recognise the implications of this hostile online behaviour instead of legitimising them for the sake of popular support.



# Policy Section

*This policy section has been written by Inga Kristina Trauthig, Research Fellow, and Amarnath Amarasingam, Senior Research Fellow, at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London. It provides policy recommendations and is produced independently by ICSR. Recommendations do not necessarily represent the views of the report authors.*

The key findings of this report carry corresponding policy implications for technology companies as this report provides insights into online behaviours of the least understood ideologically motivated violent extremism in the Southeast Asian region. At the same time, governments around the world need to be aware of the global spread of all violent ideologies and understand the need for exchange. The report's mixed-methods analysis identifies key themes in narratives as well as operational characteristics, such as platform preferences for different actors. The following section seeks to achieve a threefold aim: first, to deliver concrete policy recommendations for governmental stakeholders; second, to outline policy options and strategic foresight for technology companies; and, finally, in hand with [1] and [2], to serve as a reference point for a future evaluation of tech policies in order to assess dos and don'ts of technology legislation.

With this, the policy section ensures that the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), the academic research arm of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), is academically advising and supporting technology companies and policymakers on how to better understand the ways in which terrorists are using information technology. This is designed to fulfil not only GIFCT's pillar of learning, but ultimately to improve prevention and responses to terrorist and violent extremist attacks.

## 1. Focus: Policymakers

The empirical insights into far-right actors in Southeast Asia and the surfacing of familiar themes raise relevant points that should be addressed and factored in by governmental stakeholders interested in combatting violent extremism worldwide. In addition, international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) and its partner agencies working on cross-country understandings of extremism and countering violent extremism (CVE) programmes could take note and consider incorporating the results of this analysis when discussing prioritisation of intervention efforts in particular.

- As this report has outlined, three social media movements linked to extreme right-wing activities picked up themes and narratives from across the globe. For example, familiar references to existing conspiracy theories in the U.S. are combined with local grievances in order to appeal to followers and help disseminate and legitimise reactionary speech. These understandings highlight

the fallacy of siloing extremist narratives to different countries or regions of the world. Instead, their interconnectedness which is facilitated through online spaces should lead discussions.

- However, the report also mentioned how members of these Southeast Asian far-right communities have yet to resort to violent tactics. Therefore, their relevance or danger for national but also international terrorism does not seem imminent. Government representatives and the intelligence community are well-advised to monitor developments, since European and American representatives are able to explain how quickly a movement can shift from non-violent extremism to violent action. For example, when an accelerating factor like a global pandemic or polarising head of state fuels existing sentiments towards a tipping point towards violence.
- One significant takeaway from this report is also that a lot of the dangerous online speech and communication under assessment was aligned with pro-government views, such as the glorification of law enforcement. Relatedly, many of the thematic messages and reactionary sentiments studied are widely shared and normalised among the general population. Generally, local, national and international policymakers would be well-advised to follow the well-tread field of academic research which emphasises the weight of spoken words, also for extremist action and particularly, local governmental stakeholders should be more sensitive towards the exclusionary character towards minority or immigrant groups of some of their speech, for example.
- International organisations and their partner organisations should aim to promote the internalisation of ideals promoted in many CVE programmes by politicians around the world. At the same time, the cooperation with some Southeast Asian governments might need to be re-assessed in light of the findings of this report. It is important that CVE programmes actually work towards strengthening societies as a whole and not inadvertently strengthen extremist narratives that are understudied, such as far-right ideologies in South-Asia when combatting more prominent ones, such as IS-narratives.

## 2. Focus: Technology Companies

In addition to the report findings and their implications for political stakeholders, the analysis is also relevant for technology companies aiming to rein in the exploitation of their platforms for malevolent purposes, including the promotion of rhetoric and narratives that might entice terrorism.

- The main findings of the report, that far-right groups in Southeast Asia are using different platforms to be spreading discriminatory or even hateful speech is a pertinent reminder about the exploitation of social media in all parts of the world. As a result, this has consequences for tech companies' efforts to scale up content moderation efforts in non-Western parts of the globe to avoid the spread of hateful messages.

- In addition, the insights about platform preferences for different types of radical right communities are relevant for internal deliberations at technology companies. For instance, the report describes Facebook and Twitter as “established” platforms preferred by actors to gain legitimacy, authority and traction. Telegram, on the other hand, was preferred by fringe actors, whose messages are explicitly hateful – sometimes groups start on Facebook but the splintered and parts moved to Telegram for more extremist conversations. This points towards the necessity for tech companies to collaborate with each other.

### 3. Focus: Strategic Foresight and Broader Implications

In addition to the policy recommendations derived directly from the above report, broader implications and strategic deliberations are also evident from this study of social media communications of far-right groups in Southeast Asia.

- This GNET report highlighted one aspect which is only touched upon tangentially but could build an important aspect for follow-up research: the repeated notions of chauvinism and/or outright anti-female rhetoric with regard to the assessed groups. This is of particular relevance given the rise of so-called incel terrorism in parts of the Western world, which has some overlap with the broader far-right movement. It could prove a harbinger for Southeast Asia.

Overall, this study acts as an important reminder that in Southeast Asia Islamist terrorism, such as related to the Islamic State is considered the far bigger security threat and other potentially harmful actors are downplayed. However, it would be useful to work towards an understanding where polarisation, extremism and violence is understood more comprehensively, instead of being attached to one denominator, such as religion (Islam) or a specific group, such as Islamic State. Even if it appears counterintuitive, addressing hateful movements holistically rather than just targeting a single ideology, regardless of whether they dress themselves as a radical religious or political nationalist movement.











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