

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 9 May 2019

Facebooking in Myanmar: From Hate Speech to Fake News to Partisan Political Communication

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Facebook is the Internet in Myanmar, and it presents both opportunities for and challenges to the government, the opposition, and the people in a country that is in transition.
- Facebook has gained notoriety as a platform for hate speech and fake news in Myanmar over the past seven years.
- Facebook has removed hundreds of accounts and pages allied with or supportive of the Myanmar military, or engaged in coordinated deceptive behaviour.
- The National League for Democracy government has sought to control and regulate social media by establishing a social media monitoring body and preparing a cyber law, but without much impact to date.
- Both Facebook's close monitoring of accounts and defamation suits have made Facebook users in Myanmar more cautious, but supporters of the National League for Democracy, the military and opposition parties still rely heavily on Facebook for partisan political communication.

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INTRODUCTION

Facebook is the Internet in Myanmar. As of 31 January 2019, mobile phone subscription was at 105 per cent, meaning that many people have more than one SIM card. There were 21 million Internet users, amounting to 39 per cent of the population of approximately 54 million, all of them active Facebook users.¹ In contrast, when the present political transition began in 2011, the country's telecommunications sector was under state control, the Internet was a luxury, and there were only 500,000 Internet users, about 80 per cent of whom used Facebook.² The number of Facebook users in Myanmar has grown about 53 times in eight years.

On 7 February 2018, the President's Office established a Social Media Monitoring Team "to protect the interests of the state and the people" from foreign people and organisations that might harm Myanmar.³ In October of the same year, Myo Yan Naung Thein, secretary of the Central Research Management Team of the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD), alleged that online trolls systematically defamed the party. Without specifying their identities or naming them, he said, "Those groups are the first to make comments under the posts of the news agencies. Once a news story relating to the government comes online, [they] instantly respond. They seek to shape public opinion and commentary. The team is big and has about 3,000 professional members who received their training abroad."⁴

On 12 December, Deputy Minister of Transport and Communications Thar Oo told the upper house of the Myanmar Parliament that the government was preparing a cyber law.⁵ In January 2019, prominent investigative journalist and editor of *Myanmar Now* Swe Win warned of the spread of fake news online. "Now, more than ever, it is imperative that we make huge sacrifices to disseminate truth."⁶

On 25 February 2019, Thein Tun Oo, spokesperson of the former ruling and now opposition Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), responded to widespread online defamation of the party by commenting, "We can't say that those who call us thieves or the party of thieves are members of the public. In fact they operate as a team with international support and each of them opened several [Facebook] accounts. In fact they want to shape public opinion through the media."⁷

These statements point to the widely perceived gravity of the problem of fake news in Myanmar—or deliberate online falsehoods as Singapore calls them. The earlier years of the country's ongoing transition, between 2012 and 2015, witnessed the emergence of largely anti-Muslim online and offline hate speech. Most political and social analyses and commentaries in those years therefore focused on hate speech and suggested legal and other means to combat it.

While the NLD government worked on a hate speech bill after it came to power in 2016, it later shelved it. With the drastic decline in the influence of the anti-Muslim *Ma Ba Tha* (Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion) since 2017, online hate speech seemed to have become insignificant or negligible. Fake news or deliberate online falsehoods apparently became the more common phenomenon, at least in the eyes of the authorities. Consequently, concerns at the official level about Internet use have shifted to the abundance of fake news because this focus helps the NLD government to deny accusations of the continuing offline and online spread of anti-Rohingya hate speech, use the narrative of fake news as an excuse, and use and monitor social media.

FACEBOOKING AND ITS PROBLEMS IN A MYANMAR IN TRANSITION

Essentially, people use Facebook for two main reasons: the need to belong to a community, and the need for self-representation.⁸ On Facebook, people develop a sense of belonging and can also express themselves through producing and sharing posts, comments, pictures, and videos. Facebook also enables real-time communication between governments and politicians on the one hand and their people and constituents on the other.⁹

Social media also facilitates the creation of echo chambers and filter bubbles in which partisan and polarized groups engage in selective exposure to facts and develop confirmation bias.¹⁰ The spread of fake news complicates further the use of Facebook for social and political purposes. How to regulate and sanction this is now at the top of the agenda of governments across the world. The problem is more severe in countries like Myanmar, where the rule of law is weak, political and social transition is the order of the day, and the government in power and its supporters themselves rely on Facebook for partisan political communication.

FACEBOOK AND HATE SPEECH

Myanmar faced a series of intercommunal, interreligious, or religiously framed violent conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims from 2012 to 2017. The international community and media have tended to portray the conflicts as being largely anti-Muslim phenomena because the Muslim minority in the country has borne the brunt of violence in most, if not all, instances. Many Buddhists have responded that this assessment was unfair because it was usually cases of rape, murder, blasphemy and sexual harassment which ‘triggered’ conflicts. They contend that they must protect themselves from Islam and Muslims. This discursive war has engendered rampant anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim hate speech. *Ma Ba Tha* emerged in June 2013 to ‘protect’ Buddhism and Buddhists in Myanmar from the alleged threat of Islam and Muslims. It became the major producer of and contributor to the anti-Muslim hate campaign online and offline from 2013 to 2015.¹¹

When this violence and its adverse impact on the social fabric of Myanmar almost derailed the country’s transition, hate speech became a hot topic. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar civil society, with the backing of the international community, demanded more effective and stronger rule of law, but these demands largely fell on deaf ears in the USDP-led administration then in power.¹²

FAKE NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

Ma Ba Tha continued to promote interreligious disharmony and challenge pluralism after the NLD came to power in 2016. The ruling party therefore initiated a project to pass a hate speech bill.¹³ Concurrently, the government took action against *Ma Ba Tha* by having it banned in May 2017.¹⁴ *Ma Ba Tha* rebranded itself as the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation. The NLD-appointed cabinet minister for religious affairs and culture Aung Ko maintains that the new organisation is illegal,¹⁵ although neither his ministry nor the NLD government has sought further action.

Aung Ko’s ministry consequently became the target of deliberately propagated fake news by *Ma Ba Tha* and its supporters on several occasions.¹⁶ He himself faced protests calling for his resignation and for an apology for his crackdown on *Ma Ba Tha*.¹⁷ However, the NLD government’s crackdown has rendered *Ma Ba Tha* insignificant or negligible. Perhaps

for this reason, the NLD has shelved plans to pass a hate speech law, although it said in late 2017 that it would soon send the bill to Parliament.¹⁸

As things stand now, fake news has replaced hate speech as a more urgent problem for the government. On 8 November 2017, the NLD-dominated Parliament approved the formation of a body to monitor news online. Lower house NLD representative Ye Lwin said at the time, “Mobile phone usage has grown and spread across Myanmar since the political transformation in 2010. Usage of social media, Facebook, Viber, and Messenger has spread within the people in a short time. Consequently, wrong news, fake news, and fabricated news have penetrated into the people and undesirable political, social, and economic results have occurred.”¹⁹ Minister for transportation and communications Thant Sin Maung agreed: “Attempts to blacken the name of individuals or organizations or instigate racial and religious sentiments disrupt law and order and destabilize the country.”²⁰

The government formed the Social Media Monitoring Team (SMMT) in February 2018 through an expenditure of MMK 6,426 million (approx. USD 4.5 million). But reports on its day-to-day activity and on its impact on the dissemination of fake news and hate speech are not publicly available yet. When the opposition USDP challenged the conduct of the SMMT in a session of the lower house on 11 November 2018, the Ministry of Transportation and Communications responded that the SMMT only used open-source intelligence and conducted social media analytics, without detailing the process and impact.²¹

FACEBOOK AND THE ROHINGYA CRISIS

Although the Myanmar government, civil society, and the international community had been concerned with rampant hate speech on Facebook in 2012-15, none of them explicitly held the company accountable. However, the colossal refugee crisis from August 2017 onwards changed matters. The crisis followed the Myanmar military’s clearance operation against the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which the NLD government branded a terrorist organization on 25 August 2017.²² As this crisis unfolded, United Nations human rights experts and investigators Yanghee Lee and Marzuki Darusman explicitly called on Facebook to deal with the use of the platform as a tool in a coordinated hate campaign against the Rohingya.²³

The Rohingya problem created a discursive war between the Myanmar government, people, and military on the one hand and the international media and community on the other hand. While the Myanmar side saw the crisis as an unplanned consequence of the operation against ARSA terrorists, the international media and community view it as genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. They demand accountability and swift repatriation of the refugees stranded in Bangladesh.²⁴

Accusations of the spread of fake news and doctored images on Facebook again came to the fore. In response to the allegations of their inaction in the face of the spread of fake news on the crisis and targeted hate speech against the Rohingya, Facebook announced on 28 August 2018 the permanent removal of 18 Facebook accounts, one Instagram account and 52 Facebook pages, including Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing's account and the military-owned Myawady television network's page.²⁵ This put the NLD in a difficult position, although the government immediately denied any role in this action.²⁶ Facebook further removed 13 pages and 10 accounts on October 15, and 425 pages, 17 groups, 135 accounts and 15 Instagram accounts on 18 December, stating that the pages and accounts had millions of followers and were engaged in coordinated deceptive behaviour.²⁷ Perhaps thanks to these actions, Facebook has largely saved its reputation from international criticism although Yanghee Lee, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, asked Facebook to be more vigilant and to understand the Myanmar context better, in her most recent report to the Human Rights Council in March 2019.²⁸

PARTISAN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION ON FACEBOOK

Despite the removal of hundreds of Facebook accounts and pages, Facebooking remains as popular as ever in Myanmar. Users seem aware that the company now watches them and is stricter in enforcing its community standards. They are also apparently concerned about the rise in the last three years in the number of civil defamation cases under Section 66 (d) of the Telecommunications Act (2013) and criminal cases under the Penal Code on online defamation.²⁹

The NLD government's own newspapers, radio, and television constantly cover the activities and perspectives of the ruling government in both English and in the Myanmar language. Those government-owned and government-run outlets have regular partisan content that understandably praises the government in power. But they do not run items that are highly critical of the military and other opposition forces and parties such as the USDP. The NLD also relies on private media outlets, but it has had its own problems with the latter over the decline in press freedom and the increase in the number of defamation cases and suits for the publication of state secrets filed against journalists.³⁰

Therefore the natural partisan outlet for the government and its supporters has become Facebook, on which most if not all political communication and comment now appears. Supporters of the NLD and those of the military, the USDP, and related parties maintain a strong presence on Facebook and engage in regular discursive wars. The USDP and NLD provide their members with training in online skills.³¹ When one side wins, it rejoices, while the other side suspects foul play.³²

As long as partisan accounts and pages do not contain discourse of a highly personal and inflammatory nature which violates Facebook's community standards, the company does not get involved. It may in any case not have the human and technological capacity necessary to monitor, review and, if appropriate, red-flag the thousands of partisan and potentially inflammatory postings in the Myanmar language that come online on a daily basis. Facebook itself acknowledges difficulties in deciding on and taking action against hate speech on their platform.³³

Facebook has issued warnings to the owners of several accounts by closing them for a short time.³⁴ It has also apparently allowed users to learn acceptable Facebooking through letting them make mistakes, and correcting them when necessary. Facebook and its users now seem engaged in a process of mutual learning. Myanmar users are improving their Facebooking skills and getting ready for the general elections in 2020. The ongoing transition in unendingly polarized Myanmar provides them with an endless supply of contentious issues. The most recent is the controversy over a possible amendment to the Constitution, which began in February 2019. Hundreds, if not thousands, of the Facebook accounts of pro-NLD,

pro-USDP, and pro-military users are now full of partisan posts, cartoons, pictures, and videos relating to this controversy.³⁵

CONCLUSION

Facebooking in a Myanmar in transition has over the past seven years held both advantages and disadvantages for various parties. The NLD government seems concerned about its negative impact, and has sought to remedy the situation through monitoring social media and preparing a cyber law. Upon completion, the cyber law may or may not be effective in controlling undesirable and dangerous cyber traffic. It is not easy to gauge the human and technological capacity of relevant government agencies in Myanmar to enforce a law that deals with a highly technical problem.

However, the highly volatile nature of the transition in Myanmar does require the government, military, political parties, and others to continue to rely on Facebook for their political communication needs. Partisan Facebooking may even increase when the 2020 general elections draw near, and all sides in that contest are expected to resort to Facebook for instant communication.

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- ³⁴ Author’s observation of key partisan accounts in 2017–19.
- ³⁵ Author’s observation of key partisan accounts in February and March 2019.

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