ACICE
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UPDATE ON
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Disinformation during South Korea's 2025 Elections

INTRODUCTION

1.   Recent democratic elections have been subject to disinformation campaigns. Australia, Germany, Portugal and Romania reported varying degrees of disinformation campaigns targeting the election process and candidates. *Reuters* noted that Romania's Presidential elections in December 2024 was annulled on suspicion of Russian interference; and the country was also subject to disinformation in their re-elections in May 2025.

2.   South Korea was not spared from disinformation campaigns in its recent elections. South Korea held its 9th Presidential Elections in June 2025. Democratic Party candidate Lee Jae-myung was elected as the country's 14th President with 49.42% of the electoral vote. This election was held after former President Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment. In the lead up to the elections, a surge of disinformation campaigns appeared across social media platforms, threatening to distort public perception, undermine voters' trust as well as the integrity of the democratic process. *Disinformation Social Media Alliance* reported how the spread of disinformation, from fabricated images to manipulated videos and outright lies, has created a chaotic and

confusing information landscape, making it difficult for voters to discern fact from fiction.

3.   South Korea has a highly polarised political landscape with two main parties – the Democratic Party and People Power Party – holding the majority of the seats in the National Assembly. The evolution and use of technology in the social media space, together with a high internet penetration rate of over 97% (as reported by *DataReportal*), polarisation and geopolitical tension created a fertile ground for manipulation and the propagation of false narratives. A *Brookings* commentary confirmed how "disinformation has long spread through the South Korean media ecosystem that combines online platforms with more traditional newspaper and broadcast outlets".

Tactics, Techniques and Procedures

4.   The use of AI-Generated content, including deepfake videos and manipulated visuals to taint the information environment was observed in the lead up to South Korea's 9th Presidential Elections. One of the most viral examples was a fabricated photo showing frontrunner Lee Jae-myung bowing to a statue of Mao Zedong. The image was circulated widely on Facebook and Threads, and was subsequently debunked by *AFP Fact Check*. Nonetheless, it had already led to outrage and sparked heated debates among voters on various social media platforms. According to the *Disinformation Social Media Alliance*, the dissemination of this manipulated photograph underscores the sophisticated tactics employed by purveyors of disinformation to sway public opinion and manipulate electoral outcomes. In this instance, the objective was to discredit the candidate by falsely associating them with communist ideology and introduce doubts about the candidate's political affiliations.

Figure 1: Screenshot comparing the fabricated photo (Left) and the corresponding shot in the original livestream which shows Lee bowing to a group of his supporters (Right)

Source: AFP Fact Check

5.   False claims and visuals that US President Donald Trump and even the Pentagon had endorsed conservative candidates like Han Duck-soo and Kim Moon-soo were widely shared on platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Threads and X. US forces in South Korea had publicly denied these claims, but not before they gained traction among voters. According to the *Disinformation Social Media Alliance*, such fabricated endorsement aimed to lend credibility to a candidate lagging in the polls and potentially influence the voting decisions of segments of the population susceptible to such claims. The ease of disseminating such false information also highlighted the vulnerability of the democratic process to external interference and manipulation in the digital age.

6.   *AFP Fact Check* reported social media users repeatedly circulated an AI-generated video clip claiming frontrunner Lee Jae-myung faked his 2023 hunger strike in protest of the then-administration policies, and that Lee had risen from his hospital bed and asked for food after the cameras had stopped recording. The fake video clip was generated using a genuine photo of Lee but it had inconsistencies typical of AI generation. These included disappearing objects and background visual elements, as well as Lee's hair changing

colour as the video progressed. The video was widely shared in multiple Facebook groups supporting conservative politicians, and fed into a pre-existing narrative that Lee's previous protest was performative.
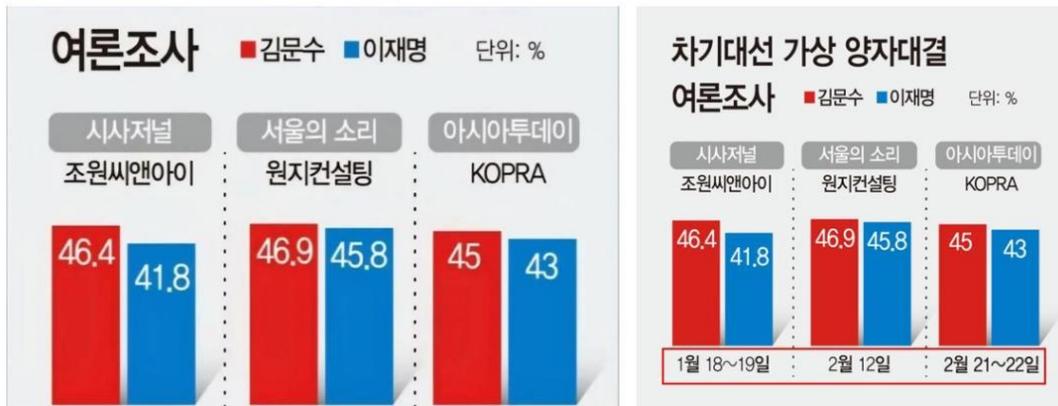
Figure 3: Screenshot comparison of a keyframe from the AI-generated clip (left) and the original photograph published by Yonhap, with visual inconsistencies marked in red

Source: AFP Fact Check

7.   *AFP Fact Check* also reported a viral graphic shared days before early voting began on a pre-election poll, which falsely claimed the conservative People Power Party (PPP) candidate Kim as leading in recent polls. However, the figures within the graphic were extracted from an earlier poll collected in the January and February, with the deliberate omission of the dates when the surveys were conducted.

Figure 4: Screenshot comparison of the falsely shared graphic (left) and the *AsiaToday* graphic (right), with the cropped out dates in red

Source: AFP Fact Check

8.   Another report by *AFP Fact Check* debunked social media users' claims that anyone could register to vote from abroad with just an email address. *AFP* clarified that the South Korean National Election Commission's (NEC's) overseas voter registration form required additional details such as passport number, place of birth and current residence to complete the application to register as an overseas voter, and an email address validation is just an initial step of the registration process.

Legislative Countermeasures

9.   South Korea's special parliamentary committee passed a revision to the Public Official Elections Act in December 2023 to prohibit political campaign content which utilised AI-generated deepfakes during the election season. Under the revised law, individuals involved in distributing or showcasing fake political campaign videos leading up to an election could be jailed up to seven years or fined up to 50 million won.

10.   Despite South Korea's regulatory measures, malicious actors continued to launch disinformation campaigns prior to the elections. *The Korea Herald* reported that the South Korean NEC identified 129 deepfakes in violation of the election laws ahead of the country's parliamentary election in April 2024. Kim Myung-joo, professor at Seoul Women's University said that "creating deepfake videos is a bit complicated, but anyone can generate a deepfake image using a mobile app", which required as little as 10 minutes to do so. Kim also added that political YouTubers or bloggers could use the technology to spread disinformation about politicians that they disliked.

CONCLUSION

11.   The 2025 South Korean elections highlighted the growing challenges and increasing complexity in combating the spread of disinformation and disinformation through social media platforms. The ease of fabricating digital content using generative AI and a highly polarised electorate who consume digital content, facilitated the propagation of manipulated content.

12.   Beyond media literacy programmes, and fact-checking initiatives, social media platforms also play a crucial role in combating online disinformation. South Korea's 2025 elections underscored the urgent need for governments, social media platforms and fact-checking organisations to work closely to quickly identify and remove false information effectively before it goes viral. This is crucial to safeguard the integrity of elections and the public's trust in the information environment.

CONTACT DETAILS

All reports can be retrieved from our website at www.acice-asean.org/resource/.

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