

Investigation: A network of pro-military Facebook pages in Myanmar with Russian connections



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By Aung Kaung Myat

In late 2019, Annie Lab identified a network of six Facebook pages in Myanmar that has been

coordinating the dissemination of pro-military content. All pages have administrators residing in Russia. Together, the pages have more than 4.4 million followers (page likes) and some of their content has been shared widely across Myanmar.

Admins in Russia

The following table lists the six pages with their URLs, page likes and the number of their administrators based in Russia and Myanmar. This information was obtained from the Page Transparency sections of each page on Nov. 1, 2019 (the names in Burmese have been translated into English in italics).

Page name	Facebook URL	Page likes	Primary Locations of Admins
News	https://www.facebook.com/1824525061145636	1,304,143	Myanmar (8) Russia (1)
<i>Myanma Odd News and Breaking News</i> (မြန်မာ့ သတင်းတူး သတင်းဦးများ)	https://www.facebook.com/1897738757163614	1,190,330	Myanmar (11) Russia (6)
Sashalin.com – <i>Myanma News</i> (မြန်မာ့သတင်း)	https://www.facebook.com/1917211255221980	586,334	Myanmar (9) Russia (3)
Myanmar Breaking News	https://www.facebook.com/1960715524161688	643,340	Myanmar (7) Russia (3)
Sun Thit Lwin - Daily news	https://www.facebook.com/1730996843808425	488,824	Myanmar (5) Russia (2)
Sun Thit Lwin - News- <i>Myanma News</i> (မြန်မာ့သတင်း)	https://www.facebook.com/1405634766125396	228,714	Myanmar (7) Russia (4)

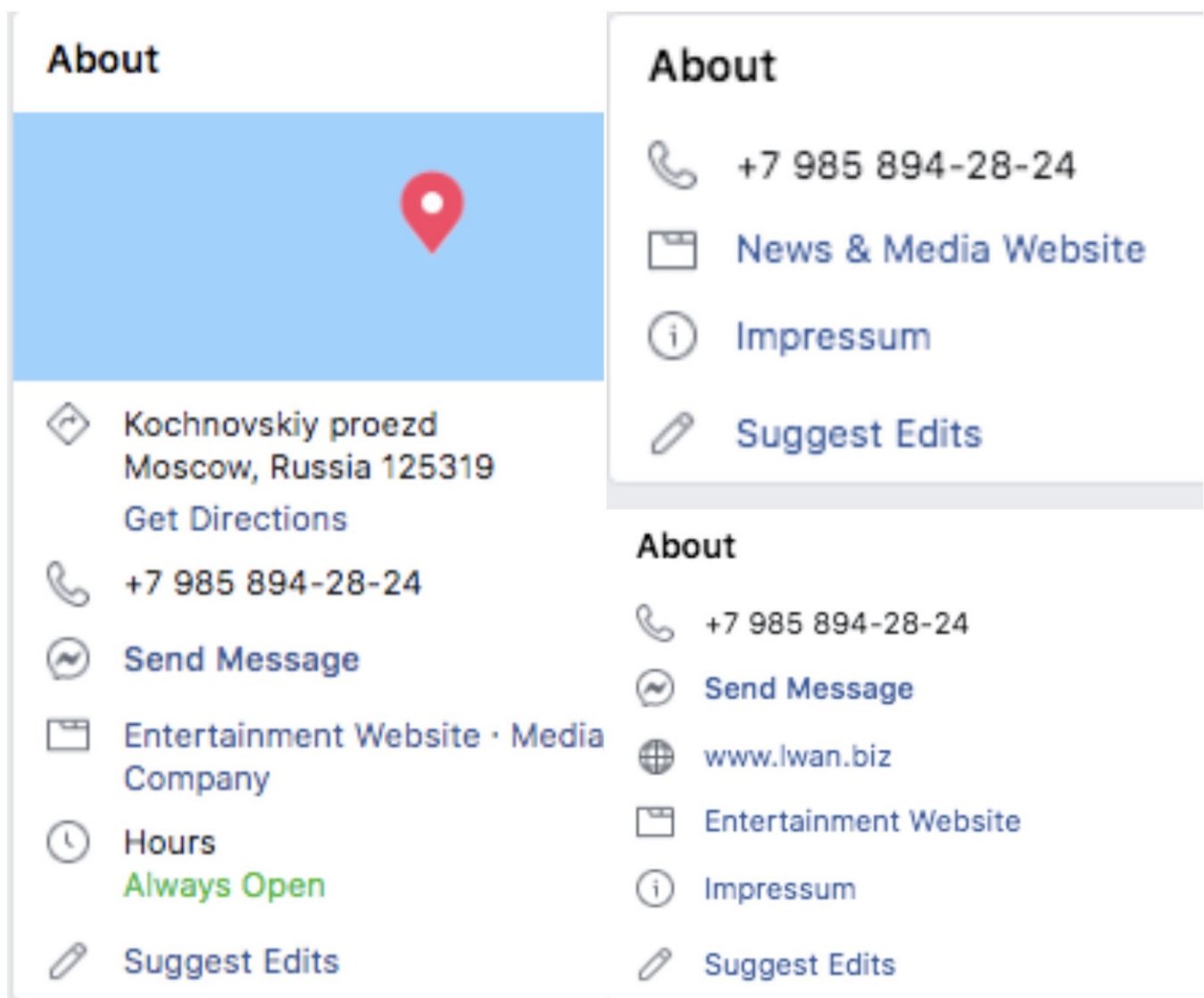
Source: Page transparency sections of respective Facebook pages

The Burmese army is known for its ties with its Russian counterpart.

In 2018, for example, the Ministry of Defense in Myanmar purchased Russian military equipment including fighter jets and sent its officers to military training in Russia.

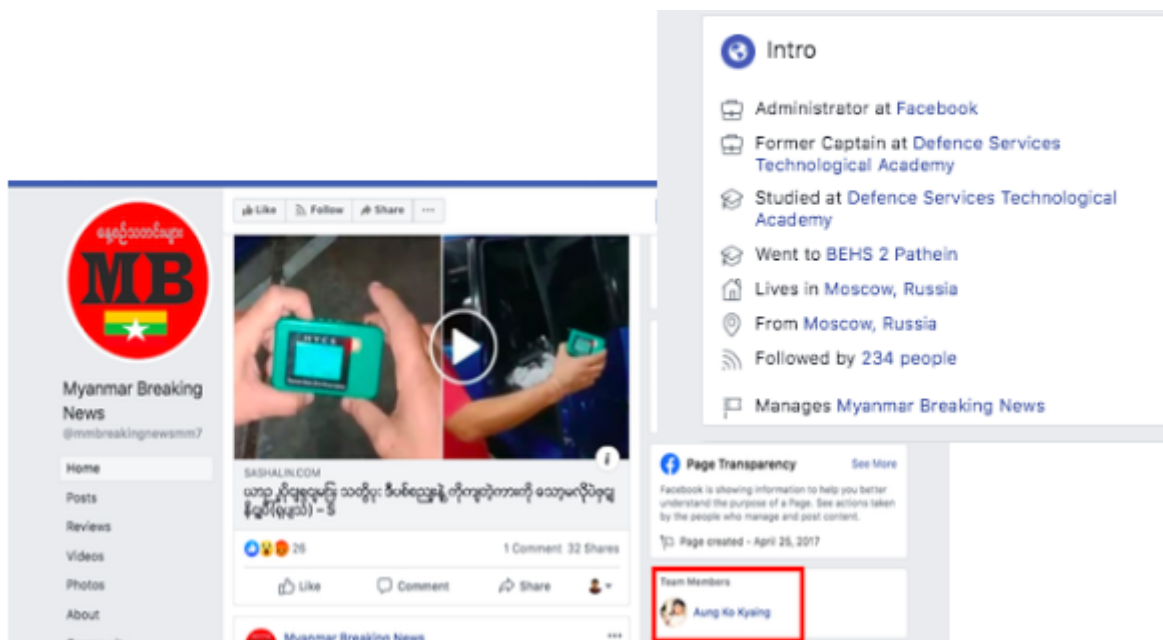
One Facebook page, “Sashalin.com — Myanma News,” has a Russian street address and a Russian phone number. Interestingly, two other pages, “Sun Thit Lwin — Daily news” and “Sun Thit Lwin — Myanma News,” share the same phone number without any address.

“Myanmar Breaking News” has an administrator called “Aung Ko Kyaing” whose Facebook account says he currently lives in Moscow but studied at the Defense Services Technological Academy, one of the military academies in Myanmar.



About section of Sashalin.com — Myanma News (left), Sun Thit Lwin Daily news (right above) and Sun Thit Lwin -Myanma News (right bottom)





A team member of Myanmar Breaking News (left) and his profile info (right)

Imposter names

Three pages used to have different names before the administrators settled on the current ones. Presumably, the initial page names were made to trick users into believing these were the official Facebook pages of a known news organization.

“News,” the page with the largest followers (1.3 million likes), was created in February 2017 as “7Days Daily News.” The name sounded a lot like one of the biggest newspapers in Myanmar, 7Day Daily. Nine months later, its name was changed to “Unofficial: 7Days Daily News.” The page changed its name again to simply “News” toward the end of 2017.

During the initial nine months, the page garnered over 650,000 followers with an average monthly growth of 18%, according to page data obtained for this investigation. The growth rate dropped to 2% after the deceptive name that implied a relationship with an established newspaper company was removed.

Similar tactics have been adopted by two other pages. Both impersonated 7Day Daily. Myanmar Breaking News was called “7Days News” for seven months. Its average monthly page growth was 40% during that period, which came down to just 1% after the name change. Sun Thit Lwin — Daily News has also used the name “7days daily news” in 2017 for a month.

Coordinated behaviors of cross-posting

Although these pages mainly feature frivolous content such as celebrity gossip and funny off-beat stories, often directly copied from other online media, they also post political commentaries and opinion pieces.

This content supports the military and casts a negative light on the civilian government led by National League for Democracy (NLD) as well as on Muslims in the country including Rohingyas. This material is usually cross-posted simultaneously by the six pages.

For example, when the Ministry of Education expelled a group of university students for holding a demonstration and demanding a budget increase in the education sector, all of them posted identical criticism of the NLD government at the same time.

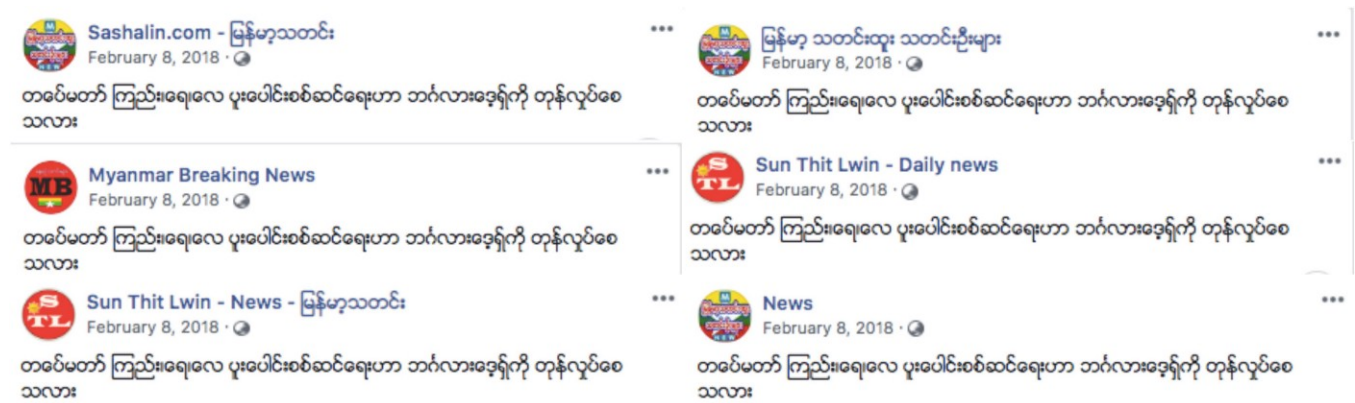
They listed the names of the students with a 2012 quote from Aung San Suu Kyi in which she supported university students and their right to free expression and autonomy. The posts accused the NLD-led government of “hypocrisy.”



The six Facebook page posts are exactly the same.

When the Burmese army had a military parade in 2018, all six pages posted the same news article titled, “Did the joint military operation of Tatmadaw’s Army, Navy and Air Force threaten Bangladesh?”

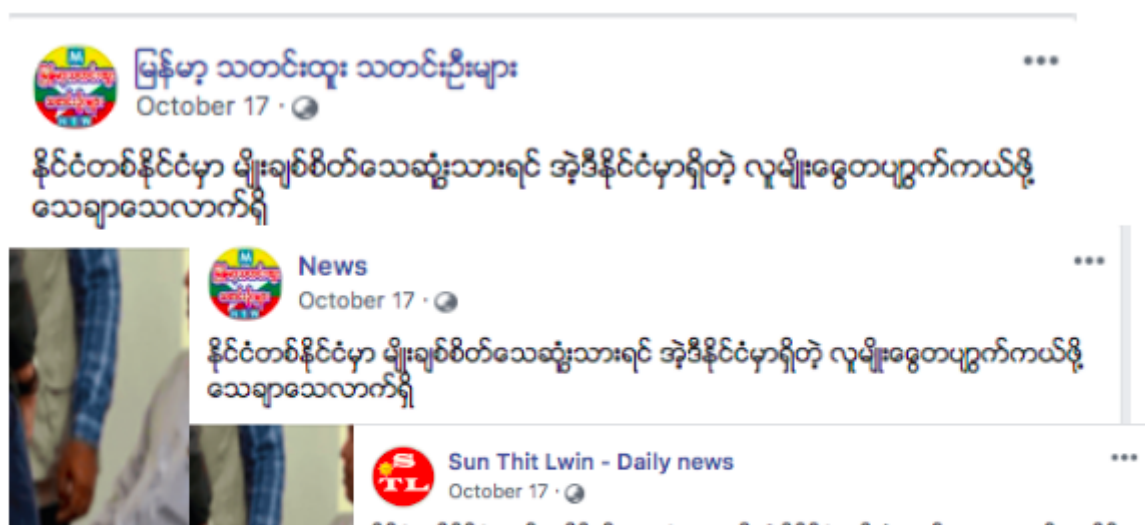
The military’s established position is that Bangladesh is the origin of the country’s Rohingya population. The article linked from the Facebook post (archived [here](#)) implies that Bangladesh and Myanmar are on the verge of war and suggests military actions.



Headlines shared by all six pages

An opinion piece that emphasizes the importance of nationalism and “the existential threat of Rohingya to Myanmar” is another example of a concerted effort to push the same content.

Featuring Aung La N Sang, a well-known martial arts practitioner, the article claims that everyone must be loyal to their country of birth. It portrays the Rohingyas as “illegal Bengali immigrants” and says that even if they were given Burmese citizenship, Rohingyas “would side with Bangladesh” during military confrontation between the two countries.



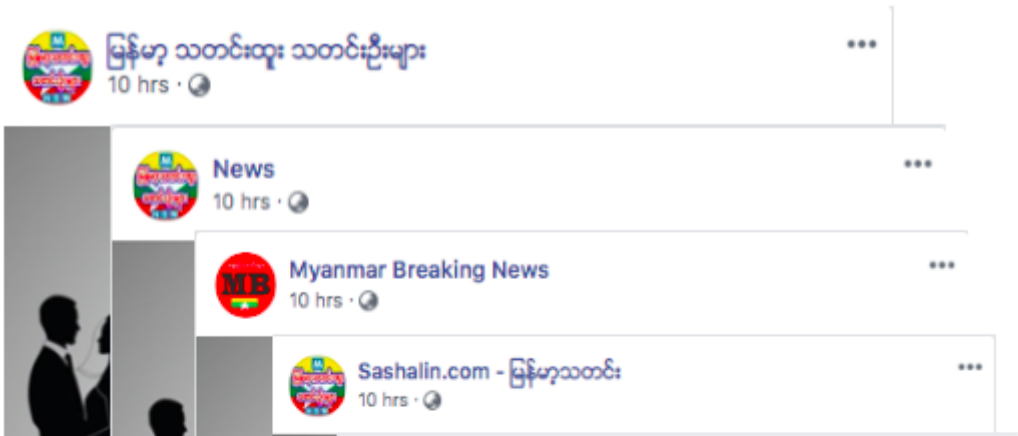


The article also warns of “crazy liberalism” imported from outside and says “when nationalism dies, all races of the nation will disappear.”

There are many more examples of such narratives posted in duplicate by the six pages, including a conspiracy theory about the insurgent group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army getting international military support, an unsubstantiated claim that underage girls are sexually assaulted and forced to convert to Islam, and praise of the “self-sacrifices” made by soldiers.

Not original

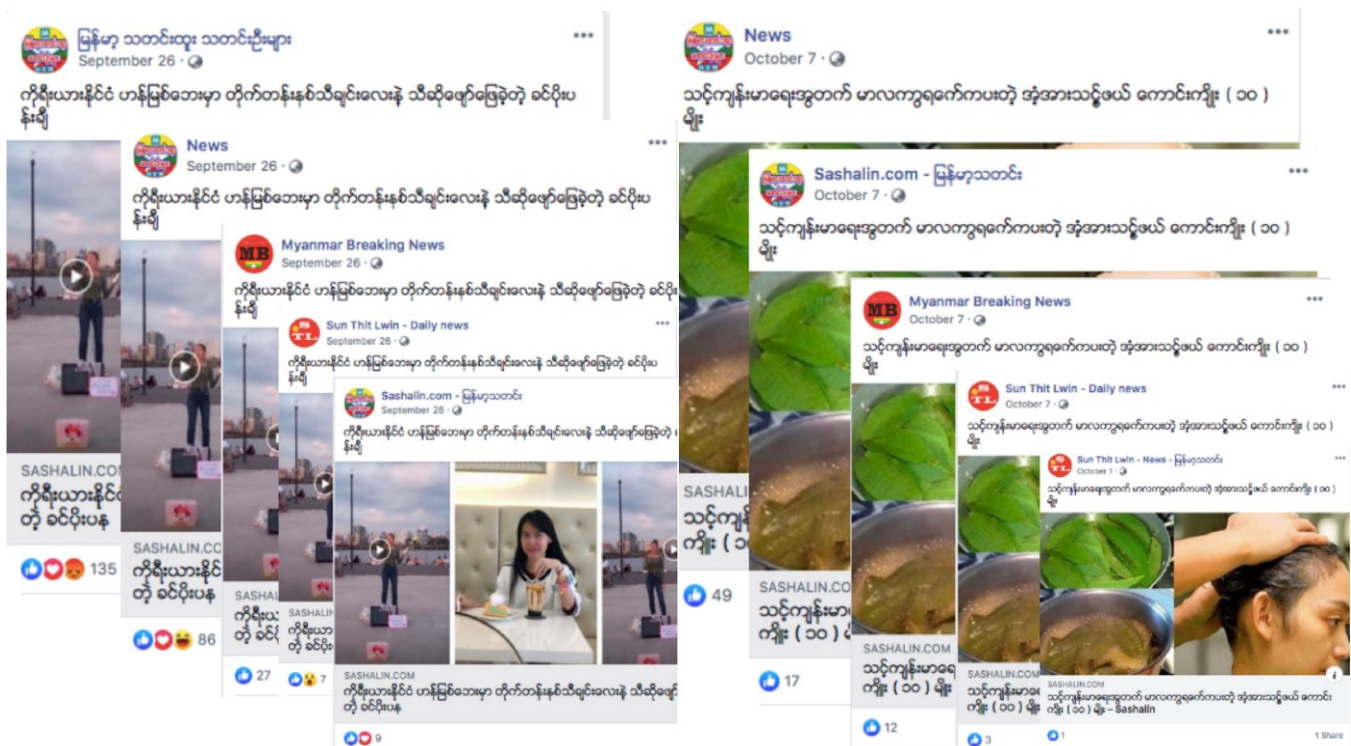
It is not only the politically-inclined stories that are coordinated. This graphic with a “life-lesson” telling people not to rush into marriage was posted by five pages simultaneously.





“Marriage can’t be easily undone and therefore, it requires careful consideration,” says the post.

A story about a Burmese singer performing in South Korea was also posted at the same time by five pages with the exact same caption. The same thing happened with an article titled, “10 surprising health benefits of guava leaves.”



Identical stories about the singer in South Korea (left) and medicinal effects of guava leaves (right).

Many of their stories are taken from various Facebook pages owned by other online media.

For example, the report about the medical condition of a retired politician from the ruling NLD was identical to a story published by Kumudra, a weekly magazine.



The Facebook page in question (left) copied the text and photos from Kumudra (right).

Another example is a story about a military press conference. Although Sashalin.com changed its featured image, the text is identical to a story from Radio Free Asia Burmese.





The Facebook page in question (left) copied the text from RFA Burmese (right)

Inauthentic behaviors

Russia is an unusual primary location for page administrators who manage Burmese Facebook pages. It is hard to investigate who is behind these pages and what their motivations are.

But there is an established link between the Burmese and Russian militaries, and the identical political content of all six pages offers a skewed narrative in favor of military actions and nationalism.

They are often critical of perceived enemies such as the NLD and Myanmar's Muslim population while sympathetic toward the “suffering” and “self-sacrifices” of soldiers.

The pro-military messages target more than 4.4 million users and are presented alongside more sensational stories about celebrities, alternative medicine and sex, usually with clickbait headlines and plagiarized texts.

In 2018 Facebook announced it removed hundreds of pages and groups managed by military officials in Myanmar due to their “coordinated, inauthentic behaviors” but these six pages were clearly not part of the takedown.

This investigation uncovered a concerted effort among these six Facebook pages to influence online conversations with unsubstantiated claims, hatred toward a religious minority, and jingoistic messages.

Our work suggests there could be many similar networks operating in Myanmar on Facebook and other social media platforms today.

Disclaimer: This is a student work. Although JMISC faculty members have done everything possible to verify its accuracy, we cannot guarantee there are no mistakes. If you notice an error or have any questions, please email us at contact@annieasia.org.

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