

Hate Speech and Incitement in Southeast Asia

Hate and danger speech are again on the rise in Southeast Asia due to COVID-19. The virus has been used by a variety of hateful and racist groups in the region to incite violence against minority groups. In Indonesia, the primary victims have been the Chinese-Indonesian populations. In India and Sri Lanka, the minority Muslim communities are targeted. Similarly, in Myanmar the government and Tatmadaw have used the virus to exacerbate ongoing tensions against Muslims and other minorities.

For the Rohingya, while already victims of genocide at the hands of the Myanmar government, the diaspora has found itself being blamed for importing the virus into countries such as Bangladesh and Malaysia.¹ In Malaysia, where the Rohingya were for some while depicted as victims across social media platforms, with the onset of COVID-19 the community are becoming increasingly the target of hate narratives, and the government has responded by rounding-up the refugees and locating them in camps where conditions mean the virus could easily spread.²

All social media platforms in Southeast Asia have recorded spikes in hate and danger speech, including WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram.³ In response, software companies, including Facebook, have been developing A.I. to tackle wording, language and context used by those promoting racism born from COVID-19. Facebook noted that in the first 3 months of 2020 it had removed 9.6 million pieces of hate speech and misinformation, up threefold in quantity from the previous three months.⁴

Asia and Asians have also borne the brunt of widespread racist stereotyping, with many nations globally reporting a rise in anti-Asian sentiment due to attackers being unable to determine the victim's background, assuming all Asians are Chinese. Xenophobic sentiments have been noted and recorded in Australia⁵, the United States (exacerbated by President Trump dubbing COVID-19 the "Wuhan virus" or the "Chinese virus"), Europe, and the United Kingdom.⁶ This racism continues to proliferate in countries including Australia, and has exacerbated diplomatic tensions between a number of countries and China, though according to the Lowry Institute in 2019, in Southeast Asia "hate speech and the language of violence is increasingly seen as more a global phenomenon, not something that can be framed in national borders."⁷ COVID-19 appears to be interrupting and reorientating this perception given some of the economic fallout experienced between Australia and China, as an example.

¹ Minter, Adam, "Rohingyas, Migrant Workers Face the Brunt of Malaysia's Xenophobia During COVID," *The Print*, 15 May (2020), <https://theprint.in/opinion/rohingyas-migrant-workers-face-the-brunt-of-malaysias-xenophobia-during-covid/422135/>

² Ibid.

³ Takahashi, Sora, and Yifan Yu, "Anti-Asian Hate, the New Outbreak Threatening the World," *Nikkei Asian Review*, 8 Feb. (2020), <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/Anti-Asian-hate-the-new-outbreak-threatening-the-world>

⁴ Khan, Jeremy, "Facebook Makes Strides Using A.I. to Automatically Find Hate Speech and COVID-19 Misinformation," *Fortune*, 13 May (2020), <https://fortune.com/2020/05/12/facebook-a-i-hate-speech-covid-19-misinformation/>

⁵ Zhou, Naaman, "Survey of COVID-19 racism Against Asian Australians Records 178 Incidents in Two Weeks," *Guardian*, 17 April (2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/survey-of-covid-19-racism-against-asian-australians-records-178-incidents-in-two-weeks>

⁶ Anon, "COVID-19 Fuelling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide: National Action Plans Needed to Counter Intolerance," *Human Rights Watch*, 12 May (2020), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>

⁷ Rose, JJ, "A Bugle for Bigotry: Does Hate Speech in Australia Resonate in Asia?" *The Interpreter*, 1 May (2019), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/bugle-bigotry-does-hate-speech-australia-resonate-asia>

Recommendations

Southeast Asian governments should:

1. Realise the importance of direct hate speech and danger speech legislation, and implement this legislation in its civil and penal codes.
2. Work with the private sector, including social media sites and internet companies more broadly, to implement a range of generic policy measures across the region, rather than on a state-by-state basis.
3. Ensure public education about COVID-19 to counter hate narratives that use the virus as a reason for refugee deportation.
4. Work with CSOs and NGOs at large-scale educational programmes for all ages and all users.
5. Learn from and work with the European Union and its partners to implement measures to curb hate speech and danger speech in Southeast Asia.