

Policy Brief

HATE SPEECH AGAINST CHINESE INDONESIANS 2019–2020

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A Policy Brief by CSIS Indonesia

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The author(s) welcome comments on the present form of this Policy Brief. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and are not intended to be attributed to CSIS Indonesia.



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Background

While it is not a new phenomenon, the hate speech trend in Indonesia targeting mostly against minorities has been increasing in recent years. While it used to be covert since they were mostly conducted in private encounters, lately, it has been looming as people have unfortunately been using various types of social media as convenient platforms to spread hate speech. This deserves government attention since they do not simply contain hateful words, but some have also incited the audience to conduct violence against the targeted groups.

This policy brief highlights the hate speech trend against the Chinese-Indonesian community—one of the minority groups covered in the National Hate Speech Dashboard developed by CSIS. The dashboard aims to monitor this specific crime due to its potential to provoke violence against minorities in Indonesia. This brief seeks to explain the particular surge of hate speech against the Chinese Indonesians within the timeframe of 2019-2020, which were interestingly triggered by various issues ranging from domestic political events, government policies, and even external factors—such as what was happening in mainland China. It is important to note that Chinese Indonesians have become political scapegoats since the beginning of independence and was then intensified during the New Order era (1967-1998).

Around 63,6% of the country's internet users from the age of 16-64 years old are Twitter users.¹ Although Twitter users have their own bias in the context of user demography,² the conversations that take place in the platform itself are still useful as a warning system of what exactly is happening in Indonesian society. Twitter is arguably the most fluid new media platform where the public and politicians mainly interact and shape opinions in the online sphere. Therefore, the hate speech against Chinese minorities might be intertwined with the politicisation of hate speech.

The word 'Cina': the Indonesian context

To identify the hate speech targeted towards the Chinese Indonesians, we gathered tweets with the keyword *Cina* (Indonesian word for Chinese or China) in our data collection. More than its literal meaning, the word *Cina* itself has political and historical context for the Chinese Indonesians. The word *Cina* is often used to label the Chinese Indonesians as an outsider, or non-*pribumi*, to distinguish them from the local

¹ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-indonesia>

² Blank G. The Digital Divide Among Twitter Users and Its Implications for Social Research. *Social Science Computer Review*. 2017;35(6):679-697. doi:10.1177/0894439316671698

native/indigenous or *pribumi*.³ Having this stereotype, the Chinese Indonesians are placed as scapegoats in some socio-economic issues, especially in times of crisis.⁴ As Chinese descendants, they are particularly vulnerable to negative allegations related to mainland China and communism. The prevalence, however, has not been eliminated yet, even after the post-Reformation era.⁵

Negative sentiment towards Chinese Indonesians were often, if not always, fabricated by the elites. Suharto's regime particularly contributed to the discrimination and negative connotation of *Cina* by enacting divisive ethnic policies towards the Chinese Indonesians to assimilate them with the Indonesian public. On the other side of the coin, these policies structurally placed this minority group as non-native.

Given the negative sentiment of the word and to lessen discriminatory action towards the Chinese Indonesians, the former president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, issued a presidential decree to change the word *Cina* with a more neutral word *Tionghoa*.⁶ However, in daily conversation, the word *Cina* and its stereotype persisted and are exploited by elites or political actors for their own interest.

Some people with political interest tend to keep fanning the conception that Chinese Indonesians are foreigners or outsiders of the country or even agents for China's political agenda. Hence, to some extent, hateful content to mainland China cannot be entirely separated from the perception of Chinese Indonesians or the other way around.

On several occasions, especially during electoral competitions, elites also frequently use the anti-Chinese bias to spread rumours against their competitor. Associating a candidate or government official as 'Chinese slaves', for example, is commonplace to instigate anti-Chinese sentiment. For instance, President Jokowi, a Javanese, has long been a target of anti-Chinese sentiment from his political adversaries. In addition, the growing economic relationship between Indonesia and China somewhat exacerbates the negative sentiment towards China.⁷

³ Freedman, Amy (2003). *Political Institutions and Ethnic Chinese Identity in Indonesia*. *Asian Ethnicity*, 4(3), 439–452. doi:10.1080/1343900032000117259.

⁴ Purdey, Jemma. (2006). *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia, 1996–1999*. Singapore: NUS Press.

⁵ Sumaktoyo, N. (2021). ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS SENTIMENTS IN INDONESIAN POLITICS: EVIDENCE FROM THE 2017 JAKARTA GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 21(1), 141–164. doi:10.1017/jea.2020.35

⁶ <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2014/03/19/1458446/Presiden.SBY.Ganti.Istilah.China.Menjadi.Tionghoa>.

⁷ <https://thedi diplomat.com/2019/06/understanding-indonesians-souring-sentiment-toward-china/>

Findings

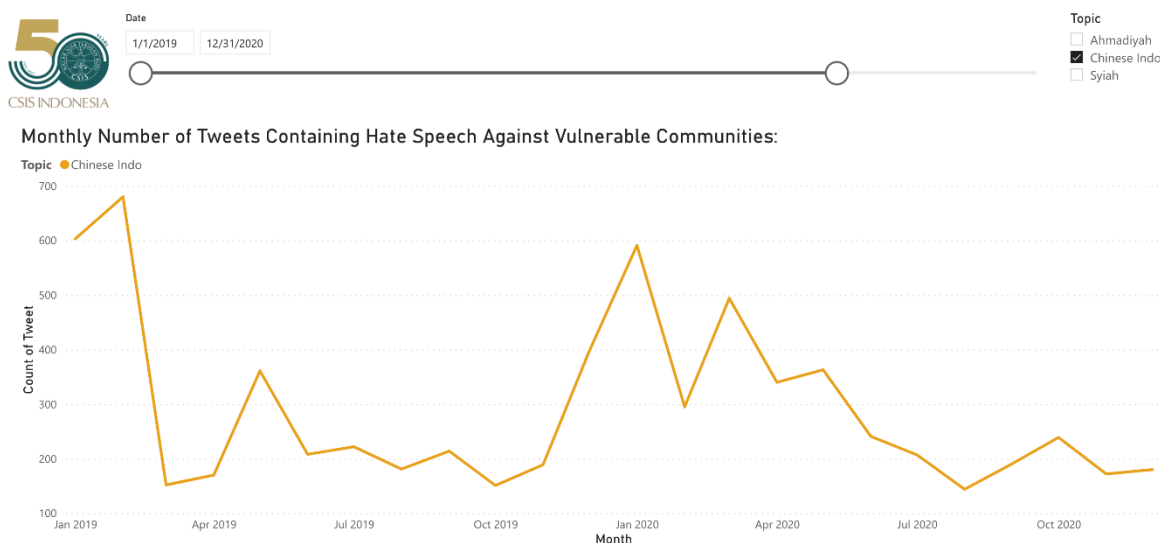


Figure 1. Above is a line graph based on the dataset of tweets containing hate speech against Chinese Indonesians. The yellow line indicates the tweets against Chinese Indonesians. The X-axis of this graph displays the month or period of which the tweets were being written, while the Y-axis explains the count of tweets measured in thousands.

We define hate speech as “any tweet that uses phrases which legitimise hostile actions or ascribe negative qualities towards the identity of a vulnerable community.” Further details regarding the data gathering and analysis method can be read in the codebook available at www.dashboard.csis.or.id/hatespeech/.

On average, 696 tweets containing hate speech against Chinese Indonesians were detected per month in 2019. The number increased in 2020 to 855 tweets per month on average. The detected hate speeches are either directly targeting—or indirectly linked—to the vulnerable Chinese Indonesians. It is important to note that some tweets subtly contain hate speech. Therefore, it is crucial to grasp the cultural context of the words in a tweet, especially with the word *Cina*. With that being said, we included hate speech against mainland China and against government officials, which indirectly references Chinese Indonesians.

In general, our analysis revealed that the spikes in the number of hate speeches on Twitter always occurred during a political or social event happening on the ground. Therefore, any social or political event that drew national attention is prone to be the trigger in initiating hate speech against Chinese Indonesians by elites or some group of people for their own interest.

In 2019, January and February had the highest number of hate speech tweets, which on average were estimated to be around 626 tweets. Recalling the social and political context

during that period, it was when the presidential campaigns for the candidates running for the 2019 presidential election took place.

Another spike occurred in May 2019, when the official result of the election was announced. We found hundreds of hate speeches during that month. On the ground, May 2019 was marked by protest mobilisation aimed to dismiss the official result that gave Joko Widodo his second period as president. Based on our analysis, most hate speech tweets in 2019 are related to the political tension between the two camps of presidential candidate supporters.

In late 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic started to spread globally. Numerous states and international media outlets often drew the attention of the world to China as the ones who were responsible for the pandemic.⁸ During that period, we recorded a spike in the number of hate speeches starting in December 2019, and the trend continued to climb in January 2020. We recorded more than 600 hate speech tweets in January alone. There was a slight decline in February, which showed around 300 tweets before it bounced back to 500 tweets in March. We also recorded a spike from November to the end of 2020. Looking at the conversation, the spike was triggered by the rejection of the COVID-19 vaccination by some groups of people. The rejection was fueled mainly by news about vaccines produced by China.

Frequent words

We compared the frequent words used in 2019 and 2020 to help us identify similarities or dissimilarities of conversation between the two periods—by making word clouds based on frequent words used in the collected hate speech tweets—at least 50 times within one year. Based on our analysis, we found a number of frequent words that were consistently used in the hate speeches against Chinese Indonesians in both years. However, there is also a unique context that distinguishes the conversation between the two periods.

⁸ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-it-all-started-chinas-early-coronavirus-missteps-11583508932>

2019



2020



Figure 2. Word cloud of hate speech tweets. It contains the most used words in hate speech tweets. We exclude stopping words and our main keyword, *Cina* and also *Indonesia*. On each word cloud, a larger size represents a higher frequency.

As illustrated in Figure 2, words such as *komunis* (communist), *pribumi* (local native/indigenous), *negara* (state), *rezim* (regime), *Islam*, and *NKRI* (the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia) are used most frequently in both 2019 and 2020. The occurrence of these words implies that the discriminatory labelling against Chinese Indonesians is persisted in the public domain, especially in social media. Words such as *Islam* and *negara* also hint that anti-Chinese bias is commonly intersected with religious sentiment and the sentiment towards the state or the government.

We also identified some hateful words that were frequently used in hate speech against Chinese Indonesians. For instance, *antek* (minion/henchmen) and *anjing* (dog) are detected as frequent words in both years. Furthermore, a word containing incitement such as *bunuh* (kill) is detected as one of the frequent words in 2020 within the tweets categorised as hate speech.

The main difference between 2019 and 2020 is the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Words such as *corona*, *virus*, and *covid* are amongst the top frequent words in 2020. The vaccination issue is also detected in collected hate speech tweets as we found words such as *vaksin* (vaccine) and *vaksinasi* (vaccination) among the frequent words. Another interesting finding is the occurrence of *TKA* (foreign workers) as one of the top frequent words in 2020. Another difference between the two years is the word *Jokowi* (Joko Widodo, the president of Indonesia) as one of the top frequent words in 2019.

Triggers of the spikes

Looking at the trend and qualitatively observing the collected hate speech tweets, we argue that hate speech against Chinese Indonesians in 2019-2020 on Twitter did not emerge in a vacuum. It invariably responded to particular social or political issues, economic issues, or other news or stories involving Chinese Indonesians or China that attracted public attention. We summarised the triggers into four main categories:

1. Political and elite-driven issues

A lot of hate speech against Chinese Indonesians were driven by political events or elite-driven, either directly or indirectly. As an instance, we discovered a hate speech wave, which started after a demonstrator in the protest was prosecuted because they were suspected to be initiating treason since he threatened President Joko Widodo in front of the General Election Supervisory Agency (*Bawaslu*) building. Some people commented on the case and compared it to another case when a young Chinese Indonesian allegedly made defamatory comments towards President Joko Widodo, but did not get the same treatment by the police.¹⁰

Another example took place in early 2020. We discovered a case involving a political elite, a retired military in this case, who claimed to have sustained an injury after getting punched by a doctor during the investigation of his case.⁹ Some people distributed the picture of the alleged doctor on Twitter, and he was suspected to be a Chinese Indonesian. From our observation, the tweets targeted to the doctor also contained incitements.

2. Pandemic related issues

Among other social issues, the pandemic has been the most pressing issue for the public in recent years. Like many other countries, the public often negatively associate the pandemic with mainland China by naming COVID-19 as a Chinese virus. In Indonesia, particularly, our analysis found that some hate speech tweets shape public opinion to associate the Coronavirus with God's punishment to China after the Uyghur crisis. It happened especially in January 2020, when the spreading of the virus was still labelled as an epidemic in China.

The focus was shifted when Indonesia finally recorded its first cases of COVID-19. Some people then turned the blame to the Indonesian government and accused China's

⁹ <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4168608/kivlan-zein-mengaku-dipukul-dokter-ini-penjelasan-rumah-sakit-adhiyaksa>

economic and political relationship as the reason behind the spread of the virus. Some tweets also contain provocation to refuse vaccines made from China.

3. Economic or policy-oriented sentiments

Anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesia has been affecting the Indonesian economic policy for years. During President Jokowi's era, the sentiment was heightened by criticisms of growing Chinese investment and the influx of foreign Chinese workers in recent years to Indonesia.¹⁰ We found that this anti-Chinese sentiment is profound in social media.

We found a substantial number of tweets related to Chinese investment and Chinese workers in 2019 and 2020. The pandemic contributed to exacerbating the negative sentiment—for instance, many tweets associated COVID-19 with the influx of Chinese investment and Chinese foreign workers. The prominent national figures, such as President Jokowi and the Coordinating Minister of Maritime and Investments, Luhut Binsar Panjaitan, were often mentioned in those hate tweets alongside the aforementioned topics. Accusations such as “Chinese slaves” or “foreign allies” were frequently used in the tweets mentioning the president or the minister. Although critics against the government are not included as hate speech, nevertheless, associating the government as “Chinese slaves” indicates linkage with the anti-Chinese sentiment.

4. Other issues

Whilst big political issues and the pandemic are the main triggers, some specific cases or news that spread amongst society also sparked hate speech to be expressed against Chinese Indonesians on Twitter. Our findings suggest that in both 2019 and 2020, there were some relations between pervasive hate speech towards Chinese Indonesians and news that gained public attention and conversations that were raised on Twitter.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate that the intensity of targeted hate speech towards Chinese Indonesians on social media—specifically Twitter—is associated with the political and social dynamics in society. Escalation of hate speech on social media happens whenever elites or groups of people want to take advantage of public attention to certain situations.

From the findings, we learned that anti-Chinese bias with its discriminatory labelling still persists in recent years. For further research, it is important to explore the convergence of hate speech in social media and real-world actions, such as the mobilisation of masses at a grassroots level and *vice versa*. The short analysis leans more towards describing the

¹⁰ <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/understanding-indonesians-souring-sentiment-toward-china/>

proliferation of the hate speech wave in the digital realm. Regardless of its limitations, the findings could serve as a warning of the situation in society.

Appendix 1. Sample of tweets containing hate speech against Chinese Indonesians.

No.	Original Tweet	Translation
1.	Nih kmren ada yg nanya2 ada china bego itu dihukum atau gak, itu pasal2 dan kejaksaaan nya, monggo ksana yah bego biar loe tau dan jgn rbut2 blang si cina biadap ini d bebasin, kampret emank gak ada otak	Yesterday, someone asked whether the Chinese idiot has been punished or not, that's the articles and the prosecutor's office, please go there, stupid, so you know and don't make a fuss about this barbaric Chinese being set free, you bastard doesn't have a brain
2.	Anak bangsa diadu nyawa, kolonialisme komunis Cina sudah siap pesta pora.	The (Indonesian) people are being pitted against each other; communist Chinese colonialism is ready for debauchery.
3.	Virus corona di Wuhan menurut gw adalah adzab akibat perlakuan pemerintah cina terhadap muslim uighur. Kita boleh tau kalo negara Cina penguasa ekonomi dunia, tapi kita tidak boleh lupa sama penguasa isi bumi dan seiisinya ini.	In my opinion, the Coronavirus in Wuhan is a punishment due to the Chinese government's treatment of Uyghur Muslims . We may know that China is the ruler of the world economy, but we must not forget the rulers of the earth and everything in it.
4.	mungkin pengen nyebarin virus utk membunuh kaum muslim,dgn cara halus,kaya cina mau membunuh kaum muslim uighur dgn virus corona blm sampe uighur baru sampe wuhan virus udh bocor...mudh2 virus bocor utk kalangan para	maybe you want to spread a virus to kill Muslims, in a subtle way, like China wants to kill Uighur Muslims with the Coronavirus, before it

	cebong mereka satu kubu dgn para bangsat negri ini...	happened, the virus has leaked... hopefully the virus will be leaked for the <i>cebong</i> , ¹¹ they are in the same camp with the bastards of this country ...
5.	ada info dokter cina ini yg mukul jendral Kivlan, betulkah????? andai benar berarti sudah dekat pesan nabi bahwa kau sipit akan kita perangi dan habisi	any info on this Chinese doctor who beat General Kivlan, is that right????? if it's true, it means that the prophet's message is close that you are slanted, we will fight and kill him.
6.	Dungu tak bertepi.. virus cina, obat cina.. pribumi jongos	Endless stupidity, Chinese virus , Chinese medicine.. native <i>jongos</i> ¹² .
7.	SUNAT DULU lah.. biar tau kl sejarab bangsa ini sejak dulu. DIJAJAH ama KAFIR VOC BABI GA SUNAT beserta Pangkhianat ETNIS CINA KAFIR BABI TUAN TANAH BABA AHONG.	get a circumcision first.. so you will know the history of this nation from the beginning. Colonised by uncircumcised infidel VOC pigs and their infidel Chinese landlord traitors Baba ¹³ Ahong.
8.	mungkin @mohmahfudmd pernah membaca literatur bahwa KAFIR BANGSAT sejenis ETNIS CINA telah memberi sumbangan besaaaaarrrrr. kepada negeri ini tuk PERJUANGAN n KEMERDEKAAN mpud pernah baca ada TUAN TANAH WAN ABUD dimasa penjajahan ? ** dengkul	maybe @mohmahfudmd had read literature that infidel bastards like the Chinese ethnicity have made a big contribution to this country for struggle and independence. Have you ever read that there was a landlord Wan Abud ¹⁴ during the colonial period? ** idiots ¹⁵

¹¹ The term "*cebong*" refers to "Jokowi supporters."

¹² The term "*jongos*" refers to male servant in Indonesia's colonial period, often used derogatively

¹³ The term "*baba*" is an old Chinese term for "old Chinese businessman."

¹⁴ The term "*wan abud*" refers to "Arabic-descent trader/businessman."

¹⁵ The term "*dengkul*" here refers to "*otak dengkul*", an Indonesian saying which directly translates to "knee-brain" and is often used to mean "idiots."

9.	Waspada. Gaya kepemimpinan Jokowi Otoritarian-Komunisme. Gaya ini menurut realitas sospol banjir darah dan sumbangan nyawa berjubel. Kuncinya ada pada TNI, INTELIJEN, dan POLRI. Jika ketiganya tertipu Jokowi, ECI, dan Cina Komunis, bukti sejarah kelam 1965 terulang kembali.	Alert. Jokowi's leadership style is authoritarian-communist. This style, according to the social and political reality, is flooded with blood and donations of many lives. The key lies with the Indonesian National Armed Forces, the intelligence, and the Indonesian National Police. If the three were fooled by Jokowi, ECI, and Communist China , the evidence of the dark history of 1965 is being repeated.
10.	Yg korupsi trilyunan hampir semua etnis pendatang cina, mereka yg bikin rusak negara sudah sepatasnya diusir semua...	Those who corrupt trillions, almost all are of Chinese ethnicity immigrants , those who destroy the country should all be expelled...



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