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Conspiracy Theories in Southeast Asia

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**Abstract**

As in many other parts of the world, conspiracy theories are rife in Southeast Asia. Examples include the claim that foreign agents were responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings, that Jews are obstructing Southeast Asian economic progress and development, and a myriad of conspiracist claims about the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370. Yet, scholarly research on the roots, functions, and consequences of conspiracy theories in Southeast Asia remains piecemeal and in its infancy. To consolidate available knowledge, this chapter introduces a number of Southeast Asian conspiracy theories that have been subjected to empirical research and analysis, including narratives that traverse nation-state boundaries (e.g., anti-Western conspiracy theories) and narratives that are relatively localised (e.g., that Indonesian authorities are ethnically cleansing the indigenous Papuan population). Our broad aim in this chapter is to counter the reductionist view that the pervasiveness of conspiracy theories in Southeast Asia can be traced back to the supposed psychopathology of the region’s populace or failed modernisation in these nation-states. Rather, in each of the cases examined, we attempt to provide an analysis of the sources and structures of conspiracy theories as they are shaped by the social and political dynamics of Southeast Asia. The salience of conspiracy theories in Southeast Asia should be seen, in our view, as stemming from a complex confluence of socio-political structures and as functionally serving to map trajectories of power, social change, and economic asymmetries.

**Introduction**

As an extraordinary event, there was bound to be differing explanations for the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 (MH370), which vanished on the 8th of March 2014 while flying from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. However, within a remarkably short time after the flight’s disappearance, an abundance of conspiracy theories emerged – in Malaysia and beyond – offering counter-narratives of the event and purporting to explain the role of heretofore unknown or hidden actors. One of the earliest conspiracy theories proposed that MH370 had been carrying “sensitive” cargo and that the flight was “remotely controlled” and flown to a secret location. Other conspiracy theories emerged almost as quickly. Some – such as the claim that the flight was lost in a “second Bermuda triangle” in the Indian Ocean or that aliens transported the plane to the moon – appeared to be based on fantasy; other claims – such as the suggestion that the flight was inadvertently shot down in a military exercise, that the CIA are intentionally withholding information about the flight’s disappearance (a claim repeated by the then former Malaysian Prime Minister), or that secret military research had caused the plane to crash (see Frizell, 2014) – seem to be based on kernels of (mis)information that are extrapolated into broader conclusions.

The examples above suggest that conspiracy theories, while not unique to Southeast Asia (see other chapters in this volume), are a salient feature of social and political discourse in the region. While data does not exist to objectively and empirically assess changes in conspiracy theorizing in Southeast Asia over time, that such conspiracist narratives are now ubiquitous in the region is beyond question. As such, conspiracy theorising is an important component when seeking to understand social and political life in Southeast Asia, even if it remains less studied than conspiracy theories in Europe and North America. In this chapter, we aim to consolidate available knowledge by introducing a number of Southeast Asian conspiracy theories that have been subjected to scholarly scrutiny. In doing so, it is important for us to acknowledge that our review is not exhaustive; that is, we have not sought to review every conspiracy theory that has emerged in the region. Rather, we have focused on several conspiracy theories in the Southeast Asian context that have received at least some empirical or analytic consideration and that point to broader similarities in conspiracy theorising across the region.

An implicit aim of this chapter is to challenge the reductionist – and often Orientalist – view that the ubiquity of conspiracy theories in Southeast Asia is a result of the supposed psychopathology of the region’s populace or failed modernisation in these nation-states (see Graf, Fathi, & Paul, 2011). In this view, regional conspiracy theories are said to be the outcome of delusional beliefs produced by an irrational paranoia unique or exclusive to an undifferentiated populace of Southeast Asia or alternatively the result of supposed under-developed mindsets (Choiruzzad, 2013). In contrast, our aim here is to provide an analysis of the sources and structures of conspiracy theories as they are shaped by the social and political dynamics of Southeast Asia. The salience of conspiracy theories in both popular and state discourses in Southeast Asia should be seen, in our view, as deriving from a complex confluence of sources that includes the nation-state elites and state institutions, groups and subgroups within society, and the political, socioeconomic, and historical conditions at both national and regional levels. In short, the purpose of this chapter is to highlight a number of Southeast Asian conspiracy theories that have been subjected to academic research and to identify and explain the multiple sources of conspiracy theorising and the functions they serve in contemporary Southeast Asia.

**Anti-West Conspiracy Theories**

In October 2002, three bombs were detonated in the tourist district of Kuta on the Indonesian island of Bali, killing 202 people and injuring a further 209 individuals. The militant Islamist group Jemaah Islamiyah were widely suspected as having perpetrated the terrorist attacks in retaliation for Indonesia’s support for the global war on terror and Australia’s role in the liberation of East Timor. A number of Jemaah Islamiyah’s members were later tried, sentenced to death, and executed for committing the attacks, yet there remains widespread distrust of the legal proceedings against the perpetrators and, more broadly, the official narrative of events. Indeed, various scholars have highlighted the pervasiveness of conspiracy theories surrounding the 2002 Bali bombings, as well as other terrorist attacks in Indonesia (e.g., Kipp, 2004; Fealy, 2003; Smith, 2005). In broad outline, these conspiracy theories suggest that, rather than having been perpetrated by homegrown extremists, terrorist attacks on Indonesian soil were instead perpetrated by foreign agents, most notably from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and Israel’s Mossad (Fealy, 2003).

When seeking to understand the popularity of such conspiracy theories, it is first important to appreciate that the impact of foreign (i.e., Western) powers in the region has not been benign, particularly in terms of the legacy of colonialism and, more recently, in shaping the region’s economic environment. Important, therefore, is not simply a sense of socioeconomic decline in the region but also a fear of penetration, unjust influence, and neo-colonialism by foreign powers. In the face of such fears, the state and its elite emerge as key narrators of conspiracism, either encouraging and nurturing conspiracy theories about Western influence or actively constructing narratives of the West seeking to intentionally undermine economic progress in Southeast Asia. For example, the 1999-2000 economic crisis in Southeast Asia produced a multitude of state-generated conspiracy theories that sought to shift blame away from regional economic mismanagement and onto a deliberate policy by the West of arresting the economic rise of Southeast Asia and bringing down authoritarian regimes, such as the Suharto regime in Indonesia (Phongphaichit & Baker, 2004; Rüland, 2018; Soh, 2000; Wrage, 1999).

For Southeast Asian political elites, nurturing this anti-Western conspiracy theory serves multiple functions. First, this “survival discourse” serves a functional role in deflecting attention away from home-made political and economic failings: by narrating regional and national crises as primarily – if not wholly – externally caused, political elites are able to draw on historical accounts of victimisation by the West and to blame continuing Western interference as the cause of the region’s decline. Second, conspiracy theorising about the nefarious Western influence in the region assists in rallying citizenry to defend the *status quo* state: the rhetoric of vulnerability in the international area provides a useful plank on which to demand patriotism and loyalty to the establishment. Finally, and somewhat ironically perhaps, in employing this conspiracist narrative, Southeast Asian regimes also find a useful means of silencing local opposition. By accusing challengers to the *status quo* of “conspiring” with foreign agents, the established elite are able to justify an expansion of authoritarian rule and the suppression of dissent – as has occurred in Thailand (Askew, 2007; Johnson, 2013), Indonesia (Yunanto, 2003), and, more recently, Cambodia (Croissant, 2018) and the Philippines (Cook, 2018).

In Indonesia and Malaysia – the two predominantly Muslim states in Southeast Asia – a variant of the anti-Western conspiracy theory employed by political and religious leaders purports that foreign agents are specifically targeting Muslims and that globalisation is a concerted attempt to undermine Islamic identity, both at the level of the nation-state and the *umma* (i.e., the collective community of Muslims) (Barton, 2002a, 2002b; Moten, 2005; see also Gray, in this volume). As before, this variant of the conspiracy theory plays multiple roles for elites, but further assists in helping to mobilise Muslim citizenry – who make up the majority of the population in Malaysian and Indonesia – in service of the nation state, while contesting ground occupied by more extreme Islamic opposition. It is within this landscape that conspiracy theories about terrorist attacks find a natural home: here, it is claimed that Western powers not only perpetrate terrorist attacks in Muslim countries like Indonesia, but also on their own soil (e.g., the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States), in order to undermine Muslim unity and Islamic advancement (Hassan & Salleh, 2010; van Bruinessen, 2003).

In both Indonesia and Malaysia, this variant of the anti-West conspiracy theory has become a staple among Islamic militant groups (Choiruzzad, 2013), who view it as means of attacking their respective regimes (e.g., for complicity with foreign agents in allowing the terrorist attacks to occur) and as a public defence against claims that the same militant groups are responsible for the attacks. The wider appeal of the conspiracist narrative, however, have deeper roots. For example, some scholars have noted how the historical context in Indonesia breeds a level of distrust in relation to official narratives (e.g., Choiruzzad, 2013), with the notion of “extremism” (both of the left and right variety) historically being used to silence political opposition (Yunanto, 2003). More recently, high-profile mis-arrests, extra-judicial killings, and a lax attitude toward counter-terrorism generally have all fuelled conspiracy theorising. Choiruzzad (2013), for example, highlights a number of recent cases of false or manipulated testimonies obtained from suspected Islamic militants, as well as extra-judicial killings of suspected militants. He goes on to suggest that such mis-steps undermine official narratives of counter-terrorism and leads to a climate in which “official” and “alternative” narratives are equally contested. In short, mis-steps by those in positions of power have heightened community hostility and distrust toward the police, counter-terrorism agencies, and the Indonesian regime in general, and fuels accounts of foreign actors committing acts of terrorism in Indonesia.

These explanations are consistent with the broader literature suggesting that conspiracy theories are more likely to gain acceptance when mainstream or “official” explanations of events contain erroneous information, discrepancies, or ambiguities (Miller, 2002; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Swami & Furnham 2014). That is, in scenarios where there is little reliable information or when details of event are open to interpretation, contested, and ambiguous, conspiracy theories gain acceptance because they purport to offer a coherent and comprehensive narrative. Among individuals who lack agency or who feel powerless, in particular, conspiracy theories – even if seemingly perplexing in relation to the knowledge held by wider society – offer a useful means of dealing with uncertainty sparked by complex economic, social, or political phenomena. In other words, in a national context marked by competing narratives, and particularly where mainstream narratives are highly contested (Choiruzzad, 2013), believing in conspiracy theories that terrorist attacks in Indonesia are being perpetrated by foreign agents seems intuitive.

A handful of studies have attempted to provide empirical support for these theoretical accounts and commentaries based on a social identities perspective. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals tend to achieve positive social identity through social comparisons between one’s in-group and relevant out-groups. In addition, individuals are expected to exhibit more negative attitudes and behaviours towards social out-groups to the extent that those out-groups are perceived as realistic threats (i.e., threats to a group’s political or economic power, resources, and general well-being) and symbolic threats (i.e., threats to a group’s values, belief systems, morality, philosophy of life, or identity) (Stephan & Renfro, 2002; Stephan, Ybarra, & Rios Morrison, 2009). Based on this broad theory, Mashuri and Zaduqisti (2015) tested the extent to which intergroup threat and social identity as a Muslim influenced belief in the conspiracy theory that Western powers are responsible for terrorist attacks in Indonesia.

Using a quasi-experimental design, Mashuri and Zaduqisti (2015) randomly assigned a sample of Muslim university students (*N* = 139) to one of four combined conditions, namely high or low intergroup threat (manipulated using a fictitious newspaper article predicting rising or decreasing political and cultural threat from Western powers toward Muslims) and high or low social identity salience (manipulated by asking participants to write a brief essay describing their Muslim identities or daily activities). In addition, participants were asked to rate their agreement with four statements that Western powers were conspiring to commit acts of terrorism in Indonesia. Their results showed that participants in the high intergroup threat condition were significantly more likely to believe in the conspiracy theory than those in the low threat condition, but only when Muslim social identity salience was also high. Cross-sectional studies with Muslim students in Indonesia have also supported these broad findings (Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2014a, 2014b; Mashuri, Akhrani, & Zaduqisti, 2016; Mashuri, Zaduqisti, Sukmawati, Sakdiah, & Suharini, 2016).

In explanation, Mashuri and Zaduqisti (2014a, 2014b, 2015) suggested that participants experiencing threat and who strongly identified as Muslims were more likely to blame a derogated out-group (i.e., Western powers) as a means of reasserting feelings of control. That is, by reducing and simplifying complex phenomena (i.e., terrorist attacks in Indonesia) and by tying together a series of events in relation to its purported causes and effects (i.e., attacks that are committed by Western powers in an attempt to weaken Muslims), conspiracy theories about Western machinations seemingly offer coherent explanations that may not otherwise be forthcoming. In this sense, the conspiracy theory helps individuals to identify a clear cause of a perceived injustice or tragedy and thereby helps individuals to make sense of the world. Moreover, believing in the conspiracy theory may also play a role in victim blaming, such as toward Muslim minority groups who are believed to be conspiring with Western agents (Putra, Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2015).

Anti-West conspiracist narratives have also been documented in Timor-Leste in the form of “cargo cults” that offer visions of radical transformation of society through hidden wealth (e.g., from gold and oil resources) accompanied by concerns of foreign (mainly Australian and United States) intervention (Bovensiepen, 2016). Although the label of “cargo cults” has largely been discredited because of its connotations of regional irrationality and for exaggerating differences between Timor-Leste and the West (Hermann, 2004; Jebens, 2004), Bovensiepen (2016) suggests that Timorese notions of future prosperity are often accompanied by fears that foreign powers are conspiring to rob the country of its natural resources, whether through sinister plots, foreign exploitation, or war. For Bovensiepen (2016, p. 76), “visions of prosperity and visions of conspiracy are two sides of the same coin”, in that both are an attempt to map the trajectories of regional and nation-state power. In one sense, these visions of conspiracy contain a kernel of truth, insofar as foreign powers have enriched themselves at the expense of Timor-Leste (Neves, 2006), but they also highlight the way in which anti-West conspiracist narratives help to counter marginalisation and challenge political inequalities. In short, anti-West conspiracist narratives in Timor-Leste have a “sense-making” element, helping Timorese to understand unequal distributions of wealth and regional power.

**Conspiratorial Jews in a Region Without Jews**

Closely related to anti-West conspiracy theories is the Jewish conspiracy theory, which borrows from early European anti-Semitism to posit the view that Jews are conspiring toward world domination (Johnson, 1987). This particular conspiracy theory is a popular trope in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia (Reid, 2000). At the level of the state, for example, the spectre of Jewish world domination has frequently been raised as an argument for Muslim unity, particularly in the face of the economic crisis of the late 1990s (Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad claimed that the crisis had been orchestrated by “Jewish financiers” in order to obstruct Southeast Asian development and industrialisation; Bello, 1998; Maswood, 2002; Pieterse, 2000) and Western intervention in the Middle East. At the level of popular culture, Holocaust denial is widespread even in academic circles, works and translations of works espousing Nazism and anti-Semitism are sold without restriction, and Nazi symbols are openly displayed (Hadler, 2004; Reid, 2010; Suciu, 2008). Burhanuddin (2007), for example, notes that Indonesian translations of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are widely available, with many Indonesians accepting it as a true account of the world economic order. Similarly, some scholars have noted the popularity of conspiracy theories suggesting that the augmented reality game Pokémon GO contained a hidden agenda glorifying Jews and derogating Islam (Umam, Muluk, & Milla, 2018).

Such anti-Semitism at the levels of the state and popular culture may seem puzzling when one learns that neither Malaysia nor Indonesia have sizeable Jewish populations. How then to explain the popularity of the Jewish conspiracy theory in these countries, where “orthodox” factors that contribute to anti-Semitism (see Billig, 1978, 1989; Copsey, 2004) are unlikely to be a major influence? One argument distinguishes between the “real Jew” living in Israel or in the Diaspora and the “perceived Jew”, which is largely an imagined presence (Burhanuddin, 2007; Schulze, 2006). The distinction is important because the imagined presence of Jews allows Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia to project their fears towards real or imagined threats from alien and impersonal actors. For example, Pieterse and Parekh (1995) discussed how rapid social change and economic turmoil left many Indonesians confused by their deteriorated situation, which they then blamed on an imagined or “perceived Jew” controlling the world economy. In this sense, the imagined Jew as an invisible threat serves as a self-presentation function: while the “real Jew” oppresses Muslims in Palestine, the “perceived Jew” performs a similar role in Indonesia.

Other scholars have highlighted particular domestic factors that draw on the notion of the “perceived Jew” in giving rise to popular anti-Semitism (Burhanuddin, 2007; Reid, 2010. These scholars variously discuss the minority Chinese community or the emerging middle class in Indonesia as the real targets of Indonesian anti-Semitism. In this sense, the Jewish conspiracy theory affords Muslims in the region a means of implicitly scapegoating ethnic minorities or a broader range of perceived enemies (e.g., secularism, cosmopolitanism, Americanism, and capitalism) by constructing an imagined enemy. Likewise, for Muslim leaders and politicians, the Jewish conspiracy theory also serves to unify Muslims around a political argument about threats to the nation-state and the *umma*. State- and elite-directed misinformation and conspiracy theorising, then, facilitates the denigration of real ethnic minorities, strengthens popular nationalism, and deflects attention away from the elite’s political and economic failings. In turn, conspiracy theorising about the “perceived Jew” serves to reinforce the *status quo* state as a source of protection against perceived threats (Reid, 2010). In short, the Jewish conspiracy theory should be read as a narrative that fulfils contextualised needs both at the level of state and popular culture in Indonesia and Malaysia.

There is some empirical evidence to support these ideas. For example, in a sample of Malaysian Malay-Muslims (*N* = 368), Swami (2012, Study 1) reported that belief in the Jewish conspiracy theory was only weakly associated with belief in other conspiracy theories and indices of anomie, such as self-esteem and political alienation. In contrast, belief in the Jewish conspiracy theory was more strongly associated with both anti-Israeli attitudes and prejudice toward the Chinese minority in Malaysia (Swami, 2012, Study 2, *N* = 314). Swami goes on to suggest that, among politically conservative Malay-Muslims, belief in the Jewish conspiracy theory may reflect perceptions of Muslim victimhood, motivated in part by the question of Palestine, as well as providing a means of implicitly attacking the Chinese minority in Malaysia. In terms of the latter, because explicitly attacking the Chinese is both illegal and politically unwise, the Jewish conspiracy theory may offer a means of voicing anti-Chinese polemic that would otherwise be difficult to articulate. In short, the Jewish conspiracy theory serves a performative role in allowing for the expression of victimhood, both internationally (*vis-à-vis* Palestine) and locally (*vis-à-vis* Chinese commerce and business interests).

Beyond purely academic reasons, studying the Jewish conspiracy theory in Indonesia and Malaysia remains important because it feeds a radical Islamist discourse that seeks to explain contemporary world affairs. This discourse constructs as essentialist image of an aggressive and evil West controlled by Jews and engaged in an ongoing and unprovoked “crusade” to crush supposedly peaceful Muslims (Woodward, 2006, 2010). This narrative both borrows and builds on anti-Semitic discourse and the Jewish conspiracy theory, which in turn influences wider, popular discourse of international relations. Indeed, the available evidence, reviewed above (Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Mashuri et al., 2016), suggests that the portrayal of social conflict in terms of grand struggles between Muslims and Christians/Jews may serve as a convenient explanation for difficult-to-understand social and political processes, but may also serve a radicalisation function that promotes inter-ethnic violence when it bleeds into mainstream culture (Muslimin, 2011; Tambiah, 1996; Woodward, 2010).

**Conspiracy Theories and Inter-Group Conflict**

The theme of inter-group conflict and communal violence should come as no surprise in a region that is ethnically heterogeneous and indeed feeds a number of other regional conspiracy theories, particularly during periods of social and economic upheaval. In the Indonesian context, for example, Fanselow (2015) has discussed how the dynamics of inter-ethnic conflict fed various explanatory narratives among those involved, some of which were conspiratorial in nature. Specifically, they focused on outbreaks of ethnic violence between 1997 and 1999 in Kalimantan between Dayaks (an umbrella term used to refer to a multitude of ethnic groups indigenous to Borneo) and Madurese migrants to Kalimantan. While initial media reports attempted to frame the communal violence as a case of religious conflict between Muslims and Christians, these narratives were rejected by Dayak and Madurese leaders, who described it as a conspiracy theory propagated by the “deep state” in order to provide support for the necessity of a powerful government that could avert the disintegration of the nation-state.

Moreover, Dayak and Madurese leaders accused security forces of intentionally creating disorder in order to create a climate of instability that would allow for a re-establishment of order. That is, by allowing violence to deliberately spin out of control, the security forces could create an impression of central government ineffectiveness and the need for security forces to assume a greater political role in maintaining national security. In addition, both the Dayak and Madurese constructed conspiracist narratives of the security forces siding with the other by, for example, forewarning of attacks, supplying weapons, allowing for safe passage, or willingly allowing violence to continue. For Fanselow (2015), such conspiracist narratives should be viewed within the context of rapid socio-political change in Indonesia, with various national and provincial forces vying for political power. Such a climate created the conditions in which actors were able to use conspiracist narratives to exploit ethnic antagonisms to their own advantage.

In examining the same inter-ethnic conflict, Bouvier and Smith (2006) further highlighted how both the Dayak and Madurese constructed conspiracist narratives based on a piecing together of selective facts. For example, the fact that security forces profited from the evacuation of Madurese was used to support the Madurese conspiracist narrative that security forces were involved in creating a climate of violence. Conversely, the Dayak used an explosion at a factory as proof that the Madurese were stockpiling bombs for a terror campaign. In both examples, observations were made to fit conspiracist theories that the other side was working to a sinister, premeditated set of plans. As Bouvier and Smith (2006, p. 483) put it, “by interlocking coincidental or unusual events in a wider, more sinister, puzzle, conspiracy theories provide satisfaction and justifications to those who ‘understand’”.

This point about conspiracy theories emerging in periods of rapid change generally and in a climate where foundational information is either absent or contested is also reinforced in Butt’s (2005; see also Butt et al., 2002) examination of the “lipstick girl” conspiracy. This particularly conspiracy theory was held by some indigenous Papuans and purported that HIV/AIDS was intentionally introduced into Papua as part of an Indonesian programme of ethnic cleansing in the resource-rich region. More specifically, the conspiracy theory suggested that migrant Indonesian “lipstick girls” (i.e., sex workers) infected with HIV/AIDS were being sent to military-controlled brothels in Papua, with the explicit intention of killing Papuans. Belief in this conspiracy theory went in tandem with the spread of rumours among Papuans and symbolic beliefs about Papuan men being overpowered by spiked drinks, magic dust on cigarettes, and poisoned food.

Butt’s (2005) analysis highlights both regional and local conditions that contributed to the spread of the lipstick girl conspiracy. At the macro level, Butt highlighted the rapid social and political change in Indonesia generally and the political conditions of disempowerment among Papuans specifically that allowed for the spread of rumours and conspiracy theories. In this sense, conspiracy theories afforded Papuans a means of concretely describing the threat of political disempowerment and violence, while simultaneously expressing their concerns about it. That is, in these situations, the contested nature of power, stark inequalities in wealth and the distribution of wealth, and the rapidly changing social landscape as a result of modernisation steered disempowered individuals to explain their circumstances through rumour and conspiracy theories. Looked at from the obverse point-of-view, conspiracy theories about lipstick girls shine a light on the inconsistencies of Indonesian rule in Papua and the way in which power is managed by the nation-state to maintain hegemony.

At the micro level, Butt (2005) highlighted the way in which first-hand experience of aggression and abuse by non-Papuan military personnel and high-ranking Indonesian officers fuelled genocidal conspiracy theories. Contradictions in the healthcare system provided further fuel for conspiracy theories: the fact that Papuans were fined if they tested positive for a sexually-transmitted disease and that sex workers were regularly tested as part of a national campaign (despite sex work being illegal) provided “evidence” that the Indonesian government sought to intentionally infect Papuans with HIV/AIDS while ensuring that sex workers themselves remained disease-free. In short, Butt discussed the way in the lipstick girl conspiracy helps to tie together seemingly disparate events and experiences into a coherent narrative, which builds on authoritarian and militarised forms of governance in Papua. Butt’s (2005) analysis is important as it highlights the myriad ways in which macro- and micro-level factors overlap to provide fertile ground for the spread of conspiracy theories.

**Conclusion and Future Directions**

At the outset of this chapter, we suggested that our aim was to counter the reductionist view that conspiracy theories in Southeast Asia are a result of collective psychopathology or failed modernisation. Instead, through the examples of conspiracy theories we have reviewed in this chapter, we have attempted to highlight the ways in which Southeast Asian conspiracist narratives are shaped by the socio-political and economic dynamics of the region. In some cases, conspiracy theories are utilised by political elites to maintain the *status quo* or to provide a justification for attacks on perceived political enemies. In other cases, conspiracy theories gain traction as a means of derogating out-groups and maintaining a sense of in-group positivity, particularly during periods of rapid socio-political transformation. In yet other cases, conspiracist narratives emerge as means of understanding and explaining trajectories of nation-state, regional, or localised power asymmetries. In all such cases, however, it would be misleading to simply dismiss Southeast Asian conspiracy theories as the outcome of psychopathology or under-development; rather, these conspiracist narratives frequently have historical roots and reflect political, social and economic conditions at both national and regional levels.

Despite this, there remains much work to be done to better understand the pervasiveness and spread of conspiracy theories in Southeast Asia. For one thing, the majority of studies to date have focused on Indonesian samples and narratives, and empirical work in other Southeast Asian countries remain piecemeal or – in some cases – non-existent. Likewise, little attempt has been made to understand conspiracy theories that traverse nation-state boundaries, particularly those that may have broad regional appeal (e.g., anti-Western conspiracy theories) (but see Changsong, Yiming, & Haji Ahmad, 2017). In addition, there is marked disjuncture between studies that have approached the issue of conspiracy theories from a psychological perspective (primarily focused on social identity theory) and those that have approach it from a sociological or anthropological perspective (primarily focused on historical trajectories and power asymmetries). Bridging this gap may provide a fuller account of the ways in which conspiracy theories emerge, are disseminated, and influence decision-making at both the levels of the nation-state and in popular culture.

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