

Press Release

Myanmar Must Tackle Hate Speech Ahead of 2020 General Elections

One month ahead of Myanmar's general elections, a new report deep dives into root causes of hate speech and its effect on civil society space in Myanmar

[Yangon, 8 October 2020] Myanmar must tackle root causes of hate speech and address impunity of perpetrators, while ensuring that measures to combat hate speech are in line with international human rights standards with robust and inclusive participation of civil society, said 19 organizations in a report published today. The immediate implementation of these calls is vital ahead of the November 2020 general elections, which has already seen the erosion of the rights of ethnic and religious minorities throughout Myanmar.

“Institutionalized hate speech in Myanmar has long been systematically disseminated by powerful actors including the military, government, ultranationalists and other maligned actors. They benefit from the constructed narratives of hate and from the division and conflict it creates in society. Hate speech also contributes to a climate where impunity for human rights violations goes unaddressed. Hate speech is already being deployed as part of campaign strategies leading up to the November 2020 general elections. Such campaigns must immediately be denounced and countered by the government and the Union Election Commission to ensure a free and fair election,” said Moe Thway, President of Generation Wave.

The new joint report, “[Hate Speech Ignited: Understanding Hate Speech in Myanmar](#)”, documents and extensively analyzes the role that hate speech, rampant misinformation campaigns, and ultranationalism have played in the resurgence of oppression and human rights violations in Myanmar and highlights the new alignment of the government and military in the proliferation of hate speech. In analyzing the trends and patterns of hate speech in Myanmar, the report identifies a number of mutually reinforcing constructed narratives aimed at advancing Buddhist-Burman dominance at the expense of ethnic and religious minorities in the country.

“We are at a critical crossroads with the upcoming November 2020 elections. Uncontrollable hate speech, emboldening of ultranationalists, flagrant discriminatory policies, anti-minority attitudes, and human rights violations, which were hallmarks of the past military regime, have continued unabated in the past five years. Hate speech has caused the shrinking of civil society space, and a fundamental shift in the government's policies, and thus, concrete actions to combat hate speech is crucial in working towards a fully realized democracy. Ethnic and religious minorities, and those who advocate for their rights, should be able to participate in political processes and discussions that affects their life and future without the fear of being targeted by virulent hate speech,” said Ye Hein Aung, Director of Myanmar Cultural Research Society.

The report's findings stem from the analytical insights and experiences with hate speech of the 18 local Myanmar civil society organizations (CSOs) working to advance the protection of human rights for all peoples and communities in Myanmar. The International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School assisted in capturing the local group's knowledge and experience in writing over the course of a year between January to December 2019 with further updates from the local groups during the first quarter of 2020.

There is persistent and unaddressed impunity for the perpetrators of hate speech, while journalists, human rights defenders (HRDs), activists and civil society organizations are targeted for exercising legitimate speech. Most recently, various charges have been brought or are in the process of being brought against over 30 students who have been protesting the intensifying armed conflict in Rakhine State and ongoing internet shutdowns.

Authorities have applied restrictive laws such as the Penal Code, the Telecommunications Law, the Natural Disaster Management Law, and the deeply problematic Peace Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law in a matter that is inconsistent with international standards. In addition, many women, particularly HRDs, activists and journalists who speak out about the rights of minorities continue to be targets of hate speech and experience threats of sexual violence and gendered vitriol, which their male counterparts do not experience. The spread of hate speech was also a significant contributing factor in the grave crimes committed against Rohingya, which included mass gang rapes and sexual violence against Rohingya women.

“Too many of those criticizing the government and military have been thrown in jail under bogus charges. Without free speech, how can we advance democracy and human rights or adequately protect women’s rights? We frequently receive specific and dangerous gendered threats like “rape her”, especially in speaking out about the rights of minorities. There needs to be a strong and clear pronouncement by the government to end hate speech with particular attention on gendered hate speech and violence against women. For far too long, women’s rights have not been protected in law or in practice in Myanmar,” said Pwint Phyu Latt, Coordinator of Thint Myat Lo Thu Myar (Peace Seekers and Multiculturalist Movement).

“Hate speech in Myanmar has been designed to provoke, incite violence, discrimination and hatred that has in turn fueled violations of its ethnic and religious minority communities’ human rights and in the case of the Rohingya, it has enabled genocidal violence and atrocities. Unfortunately, the government has repeatedly failed to address hate speech. Not a single domestic case has been brought against known disseminators of such hate speech. Instead, Myanmar’s domestic laws, their misapplication, the complete lack of judicial independence, and abuse of state power have been weaponized against HRDs and activists’ legitimate forms of speech infringing on their right to freedom of expression. While state and non-state actors have been able to spread hate speech, activists must contend with: lengthy pre-trial detentions, protracted long trials without bail, expensive monetary fines. Myanmar needs to rectify these rights violations and not subject those expressing legitimate forms of speech to criminal, civil or administrative sanctions,” said Yee Mon Htun, a Clinical Instructor and Lecturer on Law at the International Human Rights Clinic (Harvard Law School).

The report offers an array of recommendations targeting various actors including the Myanmar government and military, international community and social media platforms and calls for an end to impunity, strengthening institutions, including the judiciary, repealing oppressive laws, prioritizing and promoting policies that counter hate and encourage diversity and tolerance and further support towards CSOs that work to combat hate speech. In regard to the upcoming elections, the report offers several recommendations to the Union Election Commission, including prohibiting all political parties from spreading hate speech and misinformation both online and offline.

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Editor’s note:

The English version of the report has been [published](#) in full on 8 October 2020 along with the [summary](#) of the report in Burmese. The full Burmese report will be issued at a later date.