

# The use of the term LGBT in Indonesia and its real-world consequences. (中文)

Edition 2, 2020

[Dr Michael Ewing](#)

DOI: [10.37839/MAR2652-550X2.11](https://doi.org/10.37839/MAR2652-550X2.11)

[中文 \(Chinese translation\)](#)

Indonesian society has historically been depicted as tolerant of, [or at least indifferent to](#), private homosexual relationships. Non-heterosexual and gender-diverse traditional cultural practices have long been known to exist in some parts of the archipelago, such as the [bissu](#) of Sulawesi and the [warok](#) of East Java. Transgender women, known as [waria](#), have also been a long-recognised urban presence in much of Indonesia and have regularly appeared in films and television. Additionally, promotion of lesbian and gay rights inspired by international movements began to appear in Indonesia [in the early 1980s](#).

But things changed for sexual and gender minorities in early 2016, when a dramatic shift toward [public anti-LGBT discourse began to spread](#) following public comments by a senior Indonesian politician. These negative stances have continued over the past four years with protests, police actions and proposals for the criminalisation of homosexual activities.

Prior to 2016 the term 'LGBT' was rarely used in Indonesia. But it has become an increasingly common way to refer to a range of gender or sexually diverse people in media and popular discussions. (Longer versions of the acronym often used internationally like LGBTQI+ are not common in Indonesia.)

While on the surface it is the same term that has been used internationally since the 1980s, like all words borrowed from one language into another, it has taken on connotations and local resonances different from how it might be understood outside Indonesia.

A close look at how the Indonesian term *LGBT* (italicised to show it is not necessarily the same as LGBT(QI+) in English) has been recently used to frame queer issues in mainstream Indonesian media, helps make sense of how its meaning and function have shifted and how the underlying assumptions it evokes can be used to shape public perceptions.

I looked at all articles tagged *LGBT* over the past 12 months in four mainstream online Indonesian language news outlets: [CNN Indonesia](#) (14 articles), [Kompas](#) (10 articles), [Republika](#) (19 articles) and [Tempo](#) (31 articles), focusing on those dealing with topics directly related to Indonesia. (International LGBTQI+ issues are often framed very differently.) Kompas (which has historic roots in a long-disbanded Catholic political party), CNN Indonesia and Tempo present as politically independent. Republika is explicitly aimed at the Muslim community.

The articles from CNN Indonesia, Kompas and Tempo all involve reports about actions and statements of public figures, such as government officials, academics and representatives of NGOs and as such reflect the opinions of these people. This is also the case for 10 of the Republika articles, while the remaining nine Republika articles are opinion pieces submitted by people from outside the news organisation (labelled 'Op-Ed' in excerpts presented below). While not necessarily reflecting the views of these different news outlets, these statements and views are nonetheless representative of the kind of language that is currently dominant in the media.

By examining these articles, the meaning attached to the term *LGBT* in Indonesian media can be discerned from a number of perspectives.

## ***LGBT* represented as antithetical to Indonesian society**

Several sensationalist anti-queer themes and metaphors in these articles are similar to those already in play at least since the escalation of [negative rhetoric in 2016](#).

A key theme is that *LGBT* is antithetical to Indonesian society. It is framed as contrary to the state ideology [Pancasila](#) and as a foreign imposition, while the legislature is a bulwark against this threat (translated excerpts are linked to the original Indonesian language texts by news outlet name, listed with the source of each comment if not mentioned elsewhere):

- *... this [*LGBT*] issue goes against the values of Pancasila, in particular the principles of Belief in God and Just and Civilised Humanity.* (Sodik Mudjahid of the Gerindra party, [Tempo](#))
- *... there are at least 14 representatives of European nations including our large neighbour [*Australia*] who do not want a prohibition against *LGBT* in the Indonesian Criminal Code. They want *LGBT* to grow prolifically in Indonesia. The legislature is firm, we are the foremost opponents of *LGBT* flourishing in Indonesia.* (Bambang Soesatyo, Speaker of the Indonesian legislature, [Kompas](#))

In the context of such a threat, a key metaphor is that queer people and their aspirations are an enemy (*musuh*) against which society must wage war (*memarangi*):

- *Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (*LGBT*) is the leading enemy of development. Because of this, BKKBN [*the National Population and Family Planning Board*] invites all regional leaders to wage war against it.* (Nofrijal, BKKBN General Secretary, [CNN Indonesia](#))

Interestingly, in the previous quote those opposing *LGBT* are represented by two

dominant nationalist formulations that endure from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century New Order regime under President Soeharto: developmentalism and family planning. This essentially stretches the anti-queer sentiment retroactively back well before 2016.

The link to family is also associated with the metaphor of threat by way of a threat to children, for example claims that 'LGBT lies in wait for' (*membidik*) and 'targets' (*menyasar*) young people (Op-Ed by Pundra Rengga Andhita, lecturer, Muhammadiyah University Surakarta, [Republika](#)).

## ***LGBT* represented as antithetical to religion**

This needs to be understood in the context of Indonesia as a quasi-secular state with a strong religious foundation—one which recognises religious freedom, but where belief in God is one of the fundamental principles of the State (mentioned in the first excerpt above). Six religions are officially recognised, and citizens are required to state their religion on their national identity card. Thus, religion can be conflated with citizenship and national identity in anti-LGBT rhetoric:

- *...we are a religious nation [and] we strongly reject LGBT.* (Bambang Soesatyo, Speaker of the Indonesian legislature, [Tempo](#))
- *...we will never repudiate that LGBT is forbidden according to Islam and is forbidden according to other religions.* (Romahurmuziy, General Secretary, United Development Party, [Kompas](#))
- *He [Hidayat Nur Wahid, Deputy Speaker of the Indonesian legislature] believes that there is not a single religion that allows LGBT behaviour.* ([Republika](#))

Part of the force of these religious arguments is that they are presented as universally true, when in fact they represent an understanding based on the Indonesian state-sanctioned doctrines of the officially recognised religions. Not only

are queer people accepted in many religious communities internationally, [this is also the case in Indonesia](#) albeit on a very small scale.

Religion - which in the Indonesian context is understood as world (i.e. non-indigenous) religions like Islam, Christianity and Hinduism - is also used against traditional indigenous non-heteronormative practices, such as those mentioned at the outset of this article. For example, in 2019 a ban was called against an [Indonesian film](#) that featured traditional Javanese transvestite dancers because it “went against religious values” (several regional leaders cited in [Tempo](#)).

While such themes and metaphors involving threats to society, children and religion occur in anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric across the globe, including in Australia, they are always locally inflected. This local inflection can be seen here in their expression through local experiences and key concepts and issues which have historically dominated much of Indonesian society and politics.

It should also be noted that not all articles examined in this survey are anti-LGBTQI+. Of the 74 pieces collected, 10 predominantly cite commentary from sympathetic sources who advocate for queer rights and an additional six balance negative and positive representations of queer issues (some cited below), leaving 58 (78%) which are predominately negative in tone.

## ***LGBT* and links with negative words and concepts**

As with the English use of LGBTQI+, in Indonesian *LGBT* is often used as an adjective to describe or characterise certain concepts.

These phrases are often similar to those commonly used in English and other languages, such as *LGBT* community (*komunitas LGBT*), *LGBT* group (*kelompok LGBT*), *LGBT* organisation (*organisasi LGBT*), *LGBT* couple (*pasangan LGBT*) and *LGBT* rights (*hak-hak LGBT*). Such phrases are generally neutral and may even be

used in a positive light.

Many other recurring phrases highlight the themes of threat, deviance and otherness discussed above. Terms like *LGBT* behaviour (*prilaku LGBT*), *LGBT* values (*nilai-nilai LGBT*) and *LGBT* practices (*praktik LGBT*) all suggest a unified purpose that defines a monolithic group set apart for wider society. Such practices are explicitly or implicitly presented negatively:

- *LGBT behaviour is deviant behaviour that must receive harsh penalties.* (Op-Ed by Siti Komariah from Tulungagung, [Republika](#))
- [Writing about her daughter's teacher in Norway] *Although they never explicitly spread [like a contagion] LGBTQ values to the students, many times during class they said that everyone can love anyone.* (Op-Ed by Savitri Icha Khairunnisa, overseas Indonesian living in Norway, [Republika](#))

Frequent collocations (common juxtapositions of words) with terms like problem (*permasalahan*), matter (*soal*), issue (*isu*) and danger (*bahaya*) also reinforce negative connotations of the term *LGBT*.

Another metaphor the recurs in the data is one of sickness. This is seen in the previous quote where *LGBT* values can be “spread” (*meularkan*). Similar collocations are *LGBT* virus (*virus LGBT*), *LGBT* disease (*penyakit LGBT*) and *LGBT* sufferers (*penderita LGBT*):

- *Only the system of Islam is able to stop the spread of the LGBT virus with the enforcement of its set of laws and regulations for life.* (Op-Ed by Ummu Saad from Indramayu, [Republika](#))

As with the themes discussed above, many of these phrases also occur in anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric across the world. Again, there are local nuances in how these phrases are interpreted. While *kaum LGBT* translated as ‘*LGBT* group’ may sound innocuous, as Riska Carolina from the queer-advocacy group [Arus Pelangi](#) points out [in Kompas](#), the word *kaum* – which might also be translated as ‘class’ or ‘clique’ –

can carry sensationalist connotations.

## The use of *LGBT* as a noun

Usually ‘LGBT(QI+)’ is used in English as an adjective to describe or characterise – as in LGBT people, LGBT causes, LGBT rights; and *LGBT* can be used like this in Indonesian as well. However, *LGBT* is also used as a noun, for example in the second quote above which includes the phrase “a prohibition against *LGBT*”. This is quite different from English, where “LGBT(QI+)” is used overwhelmingly as an adjective and almost never as a noun. In contrast, out of the 382 occurrences of *LGBT* in the Indonesian data I collected, it is used as a noun in more than one third of cases (36%) and as an adjective in the remaining cases.

One reason *LGBT* can shift between being an adjective and noun is because in Indonesian, particularly in informal usage, the boundaries between word classes – that is, what counts as a noun, verb, adjective, preposition, etc. – can be loose. Speakers take advantage of this to use words in ways that prescriptive grammarians might not approve.

But even more relevant to the current case, when a word is borrowed from one language into another, it can easily take on a life of its own in its new environment, shifting not only pronunciation, but often also word class, meaning and connotation. Borrowed words will be used by speakers in ways they find useful and the people writing and being quoted in the articles examined here find it quite useful to use *LGBT* as noun.

When a noun is deployed in discourse, one question we can ask is “what does it refer to?”. In several examples the answer is fairly clear, based on the context in which it is used, but the referent can vary across different cases. The Indonesian noun *LGBT* often means queer person:

- *What if an LGBT comes into a house of worship, into a church? Should we*

*refuse them?* (Bernhard, Executive Director, Depok City Centre for the Study of Law and Politics and city council member, [Tempo](#))

- *Draft Regional Family Protection Law to Require LGBTs Be Rehabilitated.* (Headline, [Tempo](#))

*LGBT* can also refer to LGBTQI+ people as a group:

- *The head of the regional office of the [political group] Islamic Defenders Front, Husni Thamrin, speaking to [news agency] Antara, claimed that as many as 8,000 people are part of LGBT in Riau.* ([Republika](#))

In other cases, the Indonesian word *LGBT* refers to an action, here cast as similar to adultery:

- *Zulkarnain [Deputy Secretary General of the Indonesian Ulama Council] then corrected his statement and admitted there was no article that legalised adultery and LGBT in the proposed regional law.* ([CNN Indonesia](#))

And in a number of other contexts *LGBT* seems to refer to a psychological or physical condition:

- *Psychology has shown that LGBT is not a disability.* (Gabriel Eel of the Indonesian Organisation for Social Change, [Tempo](#))
- *Binsa [a fictional army soldier in a cartoon] added that LGBT can be caused by hereditary or environmental factors or childhood trauma.* ([CNN Indonesia](#))
- [Reporting on selection requirements for civil service applicants] *As well as LGBT, the requirements say applicants cannot be colour blind, either partially or totally.* ([Tempo](#))

The variation in meaning of the word *LGBT* in these relatively clear cases means that in other circumstances it can become difficult to determine what exactly a speaker or author intends. In one piece ([Kompas](#)), police said they received information that local residents had “suspicions of *LGBT*” (*dugaan LGBT*) in relation



to a local NGO. In this case it is not clear whether they were suspicious that the organisation involved queer people, activities, advocacy or something else. It appears to be a rather amorphous suspicion about something the residents may not fully understand. In the following excerpt, the variant *LGBTQ* is used once as the object of both the verbs ‘do’ (*melakukan*) and ‘support’ (*mendukung*):

- *I ended the discussion with Fatih [the commentator’s daughter], with advice that she shouldn’t revile, insult or hate friends or people who do or support LGBTQ. They are also humans created by God.* (Op-Ed by Savitri Icha Khairunnisa, overseas Indonesian living in Norway, [Republika](#))

As the object of *melakukan* ‘do’, *LGBTQ* seems to mean ‘*LGBTQ* activities’ but as the object of *mendukung* ‘support’ it seems to mean ‘*LGBTQ* people’, a conclusion supported by the sentence that follows. Indeed, because of the conjoined verbs, *LGBTQ* is called upon to mean both ‘activities’ and ‘people’ simultaneously.

While the sentiment expressed in the previous example is meant to show tolerance, often ambiguity of reference can be much more menacing. For example, when there are calls to control (*mengendali*), reject (*menolak*) or forbid (*melarang*) *LGBT*, is it actions or human beings that are targeted?:

- *Yes, from the beginning our attitude has been clear that we reject LGBT.* (Hidayat Nur Wahid, Deputy Speaker of the Indonesian legislature, [Republika](#))

In such a climate of indeterminacy, when Nasrul Abit, Deputy Governor of West Sumatra, declares that “narcotics and *LGBT* are greater threats to West Sumatra than radicalism” ([Republika](#)), it is not difficult hear the accusation directed at individual people rather than actions or attitudes.

But such negative and dehumanising connotations do not go uncontested. In one of the articles citing *LGBT*-positive attitudes, Friends of Depok City community group representative Antarini Arna asks “What do they mean by anti-*LGBT*? Because all

those inside *LGBT* are human beings” ([Tempo](#)).

## ***LGBT* and its definitions in mainstream media**

The term *LGBT* has a foreign origin and is a relatively new addition to the Indonesian lexicon, so from time to time it is explicitly defined in media pieces. Often a definition is just a matter of spelling out what the acronym represents. Because the components themselves are also borrowed terms, this sometimes entails further explanation.

The following quote is from a comic produced by the Indonesian Army to warn of the dangers of *LGBT*. Binsa is a soldier talking to Beng, a young civilian man, who naively calls himself *LGBT* thinking it is a trendy term”

- *“Hey, LGBT means Lesbian, Gay, Bisexuals and Transgender. So don’t use it randomly, Beng... Lesbian means women who love women, gay is men who love men, bisexuals are attracted to men and women, while transgender is where one’s gender identity is different from the sex when they are born, like waria” said Binsa.* ([CNN Indonesia](#))

However, many times *LGBT* is defined without reference to its component parts and here associated attitudes and prejudices become clearer, in particular equating *LGBT* with deviance. Such a definition, as well as being contentious, classifies *LGBT* as an activity rather than as people:

- *LGBT is deviant practice that is stringently opposed by Islam.* (Op-Ed by Sandra Ansoriah, [Republika](#))
- *Deviant sexual practices or what is known as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT).* (Andalas University research team, [Republika](#))

Some definitions also show an incomplete understanding of the complexities of

sexual and gender identity, as in the following which restricts the meaning of LGBT to “liking the same sex”:

- *A member of the Central Java police force, initials TT, was dishonourably discharged, a.k.a. sacked, because of breaking the code of ethics, in this case liking the same sex or LGBT. (Report by [CNN Indonesia](#))*

While definitions might seem to be the most direct way of understanding what *LGBT* means in Indonesian, we see that they are also varied and inconsistent. This adds further evidence that the use of the term *LGBT* is ambiguous and left open to interpretation.

Often we cannot be sure exactly what a speaker or writer intends when they use the term and we can be even less sure how readers interpret it. The variation and indeterminacy in meaning and function of *LGBT* is part of what makes it powerful in evoking a sense of uncertain foreboding and danger. And while *LGBT* has taken on a life of its own in the Indonesian lexicon, it retains a sense of foreignness. This is why it regularly needs to be defined for readers. At the same time, this combination of vagueness and foreignness is probably one of the reasons *LGBT* - rather than an indigenous term - has come to be used. It can evoke a sense of something elusive and threatening, simultaneously from within and from outside Indonesia.

As scholars such as [Intan Paramditha](#) and [Sharyn Graham Davies](#) among others have noted, the motif of *LGBT* threat in Indonesia echoes the threat of communism that was used by the New Order government of Soeharto to consolidate and maintain power. Fear of communism continues to be used by some political and religious figures for similar political purposes today. With both communism and *LGBT*, an enemy is constructed that is amorphous and not fully understood. They are both presented as foreign, anti-religion, anti-Indonesia and corrupting.

The anti-*LGBT* uproar in Indonesia has been seen as a [reaction against](#) the expansion of LGBTQI+ rights internationally and the prospect of greater visibility and acceptance within Indonesia. Similar to the spectre of communism, it has also

been used as a tool to [distract from political machinations](#) and to [mobilise voters](#). And as with the anti-communist push in Indonesia, the anti-LGBT offensive is not just rhetorical but has real-world consequences for human lives.

*The Author would like to thank Maya Costa-Pinto, Claire Maree and Helen Pausacker for valuable feedback. This work is part of a larger project funded by the Indonesia Democracy Hallmark Research Initiative.*

*Image: A kite in the shape of a sailing ship displays an LGBT flag in Bali, Indonesia. Indonesia. Credit: Shutterstock.*