
Motives and Manipulative Strategies on COVID-19 Discourse in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study delves into examining manipulative strategies within the framework of COVID-19 discourse in Indonesia. The research systematically analyzes data from various social media platforms using a descriptive qualitative methodology. The analytical framework draws from speech act theory, argumentative discourse approaches, and manipulation strategy theory. The study's findings uncover various manipulative tactics that influential figures in Indonesia deploy. These tactics encompass denial, rationalization, diversion, lying, guilt-tripping, and shaming. Notably, the research offers tangible instances of manipulation within the COVID-19 discourse, such as claims suggesting that the virus represents a divine army or that Chinese individuals frequent mosques to learn ablution (wudu). This study is valuable to the expanding literature on COVID-19 discourse and manipulation. It offers nuanced insights into the strategies harnessed to sway public opinion amid a global pandemic. The discerned findings from this study hold significant potential, as they can inform the development of public awareness campaigns and strategies designed to counter the spread of misinformation and disinformation, a critical endeavour in today's information-rich landscape.

Keywords: Manipulative Strategies, Manipulative Strategies, Discourse

Introduction

At the end of 2019, China grappled with the COVID-19 outbreak, which continued into early 2020. In the early stages of the epidemic, before it was officially designated as COVID-19, some public figures in Indonesia successfully distorted the facts by claiming that it was God's retribution for the Chinese government's actions against the Uyghur people in Xinjiang. This manipulation was carried out through the strategic use of social media. According to Barton and Lee (2013), the critical role of language and literacy in shaping knowledge and facilitating meaningful communication is evident in the contemporary landscape, supporting ongoing social transformation. This statement highlights the strategic role of language in explaining the changing phenomena of the times. In the digital age, it is also essential to understand the use of language in online media so that linguists can contribute to public discussions about the significant impact of new media, provide alternatives to theoretical limitations, challenge moral panic about language, and penetrate technological determinism. It can help people develop critical awareness about how to use online space effectively. In Jakobson's view, the conative aspect of language is directed at the

recipient, as opposed to the cognitive part. The conative function directly involves the addressee and has the potential to shape their conduct or disposition, exemplified by actions like making invitations, issuing commands, and providing suggestions (Hébert & Tabler, 2020).

Language can be used to manipulate speech spontaneously, as language can facilitate the distortion of objective reality, offering specific goals and inaccuracies, obscurity, and ambiguity. Manipulative discourse lies between two extremes: legitimate information and lies. Lies and manipulations oppose different types of truth: lies stand against semantic truth, while manipulation stands against pragmatic truth (Akopova, 2013). Indeed, a discourse becomes manipulative not because of the use of specific lexical or grammatical units but because of the speaker's intentions, the nature of the obscurity that influences the speech, and the conditions of communication (social context). Linguistic manipulation is characterized by signs of language at different levels, which can help to interpret the speaker's intentions. Despite being a key concept in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), manipulation has received relatively little attention in the context of political discourse, especially in written political texts on the COVID-19 pandemic. While prior research has explored manipulation in media discourse and letters, there is a dearth of studies on manipulation in political discourse, particularly in text. For example, Kakisina et al. (2022) identified a range of discursive manipulation strategies used by Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro in their speeches about COVID-19, such as ideological polarization, discrediting others, emotionalizing arguments, emphasizing their power, moral superiority, and credibility, and presenting seemingly irrefutable evidence for their beliefs and reasons.

COVID-19 news has become a hot topic of public discussion in the world, especially in Indonesia, and with it has come a surge in fake news. In April 2020 alone, the National Police reported 97 cases related to COVID-19 hoaxes involving 107 suspects (Antara, 2020; Muzykant et al., 2021). WhatsApp and Facebook are the primary platforms for disseminating fake news, which most commonly concerns COVID-19. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the use of discursive manipulation strategies in political texts delivered by public figures during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia.

Theoretical Framework

Speech Acts

Speech act theory, first introduced by Austin (1962), distinguishes between three types of speech acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Locutionary acts are the bare acts of producing meaningful utterances. Illocutionary acts are the communicative acts speakers perform through their statements, such as promising, asserting, or requesting. Perlocutionary acts are words' effects on listeners, such as persuading, convincing, or confusing. Direct speech acts are those in which the literal meaning of the words conveys the speaker's intention. Indirect speech acts are those in which the literal meaning of the words does not represent the speaker's purpose but must be inferred by the listener based on the context of the utterance.

Discourse argumentation

Renkema (2004, p. 204) cites Toulmin's (1958) argument that the most essential aspect of an idea is its logical structure and how it is constructed. Toulmin defined arguments as persuading others to accept a claim by providing supporting evidence (data). The connection between the claim and the data is called the warrant. The quality of an argument can be assessed from two perspectives: strength and valence. Power refers to the likelihood of the conclusion, while valence refers to the desirability of the judgment. Renkema (2004) identified four standard argumentation techniques: providing reasons, causes, or explanations; making comparisons or analogies, giving examples; and citing authoritative sources.

Manipulation Strategy

Manipulation is a type of language performance that aims to influence others to follow the speaker's will. Fairclough defines manipulation as using language to control someone (Sorlin, 2017). Manipulation is often achieved through speech (locution) but can also be achieved through non-verbal cues (perlocution). In manipulation, the speaker wields influence over the listener's thoughts, aiming to elicit a response aligned with their intentions. This strategy involves employing manipulation techniques to achieve their objectives. Speaking of manipulation strategies, Simon (1996) identified 13 common manipulation strategies:

1. Denial: Refusing to admit wrongdoing, even when there is clear evidence to the contrary.
2. Selective inattention: Playing dumb or acting oblivious to the speaker's concerns, warnings, or pleas.
3. Rationalization: Making excuses for inappropriate or harmful behaviour.
4. Diversion: Changing the subject, dodging the issue, or throwing the speaker a curveball.
5. Lying: Deliberately providing false information.
6. Covert intimidation: Threatening the speaker to keep them anxious and unsure.
7. Guilt-tripping: Using the speaker's conscience against them to make them feel guilty and submissive.
8. Shaming: Using subtle sarcasm and put-downs to make the speaker feel afraid and insecure.
9. Playing the victim: Portraying oneself as an innocent victim to gain sympathy and evoke compassion, thereby getting what they want from the speaker.
10. Playing the servant role: Disguising their self-serving motives as a desire to serve a more noble cause.
11. Seduction: Charming, praising, flattering, or overtly supporting the speaker to lower their defences and gain their trust and loyalty.
12. Blaming others: Shifting the blame for their aggressive behaviour onto someone else.
13. Minimization: Denying or rationalizing their abusive behaviour, claiming that it is not as harmful or irresponsible as someone else may be claiming.

Method

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach, specifically content analysis, to investigate the use of language manipulation in the community. Text is a space that both enables and constrains what can be written. As Barton & Lee (2013, p. 27) state, people do not focus on the intrinsic nature of an object but instead on what it is worth to them in certain situations when they have specific goals. Although difficult to study, language manipulation is pervasive in the community. It allows people to influence others' behaviour without their knowledge and can even conflict with their best interests and desires. Language is the most commonly used tool of manipulation (Mey, 1993, p. 296).

This research focuses on the analysis of hoax texts that exhibit language manipulation. The data under examination comprises words, phrases, and sentences exemplifying language manipulation. These texts are sourced from social media platforms, specifically Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. The research proceeds with a systematic classification and analysis, leading to the exploration of three primary discussions:

1. "The Corona Virus is the Army of Allah" (*Virus Corona Merupakan Tentara Allah*): This section scrutinizes the manipulation of language in texts that depict the COVID-19 virus as a divine entity.
2. "Chinese People Going to the Mosque and Studying Wudu" (*Rakyat Cina Pergi ke Masjid dan Belajar Wudu*): Here, the analysis delves into language manipulation used to convey ideas related to the Chinese population's interactions with religious practices.

3. “Xi Jinping asking for Muslim Prayer” (*Xi Jinping Minta Doa Umat Muslim*): This discussion centres on the linguistic tactics employed to portray Xi Jinping’s engagement with Muslim prayers.

By dissecting these hoax texts and elucidating the language manipulation techniques, this research sheds light on the strategies used to influence public opinion and shape discourse in the digital age.

Results and Discussion

The Coronavirus is the Army of Allah

This discourse emerged after Abdul Somad, a preacher who lectured in Malaysia, mentioned that the Corona is the army of God, as the following text:

“...macam-macam tentara Allah datang, ada pula tentara yang terakhir ini bernama Corona. Orang yang berada di Uyghur tak terkena virus ini. Banyak orang terheran-heran. Apa sebab? Salah satu sebabnya karena mereka berwudu setiap hari, mereka membasuh tangan, ...” (HajiNews TV, 2020)

“... All kinds of God’s army came; there is also this last army named Corona. People in Uyghur are not infected with this virus. Many people are amazed. What is the reason? One reason is that they perform ablution (wudu) daily and wash their hands...”

Abdul Somad’s public figure status and religious authority lend credibility to his claims, even when they are not supported by evidence. The locus element of his speech act is the categorization and interpretation of facts, influenced by his subjectivity and ideology. Lauer (1993) argues that doctrine can be used to motivate, coerce, or even manipulate individuals. In this case, Abdul Somad is using ideology to promote the belief that the coronavirus is a soldier of God and that the Uyghur people are immune to it.

The locutionary element of Abdul Somad’s speech act is his spoken utterance, which is designed to convince his followers to accept his claims as accurate. The illocutionary feature is the communicative effect that Abdul Somad intends to achieve, which is to persuade his followers to believe that the coronavirus is a divine punishment and that God blesses the Uyghur people. The perlocutionary element is the actual effect that Abdul Somad’s speech act has on his audience, which may include changes in attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours.

Renkema (2004, p. 175) argues that argumentation texts are typically used to influence the recipient’s attitudes and actions. Abdul Somad uses language’s appeal function in this discourse to convince his audience to believe his claims. To assess the validity of Abdul Somad’s argument, we need to examine the evidence he provides. Using Toulmin’s argument structure, we can break down his argument into the following components:

Claim: The coronavirus is a soldier of God, and the Uyghur people are immune to it.

Data: The coronavirus has less affected the Uyghur people than other populations.

Warrant: God protects his followers from harm.

Abdul Somad’s warrant is problematic because it is based on a religious belief rather than empirical evidence. It means that his argument is not based on facts or data but on his faith and interpretation of the Quran. Makes his argument weak and subjective, as others cannot verify or falsify it. Additionally, his data is incomplete, as he does not acknowledge that there have been some cases of coronavirus infection among the Uyghur people. According to a report by the World Health Organization (WHO), as of July 2020, there were 76 confirmed cases, 73 recoveries, and 3 deaths in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. It contradicts Abdul Somad’s claim that the virus does not infect Uyghurs, who are a Muslim ethnic minority in China.

The suggests that Abdul Somad is using lying strategies to manipulate his audience. He may deliberately omit or distort information to support his claim or appeal to emotions and prejudices to persuade his audience. His motivations are likely religious, as he said that the virus does not infect Uyghurs, who are a Muslim ethnic minority in China. He may be trying to portray Muslims as superior or favoured by God or to justify their persecution by the Chinese government. Political motivations may also be at play, as he tries to influence public opinion or policy regarding China or Islam.

So, Abdul Somad's argument is not convincing. His claims are not supported by evidence, and his warrant is based on a religious belief rather than empirical evidence. He also ignores or misrepresents relevant data that contradicts his claim. His argument is biased and deceptive and does not reflect the reality of the pandemic.

Many people initially believed that COVID-19 was God's punishment for the sins of humanity. However, this view became untenable when the virus spread to all parts of the world, infecting both good and bad people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. As Islamic scholar Quraish Shihab (2020, pp. 6–7) points out, the Quran teaches that when God punishes a people, He saves the righteous first. For example, during the flood of Noah, God saved Noah and his followers before destroying the disbelievers. Shihab, cited by Sahal (2020), argues that COVID-19 is more accurately referred to as a *fitnah* or *balā'*, which the Quran mentions as tests and trials. Elsewhere, Quraish Shihab argues that COVID-19 is not a punishment from God but a warning. He suggests that the virus is a wake-up call for us to become better people, be more mindful, and strengthen our relationships. He sees COVID-19 as a gift of wisdom (*hikmah*), an opportunity to see things as they are and improve our moral and spiritual qualities. He urges us to use this wisdom to reflect on our actions, repent from our sins, seek God's forgiveness, and help others suffering from the pandemic. He believes that by showing compassion and solidarity, we can spread peace and harmony in a deeply divided world.

Chinese People Going to the Mosque and Studying Ablution (Wudu)

When Covid-19 swept through Indonesia, the government responded by closing places of worship, including mosques. In response to this decision, an argument cited a contrasting situation in China, where individuals were observed flocking to mosques to learn ablution. Notably, this perspective was championed by Gatot Nurmantio, a former Commander of the Indonesian National Army (Panglima TNI). On March 18, 2020, he conveyed his viewpoint through an Instagram post on the account @nurmantyo_gatot. Nurmantio claimed that in COVID-19's country of origin, China, individuals who primarily followed communism and often lacked religious affiliations were actively engaging in ablution and participating in congregational prayers at mosques. He drew a stark contrast with Indonesia, a predominantly Muslim nation, where, according to him, people were apprehensive about attending mosques, perceiving them as potential sources of COVID-19 transmission.

“...sepertinya ada yang keliru, di negeri asalnya covid-19, Cina, yang penganut paham komunis dan sebagian besar tidak beragama beramai-ramai mendatangi masjid dan belajar berwudu hingga mengikuti salat berjamaah, ...” (Tim, n.d.)

“...there seems to be something wrong in the country of origin, Covid-19, China, which is a communist and most non-religious people come to the mosque and learn ablution (wudu) to follow the congregational prayers...”

Gatot Nurmantio's discourse can be interpreted as a form of resistance against the stance taken by the Indonesian government. The central idea conveyed in the preceding text is that a significant number of individuals in China, many of whom do not adhere to any particular religious belief, are actively engaging in the study of ablution and the practice of communal prayer within mosques. It appears that Gatot may have placed his trust in the statement made by Abdul Somad,

who referred to the coronavirus as “Allah’s army” and asserted that Muslims were immune to the virus. This discourse ultimately stems from Abdul Somad’s proclamation regarding the coronavirus.

In terms of diction, the term “seems” is employed as an interrogative word, validating the claim’s accuracy when used at the beginning of a sentence. This usage is intended to challenge any preconceived notions readers hold regarding the idea that, in the country of COVID-19’s origin, there is a surge of interest in mosque attendance for ablution learning and collective prayer. This rhetorical approach casts doubt, and places blame on the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) and the Indonesian government for their perceived inadequacy. It is substantiated by the fact that the MUI Fatwa Commission had recommended conducting prayers at home in regions affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. Consequently, the intended message of this text is to inform the reader about the negative image associated with the MUI and the Indonesian government.



36,901 likes

nurmantyo_gatot -UNTUK KITA RENUNGAN-

Sepertinya ada yang keliru..?? Di negeri asalnya covid-19-cina, yg penganut paham komunis dan sebagian besar tdk beragama beramai-ramai mendatangi Masjid dan Belajar Berwudhu hingga mengikuti Sholat Berjamaah. Namun di negeri Mayoritas Muslim justru sebaliknya..?? Mereka beramai-ramai Mengganggu phobia dgn Masjid. Seakan-akan Masjid sebagai Sumber Penularan Covid-19..?? Lalu apakah mall, lift sarana umum, gereja, vihara, temple, klenteng "lebih aman" daripada Masjid..?? (Kita harus belajar pd pengurus gereja, vihara & pura/klenteng itu yg Tak Pernah Ada Himbauan untuk Larang warganya untuk beribadah disana). Padahal disana mereka tidak pernah berwudhu..?? Ada apa ini dan pikiran siapa yang mengajak demikian ??? Hingga Umat Islam lupa bahwa Masjid adlh Tempat yang Paling Aman untuk Berlindung dari Segala Bencana..?? Mengapa Umat Islam tidak Mengganggu Himbauan "Selalu" menjaga Wudhu & Sholat Berjamaah..?? Wa Allahu'alam bii showab.. Semoga Allah SWT Menjaga dan Memberi Petunjuk Umat dari Segala Kekeliruan.

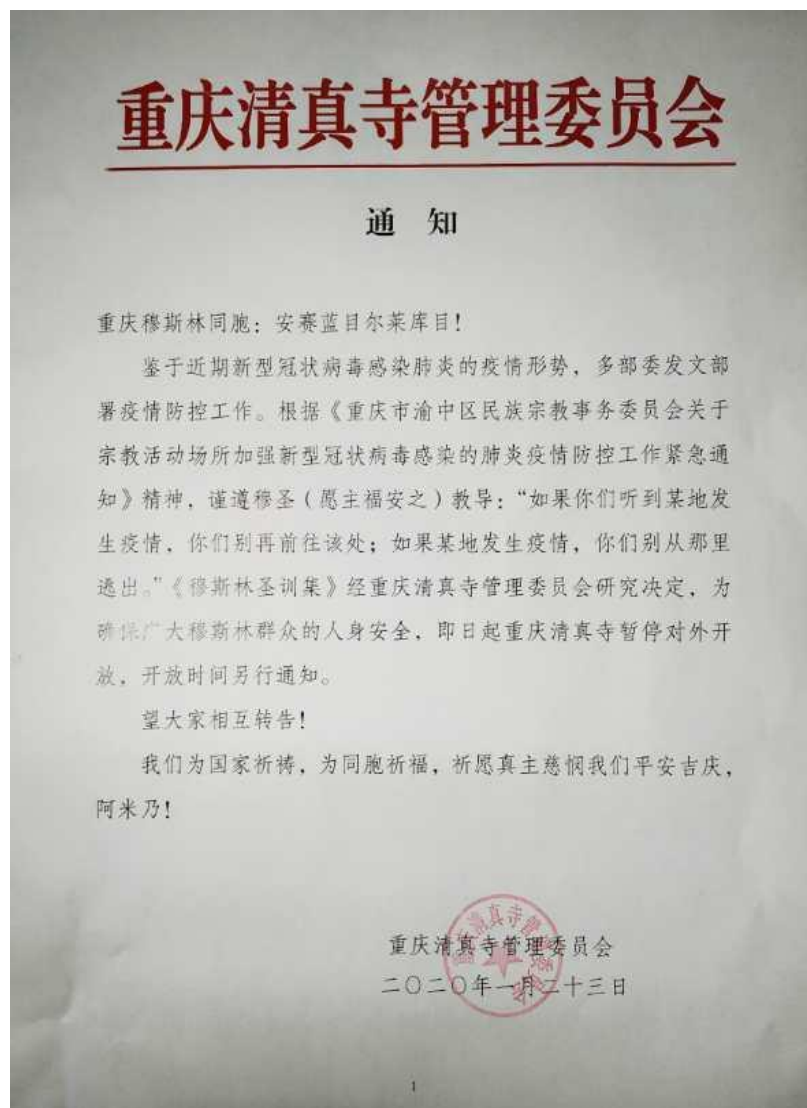
Aamiin.
Yaa Robbal 'Alamiin.

Gatot Nurmantio’s Instagram caption

Gatot Nurmantio's statement on his Instagram account represents a claim which could be considered truthful when supported by data. Regrettably, Gatot Nurmantio's presentation of data is flawed. Specifically, he asserts, "...there seems to be something wrong in the country of origin, Covid-19, China, which is a communist country, most non-religious people come to the mosque and learn ablution (wudu) to follow the congregational prayers." However, this statement relies on an assumption that in China, a substantial number of people are indeed learning ablution and participating in congregational prayers, as suggested by the Chongqing City Muslim Association (and possibly other cities) as a preventive measure against the Novel Coronavirus (before its naming by WHO as Covid-19). Contradictorily, mosques in China were temporarily closed starting from January 23, 2020, with no specified reopening date, as indicated in the following text:

为确保广大穆斯林群众的人身安全,即日起重庆清真寺暂停对外开放,开放时间另行通知

To ensure the personal safety of the Muslim community, starting today (January 23, 2020), the Chongqing Mosque will temporarily suspend its external access. The reopening schedule will be announced separately.



Announcement from Chongqing Muslim Association

Gatot Nurmantio's discourse employs various manipulation strategies, including deceit and minimizing risks associated with mosque attendance. His argument, which contends that attending mosques is safe despite substantial evidence, suggests a religious motive behind his stance. It

implies his motivation is rooted in religious beliefs or interests rather than a genuine concern for public safety. However, it's essential to note that this claim lacks any supporting evidence and contradicts the reality in China. According to multiple credible sources, such as I mentioned above, China had implemented stringent lockdown measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, which included the closure of mosques and other places of worship. No reports or videos were confirming that Chinese citizens were visiting mosques, performing ablution, or engaging in congregational prayers during the pandemic.

Furthermore, the assertion that Chinese people were converting to Islam due to Covid-19 was baseless and misleading. Several videos circulated online to substantiate this claim were either recorded before the pandemic or in different countries. For instance, a video featuring Chinese individuals reciting the *shahada* (the Islamic declaration of faith) is from the Philippines in 2019, not Chinese (O'Rourke, 2020). Gatot Nurmantyo's Instagram post, claiming that Chinese people were flocking to mosques despite the COVID-19 pandemic, was flagged as false information. Fact-checking by reputable websites, including *tirto.id* and *inews.id*, unanimously concluded that Gatot Nurmantyo's claim was baseless and intentionally provocative. They characterized it as a "hoax," exposing his deliberate intention to deceive or manipulate.

Fact-checking revealed that Gatot Nurmantyo's claim was baseless, relying on unfounded assumptions and misrepresented information. Exposes his distortion of facts for potentially ulterior motives. Fact-checkers' unanimous verdict serves as a critical reminder of the responsibility of individuals, especially public figures, to share verified information on social media, especially when it concerns sensitive issues such as public health or religion. Their call to "not propagate it further" highlights the urgency of halting the spread of false or misleading information, which can exacerbate social divisions, promote misinformation, and undermine trust in credible sources. It emphasizes the need for responsible information dissemination in the digital age.

Xi Jinping Asks for Muslim Prayer

The following discourse related to COVID-19 is Xi Jinping asking for prayers to Muslims so that the coronavirus will quickly disappear from China. Was disseminated through a Facebook account named Ptq Abdillah on February 4, 2020, and wrote the caption:

"...Presiden Cina Xi Jinping mengunjungi masjid dan meminta umat Islam untuk berdoa di negara yang sedang dilanda krisis ini. Kami membutuhkan bantuan Anda, ..."(Video Terkini - Presiden Cina Xi Jinping Mengunjungi..., n.d.)

"...Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the mosque and asked Muslims to pray in this crisis-stricken country. We need your help ..."

In the provided text, the act of locution is aimed at convincing the followers of Ptq Abdillah that Xi Jinping sought prayers from Muslims to address the COVID-19 crisis in China. This act of locution is intended to have an illocutionary effect by persuading followers to accept this narrative as accurate and act accordingly. The following perlocutionary show involves many people believing in and sharing the discourse on various social media platforms. The ultimate goal here is to inform and convince a broad audience that China is grappling with the coronavirus pandemic, thus causing this discourse to go viral and spark discussions among both proponents and opponents. To critically analyze the argumentation structure of this discourse, we can apply Toulmin's model, which dissects it into claims, data, and warrants. Despite presenting data as a video in this context, the text is predominantly one-sided. The claim that Xi Jinping sought prayers from Muslims cannot be substantiated and is ultimately untenable. Upon searching, it becomes evident that the video does not depict an instance where President Xi Jinping requested prayers from Muslims. Instead, it is a video covering President Xi Jinping's visit to the Xincheng Mosque in Yinchuan City in 2016. The original video's source can be traced to the CCTV Video News Agency channel, titled 'Chinese President Visits Big Mosque in Northwest China,' which was aired on July 21, 2016.

Based on this evidence, it becomes evident that the source post and the video's content are unrelated, falling into the category of False Connection. This implies that Ptq Abdillah employed a manipulation strategy, combining deceit and religious motives to advance the false narrative. This analysis is a crucial reminder to evaluate critically and fact-check information, mainly when misinformation can quickly spread through various media channels. Furthermore, the accompanying caption on Ptq Abdillah's Facebook post is found to be entirely fabricated and misleading. This caption falsely attributed statements to Xi Jinping, asserting that he said: "I beg you Muslims to pray for China so that this virus will quickly disappear from our country. I know that only Muslims can stop this outbreak with their prayers." Additionally, it claimed that Xi Jinping expressed remorse for the past treatment of Muslims in China and promised to grant them complete freedom henceforth. However, no concrete evidence exists to support the veracity of these statements or promises made by Xi Jinping.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it is evident that all three discourses – "The Corona Virus is the Army of Allah (*Virus Corona Merupakan Tentara Allah*)," "Chinese People Going to the Mosque and Studying Wudu (*Rakyat Cina Pergi ke Masjid dan Belajar Wudu*)," and "Xi Jinping Ask for Muslim Prayer (*Xi Jinping Meminta Doa Umat Muslim*)" – share a common element: the presence of a missing line of argument. This missing line serves as a vehicle for manipulation, employing deceptive strategies with religious motives. This manipulation appears to be rooted in two significant factors: the predominantly Muslim population of Indonesia and the broader context of the Chinese-Uyghur Muslim issue. In each case, the missing line of argument is strategically omitted to foster a particular narrative. This narrative often involves a distortion of facts or presenting false information. It exploits religious sentiments and beliefs to sway public opinion. The primarily Muslim population of Indonesia is a target for such manipulation, as it is more likely to resonate with claims that invoke religious themes.

Furthermore, the context of the Chinese-Uyghur Muslim issue adds a layer of complexity to these manipulative discourses. The manipulation exploits the existing tensions and concerns surrounding the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in China. By weaving these issues into the narrative, the manipulators seek to leverage emotions and elicit a strong response from their audience. These manipulative discourses capitalize on religious and geopolitical factors to propagate their claims. As a result, critical thinking, fact-checking, and a discerning approach to information are vital to counter such manipulations and ensure that false narratives do not mislead the public.

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