

## Extreme Speech in Myanmar: The Role of State Media in the Rohingya Forced Migration Crisis

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This article considers the role of the state authorities in perpetrating extreme speech and the processes by which state power is used in normalizing hateful expressions against minoritized communities. Drawing attention to Myanmar's 2017 Rohingya crisis, a human rights and humanitarian catastrophe, the article examines how the state media publication, the *Global New Light of Myanmar* newspaper, has actively produced anti-Rohingya speech in its editions and influenced violent narratives about the Rohingya Muslims circulating on social media. It shows how official media contributed to a political environment where anti-Rohingya speech was made acceptable and where rights abuses against the group were excused. While regulators often consider the role of social media platforms like Facebook as conduits for the spread of extreme speech, this case study shows that extreme speech by state actors using state media ought to be similarly considered a major concern for scholarship and policy.

*Keywords: Myanmar, Rohingya, extreme speech, Facebook, forced migration*

The expectation that the state should regulate speech in modern democracy has prompted a large volume of scholarship on hateful and extreme speech, focusing primarily on nonstate actors' use of social media. Excessive focus on regulating the risks of social media, however, overlooks other important factors contributing to the landscape of extreme speech that exists in countries like Myanmar, notably extreme speech by state officials and in state media. While the negative consequences of extreme speech by nonstate actors in Myanmar using platforms such as Facebook have been widely acknowledged, extreme speech by official Myanmar is underexamined.<sup>2</sup> In this article I consider the role of extreme speech perpetrated by the

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<sup>2</sup> I use the name "Myanmar" to refer to the country from the time its name was officially changed by the military junta in 1989. In referring to the country's history before 1989, the name "Burma" is used. Some interview participants' contributions are anonymized at their request and to minimize risks of victimization by Myanmar's authorities, who have a history of punishing individuals who speak publicly and show the Myanmar government or military in a bad light (HRW, 2016).

authorities in Myanmar using state media. I argue that extreme speech by state actors using state media ought to be considered a major concern for policy making and scholarship.

### Article Structure

Throughout this article, three separate methods are used: historical contextualization, interviews, and content analysis. Content analysis involves a case study examination of a Myanmar state media publication, the *Global New Light of Myanmar* (GNLM) newspaper, during the time immediately before and after the start of the 2017 Rohingya crisis. This provides an empirically rich source illustrating how the Rohingya have been denigrated in Myanmar's official media. I argue that this has contributed to an environment where anti-Rohingya speech in other forms of media, notably through social media posts, is made acceptable and where rights abuses against the group do not elicit public sympathy. I use an extended discussion of the background to the Rohingya crisis, and of recent media liberalization in Myanmar, to contextualize my study and the unique sociopolitical dynamics around the Rohingya minority. This discussion is informed by in-depth ethnographic research I undertook in Myanmar and Bangladesh between November 2015 and November 2017. My research involved observation of Myanmar's 2010 and 2015 elections and research with the Rohingya community, including more than 40 in-depth semistructured interviews. These interviews were undertaken with Rohingya community leaders in Myanmar and among the Rohingya diaspora living in Australia, Canada, Malaysia, Thailand, the UK, and the U.S. during 2015, 2016, and 2017 as well as with newly arrived Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh during 2017. Participant observations during more than a dozen visits to Myanmar, in Bangladesh refugee camps during the 2017 forced migration crisis, and among Rohingya diaspora leaders living farther from Myanmar also contributed to this research, which relied heavily on ethnographic methods of inquiry similar to those described by Skidmore (2003, 2004) for her Myanmar research.

Before my examination of the GNLM, I examine the Myanmar context in which this research is undertaken, outlining the background and situation of Myanmar's Rohingya. I focus on Myanmar's recent transition from military-led government to a quasi-civilian administration and the effects of the policy liberalization that followed this transition. In particular, I consider the effects of the country's recent media liberalization and how it has contributed to a rise in extreme speech against groups like the Rohingya by nonstate and state actors that has had devastating real-world consequences for the minoritized group.

Much of media reporting about the consequences of extreme speech in Myanmar uses the term "hate speech" (Barron, 2018b; "Myanmar Rohingya," 2018; Specia & Mozur, 2017). This is also a term routinely used by regulators and policy makers. In Myanmar, nationalists are understood as Buddhist nationalists, and their speech is often aggressively anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya. They appear to represent clear examples of the kinds of hate speech considered by A. Brown (2017); Cohen-Almagor (2015); Gagliardone, Gal, Alves, and Martinez (2015); and Waldron (2012). However, as Udupa and Pohjonen (2019; this Special Section) point out, "hate" is not a universal category, and using this term risks unintentional ambiguity. As a concept, "extreme speech" qualifies hate speech and better accounts for cultural variation and differing political contexts. This is a useful framework when considering speech in non-Western contexts, such as in Myanmar. This is particularly useful in my analysis here of extreme speech acts by official Myanmar sources. If examined in isolation and without appreciation of their specific historical

and political contexts, these examples might not be considered hateful and might thus escape the scrutiny and criticism attracted by more obvious cases of hateful speech by nonstate actors. Consequently, throughout this article I use the term “extreme speech” to describe negative speech used by the state authorities to denigrate groups like the Rohingya.

### **The History and Contemporary Circumstances of Myanmar’s Rohingya Muslims**

I lost my two sons and two daughters. At midnight the military came into my house and burnt the house but first they raped my two daughters and they shot my two daughters in front of me. I have no words to express how it was for me to suffer, to look at daughters being raped and killed in front of me. Also, my two sons were killed by government. I was not able to get the dead bodies of my daughters, it is a great sorrow for me . . . It was not sufferable, the persecution was very dangerous, we are falsely come here, not to live long, we want to back again. (Rohingya farmer living in Kutupalong refugee camp, Bangladesh [personal interview, October 22, 2017])

Desperately sad accounts like this, told to me by an ethnic Rohingya farmer recently arrived in Bangladesh’s Kutupalong refugee camp, were disturbingly common when I spoke with new camp arrivals in October 2017. Throughout the two preceding months more than 600,000 Rohingya had fled a brutal crackdown by Myanmar’s military (known as the *Tatmadaw*) that targeted the Rohingya community in Rakhine State and swelled the already large refugee camps across the international frontier in Bangladesh (“UN: Rohingya Exodus,” 2017; Inter Sector Coordination Group, 2017). The context of the Rohingya’s most recent forced migration was one in which anti-Rohingya speech was widespread in mainstream and social media and the group was without any meaningful political support within Myanmar. This was not always the case.

A Muslim minority in the overwhelmingly Buddhist Myanmar, the Rohingya are from Rakhine State, adjacent to Bangladesh, and claim a heritage in Myanmar that makes them indigenous. Myanmar’s authorities consider the group to be colonial era arrivals or illegal post–Second World War migrants from Bangladesh (formerly Pakistan) and routinely label them Bengali (Ibrahim, 2018; Ware, 2015). The Rohingya reject the Bengali label, which they consider a slur designed to deliberately misrepresent them as foreigners. Kyaw Min, a Rohingya community leader elected at Burma’s 1990 election to serve in parliament (a post–1990 election parliament was subsequently not convened by the military authorities), spoke to me during 2015 about official Myanmar’s rejection of Rohingya rights, saying, “I don’t know why they reject us. We have been in Rakhine State for many, many centuries. Our language is not like Bengali. Our culture is not like Bengali” (personal interview, November 19, 2015).

Myanmar’s authorities and Buddhist nationalists dispute the Rohingya’s claim to indigeneity (Aye Chan, 2005; Hunt 2017a, 2017b; Radio Free Asia, 2012). However, there is evidence of a substantial Muslim population residing in the Rakhine State area in the centuries before the arrival of the colonial British (Ibrahim, 2018; Yegar, 1972). When British administrators undertook their first population study there in 1826, they described a Muslim population accounting for “three-tenths” of the total (Paton, 1828, p. 372). Prominent Rohingya figures and historians, including Htay Lwin Oo (2013), Islam (2011), Siddiqui (2011), and Tahir Ba Tha (1998), confidently claim the community’s residence in precolonial Burma. I heard this

claim repeated frequently during my research in the Rohingya communities in Myanmar and Bangladesh and among the Rohingya's diaspora. These assertions about the group's history are important because Myanmar's constitution and citizenship law provide collective citizenship rights for groups present in the country before the start of the British colonial period in 1823 (Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, 1982; Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008).

While the Rohingya are today denied citizenship rights in Myanmar, there is evidence that the community was treated as citizens by the Burmese authorities during the decade and a half following independence in 1948, but the Rohingya's rights were eroded throughout the country's decades of military-led rule after a 1962 military coup (Berlie, 2008; Yegar, 1972). Throughout the democratic period before the 1962 coup, the Rohingya had political rights, could vote in elections (a right they would maintain until the Rohingya's disenfranchisement by President Thein Sein's government before the 2015 national election), and had elected members in Burmese Parliament, including government ministers and parliamentary secretaries (Berlie, 2008; Yegar, 1972). Burma's first postindependence prime minister, U Nu, told a 1954 radio audience:

The people living in Maungdaw and Buthidaung regions are our nationals, our brethren. They are called Rohingyas. They are one of the same par in status of nationality with Kachin, Kyah, Karen, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. They are one of the ethnic races of Burma. (Haque, 2017, p. 466)

In the year immediately preceding the 1962 coup, the Rohingya language was broadcast by the Burma Broadcasting Service's radio station, but the Rohingya's situation changed considerably following this coup. Since then, Burma/Myanmar's authorities have increasingly restricted the Rohingya's rights and denied their citizenship claims, often describing the Rohingya as temporary residents and regularly treating them as illegal migrants (HRW, 2014; Radio Free Asia, 2012). Consequently, rights restrictions impair virtually every aspect of the Rohingya's lives. Denied citizenship rights, they are routinely subject to travel restrictions (often including limits on their ability to travel even to adjacent villages), limits on their access to education and healthcare, and limits on their ability to marry and have children (Amnesty International, 2017; Berlie, 2008; HRW, 2012, 2013). By 2018, the Rohingya represented one of the world's largest stateless populations (Ibrahim, 2018).

Rights restrictions and intermittent local communal violence between Rakhine State's Buddhist majority and the Rohingya Muslims, as well as poverty, have contributed to a near constant flow of Rohingya refugees out of Myanmar since independence (Lee, 2014; Lewa, 2001). Planned migration is often by boat through the Bay of Bengal, and the desperate situation of Rohingya refugees adrift and unwanted there during 2015 brought some international attention. In response to the U.S. downgrading Thailand's standing in the annual *Trafficking in Persons Report 2014*, the Thai Navy prevented Rohingya refugees arriving by boat from landing in Thailand, an approach subsequently adopted by the Malaysian authorities, which led to a standoff that lasted weeks. This was only resolved when the Malaysian, Indonesian, Thai, Filipino, and U.S. governments agreed to adopt a humanitarian approach to allow those already at sea to safely land (Hoffstaedter, 2015; U.S. Department of State, 2014; Wolf, 2015). Rohingya members I spoke with in Rakhine State during 2015, 2016, and 2017 told me that since the 2015 Bay of Bengal migration crisis,

Myanmar's authorities have made it nearly impossible for Rohingya to leave Rakhine State by sea and so ensured the group's only viable outward migration option is via Bangladesh.

Migratory flows have increased following shrinking life opportunities and growing unrest in Rakhine State. This happened in the aftermath of major military operations conducted in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s; following communal violence in 2012 and again following military operations in 2016; and most spectacularly following the Myanmar military's 2017 "clearance operation," which began in late August 2017 (Amnesty International, 1992; Ware & Laoutides, 2018). This military "clearance operation" was described by the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, as bearing the "hallmarks of genocide," while the UN high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, said it was a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing" (OHCHR, 2018; United Nations, 2017).

Claiming to target Muslim militants, the actions of Myanmar's security forces in northern Rakhine State in late 2017 have been widely criticized by human rights groups and described by Amnesty International (2017) as having created a "human rights and humanitarian catastrophe." Human Rights Watch (HRW; 2017b, 2017c) considered the military's actions as amounting to "crimes against humanity," and the organization documented how almost 300 Rohingya villages had been partially or totally razed during the military campaign. New camp arrivals also frequently described to me how their homes and villages had been burned by Myanmar's security forces. Despite this, within Myanmar there was little public sympathy for the Rohingya or calls for the military to moderate their actions. Instead, Myanmar's civilian politicians were either silent or supportive of the military's approach. Most striking was that the country's de-facto civilian leader, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, once a vocal critic of Myanmar's military, seemed to echo the military's views about the crisis and support their tactics ("Under Fire Over Rohingya," 2017; Safi, 2017). Media liberalization in a shifting political climate as described in the following contributed significantly to the hostile environment.

### **Media Liberalization and Social Media Growth in a Changing Political Context**

Myanmar endured decades of military-led rule following the coup in 1962. The military-led government actively closed the country to foreign influences, nationalized industries, and used one of the world's largest militaries to undertake conflict with ethnic minorities—a conflict, often described as the "world's longest running civil war," that is ongoing (Charney, 2009; "Waiting for the Dividend," 2013; Steinberg, 2010). Throughout this time, Burma/Myanmar had one of the world's most tightly restricted media environments, and public political expression was severely curtailed ("Chronology of the Press," 2004; Kyaw Phyoo Tha, 2017).

Under the military's stewardship, Burma/Myanmar was brought to near bankruptcy and economic collapse (I. Brown, 2013). By the time the 2010 election took place, Yangon's streets bore a closer resemblance to early 1960s Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur than those of a modern Asian city.

During the years before the 2010 election, a series of protest movements, including the August 1988 "8888 Uprising," which brought Aung San Suu Kyi to prominence, and the 2007 "Saffron Revolution," when Buddhist monks joined protests against the government's economic decisions, indicated that the

military's hold on power was growing increasingly tenuous (Lintner, 1990; Steinberg, 2010). In 2008, a new military-drafted constitution set the scene for future multiparty elections, and in November 2010 Myanmar held its first nationwide elections in a generation: 22 million Myanmar residents cast votes to elect 75% of the parliamentary seats, but Myanmar's military retained significant influence within the new government structure (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008). The remaining parliamentary seats were reserved for serving members of the military who would be directly appointed by the country's military chief. Parliament's military-appointed MPs maintain an effective veto over future constitutional changes, which require three-quarters support of parliament, meaning further progress toward full democracy remains in the hands of the military leadership. The Myanmar military also retained direct control of the key ministries of border affairs, defense, and home affairs (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008).

After taking up office in early 2011, the new quasi-civilian administration, led by ex-general President Thein Sein, liberalized some elements of Myanmar's economic and media landscape (Kulczuga 2013; Shobert 2014). These reforms included economic liberalization, political prisoner amnesties, and new media freedoms, which convinced some international actors that Myanmar was transitioning toward democracy. This contributed to decisions by Western governments to ease long-standing economic sanctions ("EU Lifts Sanctions Against Burma," 2013; OECD, 2014; U.S. Department of Treasury, 2016).

Until prepublication press censorship ended in 2012, Myanmar had one of the world's most restrictive news media environments (Farrelly & Chit Win, 2016; Freedom House, 2007, 2008; Holliday, 2013). During the military-controlled era, media reporting of issues deemed sensitive by the authorities was heavily censored. Generations of Myanmar's grew up without experiencing a free domestic press. This rapidly changed during Thein Sein's term in office, when prepublication censorship was formally ended and the country became awash with smartphones. Despite the continuation of postpublication censorship, two changes to Myanmar's media landscape during this time would have far-reaching consequences: the 2011 decision to unblock access to foreign media and the 2012 decision to end prepublication media censorship (Pidd, 2012; Renshaw, 2013; Watkins, 2012). This meant Myanmar's residents could now freely access foreign news outlets as well as use previously blocked social media channels.

Understandably, Myanmar was a latecomer to the Internet revolution. Before 2012, Myanmar's mobile phone ownership level was so low that, per capita, only North Korea had fewer mobile phones (Motlagh, 2014). Policy changes during Thein Sein's tenure saw mobile phone SIM cards reduced in price from thousands of dollars to as little as one dollar (Motlagh, 2014). In a country where the GDP per capita scarcely exceeded US\$1,000, mobile phone technology was previously a luxury well beyond the reach of the average person (World Bank, 2018). When the mobile phone market was opened to international carriers and prices fell, there was a huge growth in mobile phone penetration. From a very low base, mobile phone penetration rates grew quickly to more than 50% by 2015, were expected to pass 80% during the 2015-16 financial year, and were estimated to have topped 90% by the end of 2016 (Matsui, 2015; Aung Kyaw Nyunt, 2016). This made the Internet readily available to the majority of Myanmar's 51 million residents and altered the way Myanmar's residents communicate. Media reforms also ensured that for many in Myanmar, their first experience of Internet technology was on their smartphone, using Facebook, rather than on a desktop computer using a search engine like Google or Yahoo (Gowan, 2014; Kulczuga, 2013). Facebook's aggressive chasing of market share in Myanmar—Facebook's Free Basics program was available

in Myanmar until 2017—has meant that many Internet users in Myanmar do not see the Internet as existing much beyond tools like Facebook.

The impact of the Internet's arrival on the country was evident in the way people often consumed news uncritically using online social media, which had significant political consequences (Lee, 2016, 2018). During my research in Myanmar, it was common to find mobile phone users who did not understand that the Internet existed beyond what was available to them through preloaded social media applications, as they had their social media accounts set up for them by staff at a mobile phone shop.

Myanmar's media liberalization has come with some undesirable consequences. Political and media freedoms have provided chances for divisive voices to foment ethnic and religious conflict that in the past had been suppressed by Myanmar's military-led government (Holland, 2014). In 2015, journalists in Myanmar frequently told me their concerns about the power of social media and particularly of Facebook. One foreign journalist who had worked extensively in Myanmar and the region, whom I interviewed in 2015, told me that since Myanmar's telecommunications sector had been liberalized, social media had become "incredibly influential":

Some people use it as their primary news source. In fact, a lot of people use it as their primary news source now. You speak to a lot of people and they say they don't know what the Internet is, they just know Facebook. And so, everything that they learn about what's going on in the country is coming from Facebook. Obviously, a lot of people still do read newspapers, but Facebook is the primary source of information for a lot of people now . . . which is terrible because a lot of what's going on Facebook is wrong and rumour ridden . . . It's proliferating a narrative which is false. (personal interview, December 1, 2015)

Nationalist Buddhist groups including the staunchly anti-Muslim 969 Movement and the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, known as the Ma Ba Tha, used new media and political freedoms to pursue anti-ethnic minority and anti-Muslim political agendas, including advocating policy changes that aim to severely curtail the rights of ethnic and religious minorities (Fisher, 2015).

Nationalist leaders often use provocative and extreme language to make their political case. Buddhist monk and prominent Ma Ba Tha leader Wirathu, who was sentenced to a 25-year prison sentence by the country's military-led government for inciting religious hatred but was released during an amnesty for political prisoners in 2012, said, "In every town, there is a crude and savage Muslim majority," and he warned about Muslims who "target innocent young Burmese girls and rape them" (Hodal, 2013, paras. 2, 5). Wirathu said that "Muslims are like the African carp. They breed quickly, and they are very violent and they eat their own kind. Even though they are minorities here, we are suffering under the burden they bring us" (Tin Aung Kyaw, 2013, para. 3). In 2013, Wirathu was described in a 2013 *TIME* cover story as the "Face of Buddhist Terror," and human rights groups accused his anti-Muslim rhetoric of inciting anti-Muslim violence and contributing to the exclusion of Muslims from the political mainstream (Beech, 2013). Wirathu was a rigorous user of social media, especially Facebook, regularly making inflammatory posts to his more than 500,000 followers, and on a number of occasions Wirathu's posts have been removed or his accounts frozen by Facebook, and it was reported he was permanently removed from Facebook in early 2018 (Barron,

2018a; Lee, 2016; Weng, 2017). In 2016, I reported to Facebook an anti-Muslim post by Wirathu that I believed breached Facebook's Community Standards; it took weeks and numerous other complaints before this post was removed by Facebook's monitors.

Myanmar is an overwhelmingly Buddhist country, and despite the Buddhist population accounting for 87.9% of the population and Muslims for only 4.3%, nationalists argue Myanmar's Buddhist character is facing an existential threat from Islam (Department of Population, 2016). The conversion of previously Buddhist-dominated communities to Islam in what are now Indonesia and Malaysia has contributed to a common Buddhist and nationalist trope in Myanmar that its own Buddhist character could similarly be threatened by Islam (Gravers, 2015; "Muslims Are Dangerous," 2015). This narrative has been frequently cited by nationalist figures like Wirathu to justify their claims that Myanmar Buddhism faces an existential threat from Islam that ought to be resisted (Beech, 2013; Hodal, 2013). Myanmar's Buddhist nationalists suggest it is in the national interest to defend the Buddhist religion from this perceived threat and advocate restrictions on Muslims' civil and political rights. This advocacy has often been successful.

Myanmar nationalists' use of new media freedoms to incite hatred of Muslims and of the Rohingya has attracted international attention. Facebook has been widely used by nationalists and has been particularly criticized for being slow to remove inappropriate content (Hogan & Safi, 2018; McLaughlin, 2018; Mozur, 2018). Facebook's anemic response to complaints about inappropriate content in Myanmar was raised by U.S. lawmakers when the company's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, appeared before the U.S. Senate's Commerce and Judiciary Committees (Hatmaker, 2018). Similar concerns were raised by the UN agencies in the aftermath of the Rohingya's 2017 forced migration. The chairman of the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, Marzuki Darusan, described how social media, particularly Facebook, contributed to public attitudes that played a "determining role" in Myanmar, describing how it has "substantively contributed to the level of acrimony and dissension and conflict, if you will, within the public. Hate speech is certainly of course a part of that. As far as the Myanmar situation is concerned, social media is Facebook, and Facebook is social media" (Miles, 2018, para. 6). Following media liberalization, the Myanmar public thus have been subject to a steady stream of anti-Rohingya messages from Buddhist nationalists, the military, and political figures.

Negative messages on social media have gone hand in hand with violent attacks against the Rohingya on the ground. Nationalist groups have been criticized for the role they played in instigating violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State during 2012. This violence, which left around 200 dead and tens of thousands homeless, is often described as a communal conflict between Buddhists and Muslims, but members of Rakhine State's Muslim Rohingya community were the most victimized (HRW, 2012). The authorities' response was to separate the two communities, but the burden of this policy overwhelmingly fell on the Muslim community, with around 140,000 Rohingya then confined to supposedly temporary IDP (internally displaced person) camps where at least 100,000 remain five years later.

In 2015, Myanmar's national parliament passed a collection of laws championed by nationalists. Known as the Protection of Race and Religion package, it comprised the Population Control Health Care Law, the Religious Conversion Bill, the Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Bill, and the Monogamy Bill (Caster, 2015; Wa Lone, 2015). The proposals were opposed by human rights organizations and civil society



groups concerned about their discriminatory nature. At the time, the UN's special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, said the bills "risk deepening discrimination against minorities and setting back women's rights in Myanmar" (UNHCR, 2015, para. 2). Despite this, these proposals received overwhelming parliamentary support, and while not backed by National League for Democracy (NLD) lawmakers, the party has not rescinded these laws since coming to office after the 2015 national election.

By 2017, the Rohingya lacked any meaningful domestic political support, with many in the country seemingly prepared to accept the appalling mistreatment of the group by the country's military. The events in 2012 and the horrors of the Rohingya's 2017 forced migration demonstrate how there can be devastating real-world consequences when extreme speech against groups like the Rohingya has been made acceptable and mainstreamed. Anti-Rohingya speech has played a central role in the creation of a political environment in Myanmar in which public opinion does not oppose rights abuses against the Rohingya. Although calls to regulate extreme speech in Myanmar have focused on nonstate actors' use of online platforms like Facebook (Burrington, 2017; Hogan, 2018; McLaughlin, 2018), I argue that the state media, discussed in the next section, played an important role in the mainstreaming of anti-Rohingya narratives.

### **Extreme Speech in Myanmar's State Media: The *Global New Light of Myanmar***

Despite criticism of nonstate actors' use of extreme speech in Myanmar, and specific criticism of Facebook's role in promoting it, the role of official Myanmar as an active contributor to the mainstreaming of anti-Rohingya speech and attitudes has been often overlooked. Although Myanmar nationalists have actively contributed to hostility toward the aspirations of groups like the Rohingya, the state has done this too. This is hardly surprising since official policies toward the Rohingya have, for decades, actively discriminated against the group, denying them citizenship and access to their human rights.

In Myanmar, penalties for law breaking can be harsh, and under military rule, civilians have been jailed frequently for expressing opinions considered problematic by the authorities, a practice that continues today despite the media reforms of recent years (Allott, 1993; Fink, 2001). Human rights groups including Amnesty International and HRW suggest Myanmar's legal framework simultaneously undermines those who might peacefully oppose nationalists' extreme speech that echoes that of the authorities. Amnesty International documented this in its 2016 research report "New Expression Meets Old Repression," which highlighted incarcerations in Myanmar for peaceful protests and instances of jail terms for individuals accused of mocking the military on Facebook. In 2017, following a spate of arrests of peaceful political activists, HRW called for Myanmar's authorities to repeal laws that allow criminal prosecutions for peaceful political speech (HRW, 2017a). In this context, Myanmar state media provides the country's residents with an indication of what the authorities consider acceptable forms of expression and those that are unlikely to attract official sanction. Official media sets the tone for what is acceptable, and, as I show through a case study of the GNLM, this contributes to an environment that excuses and allows nationalist hate speech, particularly targeting the country's Muslim Rohingya.

Building on my extended research on this topic, I examined GNLM editions during, and immediately before, the 2017 Rohingya crisis as a case study of official extreme speech in Myanmar. State media

dominates Myanmar's broadcast sector, and most television channels and radio stations are state owned (Ministry of Information, 2018). There are a number of state-owned daily newspapers published in Burmese, and the GNLM has Burmese and English editions that while often similar are not identical. Published by the Myanmar Ministry of Information (MOI), the GNLM is the country's longest-running newspaper, has been in print in various forms since 1914, and was nationalized by Burma's military-led government during the 1960s when it was published as the *Working People's Daily* ("About Us: Brief History," 2014; "Chronology of the Press," 2004). English was the country's official language until independence in 1948, and while it is still widely spoken by professionals, it is today a minority language in Myanmar. GNLM as an English-language publication is not aimed solely at a domestic market but is also a mechanism for the MOI to communicate official views to the diplomatic corps, foreign business, media, and the outside world more broadly.

The GNLM represents the face official Myanmar wants to show the world—the messages the authorities want the world to hear—and for this reason it is also important domestically. I examined GNLM English-language editions during two calendar months from late July until late September 2017, using August 25 (the date the 2017 crisis began) as the pivotal date. My focus was on the front-page stories—there are usually two or three daily (including photo leads)—and the online news archive. Not all articles make it to the online news archive; these articles are selected by the publisher to be retained and available and are a reflection of the MOI's priorities. The GNLM publishes a daily edition in print that is also available online at the MOI's website for around one week from publication, and there is an online archive of articles available (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2018b). Further highlighting the influence of Facebook in Myanmar, GNLM also maintains an active presence there, with around a half dozen articles taken from each edition posted daily, as well as an archive of front pages (from the printed version) available to the public (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2018a).

I adopted a thematic analysis of the GNLM data and coded articles related to Rakhine State by their primary theme. The GNLM's approach was not subtle, and most articles about Rakhine State could be neatly categorized as focused on security, development, or the role of the UN there. A clear indication of state media's security-heavy focus was the extremely narrow range of Rakhine State matters addressed in GNLM. Before the August crisis, Rakhine State matters were already overrepresented in the GNLM relative to its proportion of Myanmar's population, and the majority of these presented the authorities as either creating economic opportunity (for example, "Union Ministers Inspect Rakhine State Public Works Projects," 2017) or defending Rakhine State from Muslim terrorists. The GNLM's use of the description "terrorist" for militants in Rakhine State would be widely understood in Myanmar as a reference to Muslim militants. During the period between July 26 and August 25, 2017, 294 articles were included in the news archive; 36 of these related to Rakhine State matters. The most common theme was Rakhine State security matters, which accounted for 25 articles and included headlines like "Tents of Violent Attackers Discovered in Mayu Mountain" (2017), "IED Explodes in Maungtaw" (2017), and "Emergency Meeting After Killings of Civilians in Maungtaw" (2017). The content of GNLM articles further points to Muslims as the perpetrators of terrorism by, for example, making references to areas understood to be Muslim majority and to finding UN humanitarian supplies, widely understood as having been provided to Muslims in Rakhine State at the "violent attackers" camp. The second most common theme was development issues in Rakhine State, which

accounted for a further nine articles, while two articles addressed the role of the UN in Myanmar, which is closely related to Rakhine State issues.

This securitized focus demonstrates how GNLM's publisher, the Myanmar MOI, considered Rakhine State matters a priority for publication and reveals MOI's focus on the security situation there. Rakhine State's population is 3.1 million in a country of 51 million residents, representing around 6% of Myanmar's total. Yet in the month before the August 2017 violence, Rakhine State issues accounted for around 12% of GNLM news archive articles. Myanmar's central authorities have been at war with ethnic minorities for more than five decades, and there are dozens of armed ethnic groups (including some controlling large areas of territory), but none of them are majority Muslim (Smith, 1999). While a nationwide peace negotiation is underway and involves the participation of dozens of ethnic minority groups, the GNLM's heavy focus on Rakhine State security matters represents a strong statement from official Myanmar that security in Rakhine State ought to be specifically considered a national political concern.

State media reporting about Rakhine State was already highly securitized when the Rohingya crisis began on August 25. During the month following the crisis, there were many more articles in GNLM about Rakhine State than during the previous month, but GNLM already had an established focus on security matters when reporting events in Rakhine State. The number of articles in the archive increased to 345 during the period from August 26 to September 25. Unsurprisingly after the start of the August crisis, the number of articles about Rakhine State increased, with 124 addressing Rakhine State issues. These articles overwhelmingly had a security focus—117 addressed security issues in Rakhine State, while 7 focused on economic development matters there. During this period, Rakhine State issues accounted for around 36% of GNLM news archive articles, and headlines often adopted a sensationalist tone suggesting Myanmar was under siege by Muslim terrorists, for example, "Terrorists Trying to Destroy Maungtau" (2017), "Let Us Eradicate Extremist Terrorists, Destructive Elements Together!" (2017), "Extremist Terrorism on the Rise!" (2017), "Issuing Notification of Acknowledging and Urging the People Not to Encourage, Support and Abet Extremist Terrorists" (2017), and "Warning in Relation With Extremist Terrorists" (2017).

Front-page articles appearing in the GNLM throughout these periods similarly reflected a focus on Rakhine State security concerns. There are usually two to three front-page articles daily. During the July 26 to August 25 period, there were 50 front-page articles (or photo leads), and of these eight related to Rakhine State and all but one dealt with the security situation there. Once the 2017 Rohingya crisis began the following month (August 26 to September 25), there were 53 front-page articles, of which 47 related to security issues in Rakhine State. These articles overwhelmingly focused on official fears about potential Muslim terrorism and included photographs suggesting a chaotic situation in northern Rakhine State being calmed by Myanmar security forces, of burning villages allegedly attacked by Muslim terrorists, and of locals and emergency services working to defend and repair homes from Muslim terrorist destruction.

### **Discussion**

Myanmar's official media's approach to reporting Rakhine State matters contributes to a domestic political context that allows for the ongoing mistreatment of groups like the Rohingya. Official Myanmar media like the GNLM can be considered as representing a form of extreme speech in two main ways: First,

it characterizes the situation in Rakhine State as one in which the Myanmar authorities regularly provide development help and economic benefits to the state and its residents, but where the Myanmar population is under siege from Muslim terrorists and by implication members of the Rohingya community, and second, it ignores atrocities committed by the Myanmar military against Rohingya communities that have resulted in the largest forced migration in the region since the end of the Second World War, as well as the decades of systematic mistreatment and human rights violations against the Rohingya minority. The GNLM's strong focus on security issues in Rakhine State mirrors the extreme speech of nationalists and encourages readers to believe the country is under siege from Muslims, who are argued to be undertaking a well-organized campaign of terror there, and that Myanmar military's actions in Rakhine State are a legitimate and reasonable response to this threat. State media like the GNLM provide Myanmar's residents with an indication of acceptable forms of expression that are unlikely to attract official sanction. This is a key way the GNLM contributed to an environment that excused and allowed nationalist hate speech, particularly against groups like the Rohingya, and this helped provide license and encouragement for the Myanmar military's campaign of ethnic cleansing.

What is missing from GNLM is important, too, and should be considered as part of a discussion of extreme speech in Myanmar. Media choosing to ignore key facts and events can be as problematic as deliberately misreporting events. In this instance, by ignoring key facts, the GNLM has helped maintain a political environment where the Tatmadaw's actions in Rakhine State against the Rohingya could continue without meaningful domestic political opposition. When the recent crisis began in August 2017, the Rohingya were already routinely subject to discrimination and human rights violations in Rakhine State. Researchers at Queen Mary University of London's International State Crime Initiative described this discrimination in their 2015 report "Countdown to Annihilation" as a process of "genocide" (Green, MacManus, & de la Cour Venning, 2015). Amnesty International (2017) has described this situation as "apartheid." GNLM articles from August 26 to September 25 were published during a period when more than 400,000 Rohingya Muslims fled a Tatmadaw "clearance operation" in Rakhine State described by senior UN figures as involving ethnic cleansing ("Rohingya Crisis," 2017). Despite this, the GNLM presented the situation in Rakhine State as the Tatmadaw gallantly defending the nation's sovereignty from Muslim terrorists and complained about inappropriate international interference from groups like the UN and Western media. GNLM articles do not address discrimination against the Rohingya Muslim minority. Instead, GNLM articles about Rakhine State can be categorized as either presenting positive news about economic development there or security-related articles that frequently place the blame for unrest on "extremist terrorists."

### **Conclusions**

Much of the existing literature examining the regulation of hateful or extreme speech online (A. Brown, 2017; Cohen-Almagor, 2015; Gagliardone et al, 2015) has focused largely on the role of nonstate actors as perpetrators and has routinely considered the government's role to be primarily that of a regulator. Some researchers have called for Internet companies to play a greater role in tackling hate speech (A. Brown, 2017), but many studies that call for collective solutions to combating online hate speech assume the role of state authorities as regulators and protectors of the community from hate speech rather than treating state actors as themselves likely perpetrators of hate speech (Cohen-Almagor, 2015). While concerns about the consequences of extreme speech by individuals and nationalist groups using platforms

such as Facebook have been widely acknowledged, in this article I have argued that, while regulators internationally have actively considered the role of social media platforms like Facebook in spreading extreme speech, events in Myanmar suggest it is time they also considered what steps can be taken to address extreme speech originating from official state media sources. The role of the state, and official state media sources, in the production of extreme speech is thus important to understand in the context of global online research.

Incorporating the role of government-initiated and published speech into the theoretical framework of extreme speech allows for greater understanding of how climates of violence and hostility are generated across different media environments in different parts of the world. In Myanmar's case, the consequences of the authorities' use of state media to securitize the Rakhine State situation are being felt acutely throughout the region—more than 700,000 Rohingya refugees fled Myanmar for Bangladesh. This risks destabilizing neighboring Bangladesh, whose border areas are now home to more than 1 million desperate Rohingya refugees. This population is already known to be at risk of exploitation by migration and sex traffickers and may now be at risk of exploitation by international jihadi groups (Arnold, 2017).

Extending the concept of extreme speech to also include actions by state actors using official media ought to be a concern for critical scholarship because the consequences of extreme speech by authorities can be grave, particularly for minority groups (Article 19, 2015). For groups like the Rohingya, the consequences of failing to address this have already been shown to be devastating.

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