

## **Combatting Online Hate Speech and Disinformation Targeting Religious Communities**

### **Talking Points for Dr. Waris Husain**

Thank you to the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom for hosting this important discussion regarding the convergence of religious freedom and the ever-expanding digital world in which we are living. This was a conversation we started to have when I was working as an analyst at USCIRF, and it's great to see the Commission moving the discussion forward with events like today's!

My discussion today will focus on regional developments and trends in South and Southeast Asia relating to hate speech and disinformation and religious minorities. To give an overall assessment, one must understand that the latent and active issues relating to religious minorities continue to impact all the countries in the region, as they have for generations. While social, economic, and political disenfranchisement of religious minorities persists, the speed and reach of hate speech and fake news has changed dramatically with the astronomical expansion of internet access in Asia.

As of 2020 Out of the 4 billion people living in Asian countries, more than 2 billion people now are connected to the internet. Compare this to the 20% of the population having access to the internet in 2010, and one can see that access to the internet and social media platforms has exponentially grown in the last decade. We have seen a democratization of the information sector, where a Tik Tok video by a 16 year old in remote Pakistani village can go viral more than a hard-hitting news segment from the BBC. This presents opportunities both for good faith actors along with religious bigots to use social media to expand the reach of their message.

And with this expanded reach, we have seen interrelated issues that allow for misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech to be proliferated and cause real-world harm to religious minority communities. As internet access blossomed in Asia we have also seen:

- Mob violence unleashed on religious community centers and neighborhoods based on fake news going viral through social media platforms;
- Very few instances of proper digital education for users, making it hard for users to distinguish information from disinformation or misinformation;
- The persistence of inauthentic behavior targeting religious minority communities that can be connected to "troll farms;"
- Social media platforms taking a passive role in content moderation (something which Professor Kaye has rightly criticized consistently);
- traditional legal tools and methods are either unable or unwilling to keep pace with technological advancements.

Some of the solutions that have been implemented to stop the spread of hate speech or fake news with real-world mob violence are over-expansive to the point of violating other human rights like the rights to free speech and access to information. One of these over-expansive solutions is the increased use of internet shut-downs in countries like Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka to deal with hate speech and fake news. In some instances, like with Sri Lanka, the shutdown was put in place

to counter a viral news story falsely accusing Sri Lankan Muslims of various wrongdoings, which could instigate a violent attack on the community. In one way, this kind of swift action by the government can stop a mob from forming and attacking religious minorities but in another way, the overuse of shutdowns can have the counter-productive effect of encumbering inter-faith efforts by activists to counter misinformation with increased cooperation between majority and minority religious groups.

Related to shut-downs, in Pakistan, there is a history of closing access to particular websites or using take-down requests to silence certain users on websites like Facebook, Youtube, or Twitter. For several years, Youtube remained inaccessible by the government due to the posting of an allegedly blasphemous video. Also, the government's telecommunications authority has consistently played a role in silencing religious minorities posting content that the authorities unfairly deem as blasphemous by getting social media companies to take down content based on Pakistani law which criminalizes blasphemy. Not only are religious minorities silenced through take-down notices, it has been alleged that Pakistan's state organs utilize "troll farms" or "troll armies" who engage in inauthentic content creation which amounts to hateful, violent, and dehumanizing speech against leaders in the religious minority communities that are popular or going viral on social media.

Let's move ahead to Southeast Asia, where several laws have recently been passed to criminalize the creation and dissemination of fake news. In a perfect world, these kind of cybersecurity laws could be used sparingly by the government to protect religious minority communities from being targeted with fake news. However, in countries like Singapore, human rights activists fear that these kind of fake news laws are a disguised attempt by governments to punish journalists and internet users for publishing news stories that challenge the government's policies or actions. The ability to distinguish fake news from news that is unfavorable to government officials is a real impediment for good faith lawmakers who want to use the tool of anti-fake news laws to protect religious minorities within their borders.

One last phenomenon especially relevant for Southeast Asian and, in particular Myanmar, is the relationship between fake news, hate speech, and mass atrocities against religious minorities. It is no secret that high-ranking organizations including the United Nations have called out Facebook after finding that fake news and hate speech shared on that platform was key in facilitating the mass killing of Rohingya Muslims and their expulsion from the country. Preparing the majority population to cheer on the genocidal killing of a minority group requires hate speech that dehumanizes that group- this used to be done through modalities like the radio if one recalls how Rwandan Radio was key to the mass killing of Tutsis. Now there are thousands of users who can reach out to an audience of millions across the globe on social media platforms like Facebook. Let me be clear: this is like having thousands of Rwandan Radios operating simultaneously without oversight from their governments or from social media giants like Facebook.

Having laid out these rather difficult scenarios, I believe the overall thrust of this topic is that the speed of communication (both good and bad) has gone into overdrive with the penetration of internet access to Asia. While religious bigots have become increasingly adept at using this increased speed to their advantage - governments, activists, and social media companies are

lagging far behind without producing effective and narrowly-tailored solutions. The goal must be for these three parties (governments, activists, and social media companies) to come together in good faith and create social, legal and technological solutions that not only protect religious minorities but also facilitate free speech and open dialogue.

While analogizing traditional legal solutions from non-digital forms of press and communication can be helpful, policy-makers must understand that there are unique challenges in the digital space and therefore there is a need for a wholly NEW legal paradigms and solutions rather than retrofitting existing rules or traditions. Also, the silo between the engineers/technical experts and human rights or legal specialists must be broken down to avoid the kinds of mistakes we are currently making in our digital strategies. The human rights community needs to understand the limits and capabilities of technology while the engineers need to understand and value the input of human rights specialists to bake into the technology ways to ensure the safety and dignity of religious minorities rather than trying to reverse engineer solution once a problem with the technology arises.

I'd like to thank USCIRF again for holding this discussion today and welcome comments or questions from the Commissioners.