

Using ‘flower speech’ and new Facebook tools, Myanmar fights online hate speech

By Mari Michener Oye | Religion News Service

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YANGON, Myanmar — Sometimes a smiley-face emoticon just won’t do the trick.

In Myanmar, the newest set of Facebook stickers features a flower in an animated character’s mouth. The 24 stickers carry a deeper message than the usual “Like” thumbs-up Facebook icon: “End hate speech with flower speech.”

The stickers are the latest attempt to combat the spread of “dangerous speech” online and are sponsored by Panzagar, a coalition of civil society activists. The group’s name, which means “flower speech,” was organized as a response to the pervasiveness of anti-Muslim invective online and in public space.

At the same time and with less fanfare, Facebook is rolling out a new process for users to report online abuse in Myanmar. Since Nov. 21, Facebook users in the country have new options available to report disturbing posts. The new process is aimed at more quickly addressing complaints and removing offensive posts in the Myanmar language.

This type of “market-specific reporting mechanism” already exists in some regions, including North Africa. Facebook’s grievance process was originally developed in the U.S. in response to teen cyberbullying.

Myanmar, however, presents a very different set of issues.

Though Myanmar’s Internet and mobile phone usage remains among the lowest in the world, newly licensed telecommunication companies are set to expand that access from less than 10 percent in 2013 to roughly 50 percent by the end of 2015.

And censorship remains a real threat. Until 2011, every publication in Myanmar was censored prior to publication. The government has relaxed censorship of print media, though restrictions on film and broadcast journalism remain. After riots in Mandalay in July that authorities said left two dead and 14 injured, President Thein Sein stated: “Action will be taken against those who threaten state stability rather than using media freedom for good.”

These statements make Myanmar’s pro-democracy activists nervous.

“Our slogan is to be careful, not to be silent,” said Nay Phone Latt, a blogger and activist who has spearheaded the Panzagar campaign. “We just got freedom of expression, and we don’t want to be silenced.”

Religiously targeted violence in Buddhist-majority Myanmar has resulted in at least 200 deaths in recent years. The vast majority of victims have been Rohingya Muslims.

Much of the attention has focused on Ashin Wirathu, a Buddhist monk who was famously dubbed “The Face of Buddhist Terror” in a controversial Time magazine cover last year. He circulates inflammatory rumors, such as accusations of the rape of Buddhist women by Muslim men, on his public Facebook page.

But the narrative of social media directly causing violence is overly simplistic, said Nay Phone Latt.

“Online media is just a tool — people use these things to convey their message. If there is no Internet, they will find another way, but it’s very fast and can spread everywhere,” he said.

Wirathu, as well as the affiliated monks organization Ma Ba Tha (Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion), are active both online and off. The materials include DVDs and street sermons mixing calls for a renewal of Buddhist practice with virulent portrayals of Muslims as a threat.

Some of Panzagar’s organizing techniques, including the use of Facebook stickers, are taken directly from opponents’ playbooks, which bridge online and offline activism. Downloading materials from Panzagar’s Facebook page, local youth groups in Kachin State and Mandalay printed their own T-shirts and pamphlets. The “Youth and Social Harmony” civil society group led a street campaign that reached 56 cities and towns.

Panzagar’s own Facebook page has garnered more than 14,000 “likes.” The coalition has held workshops and distributed notebooks in public schools.

“I am a Buddhist, and I am against the so-called Buddhist extremists,” said Nay Phone Latt, the executive director of the Myanmar ICT for Development Organization, which coordinates the campaign’s online strategy. “We are doing this campaign not as Buddhists or Muslims, but as Myanmar citizens.”

Panzagar has received endorsements from Myanmar celebrities, with two songs, “We Are All Human” and “Flower Speech,” set for release in the next month. In June, Panzagar received the Citizen of Burma award, an annual honor bestowed by Burmese living abroad.

Opposition has included a fake Panzagar Facebook page created by anti-Muslim groups. This incident demonstrated that “online hate speech in Myanmar is systematically organized,” said Matt Schissler, an adviser to the civil society group Paung Ku.

When Panzagar reported the page to Facebook, it was deleted, and the “likes” were reassigned to the real Panzagar page.

“It (Panzagar) is peacebuilding against hatred,” said Ko Thit Sar, a Muslim youth leader and volunteer with the Panzagar campaign. “Where the government and community allow this kind of speech, and nobody is working against this speech, and they never speak up against it — that is the normal way to discrimination.”

This story is part of a series on religious tolerance and combating hate speech online, brought to you with support from Google.

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