International IDEA and EU-funded STEP Democracy's removal of digital records on mVoter 2020 app shows shocking disregard of transparency and accountability

Justice For Myanmar calls for immediate removal of "race" and "religion" data from election app and restoration of digital records

Oct. 2, 2020, Myanmar: Following Justice For Myanmar's Sep. 30 statement concerning racism and religious discrimination in the mVoter 2020 app, International Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) and the EU-funded STEP Democracy project have rapidly removed digital records on the launch of the app, including a video of the launch webinar in which organisational representatives gave speeches.

The app is developed by Stockholm-based inter-governmental organisation International IDEA, under STEP Democracy, in collaboration with the US-based Asia Foundation. These records were removed from the STEP Democracy website and Facebook page, and the International IDEA Myanmar Facebook page (see 'Note to Editors' below for details).

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung says: *"We are shocked that instead of removing the racist and discriminatory content in the mVoter 2020 app, International IDEA and STEP Democracy have removed records that detail their role in developing and funding the app, and their comments during the app launch. This raises serious concerns over a lack of transparency and accountability by international organisations involved in this democracy-promotion project. This sends the wrong message to the Myanmar government, suggesting that it is OK to delete records when there are questions of wrongdoing, instead of taking responsibility and upholding principles of transparency."*

Justice For Myanmar is appalled at International IDEA's Oct. 2, 2020 statement, in which they claim that the app's content is the "sole responsibility" of Myanmar's election commission. Does International IDEA support characterising candidates for election by "religion" and "race"? Is this the policy of International IDEA member governments?

International IDEA also stated that *"numerous jurisdictions around the world however include ethnic identifiers in their electoral systems and practices, often with the aim to ensure fair and equitable representation and inclusion."* While some countries may *"include ethnic identifiers"* for equitable representation and inclusion, this is clearly not the case in Myanmar. Myanmar's use of ethnic and religious identifiers are in the context of the state's discriminatory laws and policies, including the 1982 Citizenship Law, introduced by a military dictatorship. *"Ethnic identifiers"* do not *"aid in the democratic process"* in Myanmar, in which Rohingya candidates have been disqualified and Rohingya voters have been disenfranchised. Electoral candidates featured in the app have no right to choose their "race" or "religion" and some are misrepresented, in violation of their human

rights. In Myanmar, official categories of "race" and "religion" are implicated in violations of international human rights law, including the crime of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. By colluding with the Myanmar government's racial and religious discrimination, International IDEA is violating the "do no harm" principle.

The mVoter 2020 app was launched on Sep. 29. The app includes data on candidates running in Myanmar's 2020 election in each electorate. Candidate biographical data is brief, and race and religion data is prominent, based on official "race" and "religion" categories that have rendered Rohingya stateless and which have been used as a pretext to disqualify Rohingya candidates and disenfranchise Rohingya voters from the election. The app refers to Rohingya candidates as "Bengali", a derogatory term the Myanmar government and extremist nationalists use to deny Rohingya identity, challenge their right of belonging in Myanmar and instigate hate. According to the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (A/HRC/39/CRP.2):

> *The Myanmar authorities consistently and vocally assert that "there are no Rohingya in Myanmar". They object to the use of the name "Rohingya", call the group "Bengali", and argue that the Rohingya do not belong in Myanmar. They are not considered a "national race" and often referred to as "illegal immigrants" from Bangladesh. This was not always the case. Successive laws and policies regulating citizenship and legal status have become increasingly exclusionary in their formulation, and arbitrary and discriminatory in their application. Today, the overwhelming majority of Rohingya are de facto stateless, without proof of legal status or identity.*

Yadanar Maung continues: *"Governments and organisations engaging with and operating in Myanmar should ensure that they do not perpetuate Myanmar's systemic racial and religious discrimination, including the state's erasure of Rohingya identity. Working within a volatile context and in which Rohingya have gone through a genocide requires the highest level of due diligence and conflict sensitivity, which has clearly not been shown in the conduct of organisations funding and implementing the mVoter 2020 app."*

Myanmar's election is almost one month away. STEP Democracy, International IDEA and the Asia Foundation must uphold their human rights obligations and ensure that they act in accordance with international standards of democracy and transparency. Justice For Myanmar demands that International IDEA and STEP Democracy immediately take down the mVoter 2020 app unless all "race" and "religion" data is removed. Justice For Myanmar also calls on International IDEA and STEP Democracy to restore all data removed from the web and social media and publish a log detailing data removal and any alteration of records.

Note to editors

Justice For Myanmar, a group of covert activists campaigning for justice and accountability for the people of Myanmar, is calling for an end to military business and for federal democracy and a sustainable peace.

Examples of digital records removed by International IDEA and STEP Democracy include the following (current as of 8am Yangon time on Oct. 2, 2020):

- mVoter launch announcement removed from the STEP Democracy website, which was quoted and linked to in Justice For Myanmar's Sep. 30, 2020 statement: http://www.stepdemocracy.eu/index.php/news/details/169

- mVoter launch webinar removed from the IDEA Myanmar Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/internationalIDEAmyanmar/videos/1195076717541860

- mVoter launch announcement removed from the STEP Democracy Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/100554656949737/posts/international-idea-under-the-eu-funded-step-democracy-programme-in-partnership-w/1259307497741108/

A Google cache of the launch announcement on the STEP Democracy Facebook page is available here: https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:OF9IDz8WWoMJ:https://www.facebook.com/100554656949737/posts/international-idea-under-the-eu-funded-step-democracy-programme-in-partnership-w/1259307497741108/ and Justice For Myanmar has published screenshots on Twitter: https://twitter.com/JusticeMyanmar/status/1311576324033581056?s=20

International IDEA members states include Sweden (Chair of IDEA's Council of Member States), Belgium, Spain, Australia, Barbados, Benin, Botswana, Brazil, Canada, Cape Verde, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Finland, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Luxembourg, Mauritius, Mexico, Mongolia, Namibia, Netherlands, Norway, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Portugal, South Africa, Switzerland, Tunisia and Uruguay. Japan is an official observer state.

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