

DANGEROUS SPEECH, ANTI-MUSLIM VIOLENCE, AND FACEBOOK IN MYANMAR

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Abstract: This article addresses ethical dilemmas concerning freedom of expression and Facebook in a context of religious tension and semi-democratic rule in Myanmar. It begins with a discussion of how Buddhist ultranationalists have used Facebook to stoke fear, normalize hateful views, and facilitate acts of violence against the Rohingya and other Muslim communities in Myanmar. It then analyzes the Myanmar Government's use of Facebook in ways that have reinforced, rather than challenged, anti-Muslim rhetoric while restricting independent reporting. It concludes with a consideration of what Facebook and the government should do to reduce the likelihood of future violence.

How much responsibility does Facebook have for regulating dangerous speech in Myanmar? This is a particularly pertinent question given how Buddhist ultranationalists have taken advantage of the platform to stoke fear, normalize hateful views, and facilitate acts of violence against Muslims in Myanmar. The Myanmar Government's actions also demand consideration, as officials have used Facebook in ways that have reinforced anti-Muslim narratives while restricting independent reporting. Dangerous speech has become widespread online with grave offline consequences.

"Dangerous speech" is a term used by the Dangerous Speech Project to describe language meant to persuade "one group of people to fear and hate—and eventually to condone violence against—another group."¹ Offensive language in and of itself is not necessarily dangerous. Analysis of the speaker, the audience, the context, and the medium are also necessary. If the words are hateful but the speaker is a marginal figure, multicultural tolerance is deeply rooted, and people rely on diverse sources for information, the words will likely have little impact. In Myanmar, however, often the speakers are highly regarded. The society has struggled with mistrust and violence, and Facebook has become the primary medium of commu-

nication. By creating and disseminating images of adversaries through the mass media—and in Myanmar’s case, social media—a group can generate widespread support for the idea that such adversaries cannot remain.² This article considers the reasons for the explosion of dangerous speech in Myanmar, the impacts it has had, and the actions needed to prevent further violence.

A Communications and Information Revolution

From 1962 to 2010, Myanmar was under authoritarian rule, during which the regime imposed tight restrictions on the media, cellphone access, and internet use to limit access to outside information and prevent antiregime organizing. After 2010, much changed. The new, semi-elected government was eager to reengage with the world and gain domestic legitimacy. The authorities ended prepublication censorship and passed laws allowing freedom of speech, association, and assembly, albeit with restrictions. They welcomed foreign telecommunications companies; and competition between cellular providers decreased the price of SIM cards from several hundred dollars to less than \$2. Cheap 3G Chinese phones became widely available and by mid-2017, most people had access to a cellphone.³

Facebook use spread quickly, partly because phones typically come preloaded with Facebook and some mobile phone plans do not count time on Facebook toward the plan’s minutes. In addition, virtually every news source in Myanmar can now be accessed via Facebook. By 2018, there were an estimated 16 to 30 million Facebook accounts.⁴ Today, Facebook is the internet for most people in Myanmar, and it has had a transformative effect on their lives. It has provided them with newfound freedom to obtain information, express themselves, and connect with others. Yet it also has a darker side. Facebook posts featuring dangerous speech have become prevalent, contributing to rising anti-Muslim sentiment and tolerance for violence against Muslims.

Ultrationalists’ Use of Facebook

Since 2012, a Buddhist ultranationalist movement has emerged and gained momentum in part due to effective use of Facebook to create a virtual community linked by shared fears. The ultrationalists have had two distinct, but linked, targets: 1) the broader Muslim population living in urban and rural areas throughout the country, and 2) the Muslim Rohingya population concentrated in parts of Rakhine State.

On Facebook and offline, ultrationalists have framed Muslims as posing both a personal threat and a threat to the Buddhist majority nation.⁵ They have made claims about high Muslim birthrates, increasing Muslim economic influence, and Muslim plans to take over the country. They argue Muslims are increasing

their numbers in part by marrying Buddhist women and forcing them to convert to Islam.⁶ They have ignored the fact that census records indicate the Muslim population remains less than 5 percent of the total population.⁷

Ultrationalists have also reacted strongly against Muslims in Myanmar who have adopted the hijab and other forms of dress typically worn by conservative Muslims in the Middle East. They have interpreted this as a sign of Muslims' greater allegiance to their faith than to the Burmese nation. They have employed gruesome images of ISIS brutality and selective photos from episodes of communal violence in Myanmar to suggest all Muslims are potential terrorists.⁸ Some ultrationalists have also used dehumanizing language to characterize Muslims, a hallmark of dangerous speech.

Muslims in Rakhine State who identify as Rohingya have been particularly vilified. Rohingyas trace their ancestry to colonial-era migrants along with locally rooted Muslims, and many had citizenship documents in the early post-independence period. However, since the 1970s, successive Burmese governments have sought to reduce the Muslim population in parts of Rakhine State by not issuing them new citizenship cards, and restricting their access to healthcare, educational institutions, and economic opportunities, among other means.⁹ Since 2012, ultrationalists and the military leadership have popularized the use of the term "Bengali" for the Rohingya population. By characterizing them as immigrants from Bangladesh, they seek to delegitimize Rohingyas' right to live in Myanmar. On Facebook and offline, ultrationalists framed two outbreaks of communal violence between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in 2012 as evidence that the Rohingya are terrorists who pose a national threat.¹⁰ Both communities felt afraid and committed acts of violence, including arson and murder. Yet most of the more than 100,000 people who were displaced were Muslim.

The use of Facebook to spread anti-Muslim messages is not unique to Myanmar but there are aspects of the Myanmar context that have made the impact more severe. The country's rapid opening and changes in the economic landscape have been unsettling, and many people worry that others will gain at their expense.¹¹ For decades, teaching has been by rote memorization, meaning people have had no formal training in critically assessing information.¹² Furthermore, some well-known Buddhist monks are at the forefront of the Buddhist ultrationalist movement. Many Buddhist citizens are receptive to monks' messages because they see monks as more aware of the true nature of things than laypeople.¹³ Anti-Muslim narratives resonate in part because of similar past state propaganda used to forge national unity. Since 2012, state media and some officials' institutional and personal Facebook accounts have at times echoed Buddhist ultrationalist sentiments and concerns, adding to their validity.¹⁴

The wide reach of Facebook, the speed of information dissemination, the impact of arresting images and incendiary text, and the participatory nature of sharing and commenting on the platform have contributed to an atmosphere of heightened anxiety among Buddhists and other non-Muslims in Myanmar. This has spurred offline action. For example, Buddhist ultranationalists launched a boycott of Muslim-owned businesses and promoted the widespread use of stickers with Buddhist symbols to identify Buddhist-owned establishments. In another instance, a local government official who had never met a Muslim told a New York Times reporter that he was thankful to Facebook for giving him “true information” about the problems that Muslims posed.¹⁵ As a result, he authorized making his village one of more than 20 that bar Muslim residents.¹⁶

Between 2012 and 2014, several instances of communal violence in central Myanmar resulted in fatalities. In at least one case, a Buddhist monk’s Facebook post appeared directly connected to the violence. In 2014, Wirathu, a prominent ultranationalist monk in the city of Mandalay, reposted on his Facebook page a report of a Buddhist female employee’s rape by the proprietor of a local teashop. Wirathu added that he had called the proprietor to assert he would face justice.¹⁷ Some followers took this as a call to action. Crowds of agitated Buddhist men gathered in the streets of Mandalay, Muslims organized in defense, and fighting erupted. A Muslim man and a Buddhist man were killed. Later, the state media reported that the rape allegation was false.¹⁸

There are moderating voices in Myanmar, including some human-rights activists, elected officials, Buddhist monks, and interfaith organizations. They have been able to reduce or prevent violence in certain instances, but ultranationalists have tried to marginalize such voices. When 97 civil-society groups opposed legislation drafted by a Buddhist nationalist organization that would have, among other things, restricted marriages between Buddhist women and men of other faiths, several women’s rights leaders received threatening online messages and phone calls, including some death threats.¹⁹ This has had a chilling effect on those who would speak out in defense of social inclusion.

The Myanmar Government’s Engagement with Facebook

Senior Burmese officials have not forcefully discredited the Buddhist nationalist narrative or promoted a compelling counter-narrative on their Facebook accounts or in the state media. The military leadership benefits from Buddhist perceptions that it is defending the Buddhist-majority nation, while the civilian wing of the government does not want to alienate voters by pushing a message out of step with majority sentiment. Buddhist nationalism also resonates with some leaders’ views, and some officials in the 2011-16 Thein Sein government had per-

sonal connections with ultranationalist monks.²⁰

In 2013, the Thein Sein government passed the Telecommunications Law, which authorized fines and prison sentences for those proven guilty of “defaming, disturbing, causing undue influence, or threatening any person using a telecommunications network.”²¹ Military personnel, the Thein Sein government, and Aung San Suu Kyi’s government, which assumed power in 2016, have used this law to press charges against journalists and other individuals who have criticized or satirized political leaders online.²² Yet officials have not used this law to charge individuals who have stirred up religious hatred.

Even Wirathu, whom the military regime had previously jailed for inciting anti-Muslim violence, has not faced charges. After the January 2017 assassination of Ko Ni, a constitutional lawyer and Aung San Suu Kyi’s adviser, Wirathu praised the killers.²³ Ko Ni was a Muslim who promoted social inclusion. The ex-military assassins’ motivations were reportedly “extreme patriotism.”²⁴ Following that, the state-sponsored Buddhist monks’ council banned Wirathu from giving public speeches for a year but the government did not curtail his online activities. Meanwhile, a judge agreed to hear a case filed by one of Wirathu’s supporters who accused a Burmese journalist of defamation for posting criticism of Wirathu’s comments on his personal Facebook page.²⁵

Aung San Suu Kyi’s government has wrestled with how to assert some control on the population’s use of the platform while not offending Buddhist nationalists. It is unclear if the government has ever asked Facebook to shut down any accounts; however, in February 2018, an official social-media-oversight team was set up to identify “cases that harm the stability and tranquility of the country.”²⁶

The military has been sensitive about independent reporting and therefore unwilling to allow journalists access parts of northern Rakhine State, where it carried out clearance operations in 2017. The operations were in response to deadly attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army on border posts.²⁷ Despite denials that the security forces committed acts of violence against civilians, satellite photos documented the systematic burning of Rohingya villages.²⁸ Several hundred thousand Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, including women and girls who had witnessed or experienced rape by the security forces and affiliated militia groups. While not conclusive, a survey conducted in Rohingya refugee camps suggested that more than 6,000 civilians died, including young children.²⁹ Two Burmese journalists who managed to gather information on the military’s execution of ten Rohingya males were later entrapped and charged with violating the colonial-era Official Secrets Act.³⁰ This was clearly a warning to other journalists, who have become much more cautious in their reporting.³¹

United Nations officials and human-rights organizations characterized the

Rakhine State security operations as ethnic cleansing. Yet most residents of Myanmar are not sympathetic.³² Through state media and Buddhist-nationalist Facebook pages, they only saw the accounts of displaced and traumatized Buddhists and Hindus who were justifiably terrified of the Rohingya militants. Thus, many citizens voiced support on Facebook for the counterinsurgency operations.

Facebook's Breach of Ethics

What has been Facebook's response to the use of its platform to spread dangerous speech? In short, too little too late. Facebook's Community Standards use the term hate speech rather than dangerous speech. They define hate speech as "content that directly attacks people based on their race, ethnicity, national origin, [or] religious affiliation," among other things.³³ They state that hate speech is not allowed, "because it creates an environment of intimidation and exclusion and in some cases may promote real-world violence."³⁴ Much of the anti-Muslim rhetoric posted on Facebook in Myanmar from 2012 onward clearly met these criteria but remained on Facebook. The company should have been on high alert given the volatile context in Myanmar and the high profile of some of those posting.

In June 2017, Facebook announced that it would take hate speech in Myanmar and elsewhere much more seriously, asserting that it recognized the importance of understanding local contexts and would increase the number of content reviewers.³⁵ Yet, even in September 2017, Facebook did not immediately react when chain messages circulated on Facebook Messenger—an instant messaging application associated with Facebook—warning Buddhists to arm themselves in preparation for Muslim attacks and vice versa. Local rights- and IT-oriented civil-society organizations alerted Facebook but four days elapsed between the appearance of the messages and their removal.³⁶ Facebook's own monitoring mechanisms had apparently not caught the messages and responded slowly even after being notified.

At the same time, Facebook may be applying uneven policies in Myanmar. Ultranationalists such as Wirathu were able to propagate hate speech on their Facebook pages with little consequence, but Rohingya bloggers have claimed that Facebook has been quick to suspend or close their accounts for posting graphic photographs documenting the military's human-rights abuses and voicing criticism of the military.³⁷

As of mid-2018, Facebook did not have a content-monitoring office in Myanmar; its Burmese language content reviewers lived abroad.³⁸ In an April 2018 open letter, concerned civil-society groups called for the company to be much more transparent regarding its monitoring mechanisms, policies, and actions.³⁹ In June 2018, Facebook blacklisted two ultranationalist monks and the largest Buddhist

nationalist organization, and again pledged to increase the number of content reviewers.⁴⁰ This is critical, because a largely technological approach, focused primarily on artificial intelligence searches for key words, is too crude. Facebook must also recruit and communicate regularly with local experts who can assess the context and identify key organizations and individuals with significant followings who are engaging in dangerous speech.

Conclusion

Facebook posts and messages have played a key part in spreading fear and inciting anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar. Both the government and Facebook must act to prevent such violence in the future. Banning Facebook is not the answer but there must be a better balance between allowing forms of free speech, including criticism of state leaders and factual reporting of rights abuses, while curtailing dangerous speech. Ideally, the Myanmar Government would publicly condemn the use of dangerous speech, educate citizens to critically assess information, create a more conducive environment for independent journalism, and consistently promote an inclusive national narrative. Beyond that, the media could facilitate a process of rehumanizing the enemy “other” and cultivating empathy.⁴¹ If it really wants to live up to its promise of making the platform a welcome and safe space for all, Facebook could work together with the government and relevant civil society groups to foster more respectful and thoughtful communication, at least on its pages. In Myanmar today, as one citizen put it, “Facebook is life.”⁴² What then, could be more important than ensuring it is no longer a platform for catalyzing lethal violence? 

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