Asia Pacific Regional Outlook November 2020

Hate Speech and Incitement in Southeast Asia

Hate speech in the Asia Pacific region has increased with the COVID pandemic, and social media has played a large role in this increase. While the initial targets of the pandemic's hate speech were Chinese citizens, or people of Chinese background, and the hate speech apparent both in the virtual world and in the real world,[1] in more recent months the victims have been a range of minority groups from around the Asia Pacific region. An OCHA report on the region notes that "Discriminatory rhetoric against marginalized populations such as minorities, refugees and migrants has surged in the context of COVID-19. False stories accusing these vulnerable groups of being responsible for the transmission of the virus have resulted in a rise of discrimination and in some cases violence against the targeted group."[2]

These minority groups include religious, ethnic, cultural minorities, and recent refugees that have fled violence. Included are Rohingya refugees who have been the targets of discrimination in Malaysia, with Malaysian locals using social media to suggest the refugees carry the COVID-19 virus.[3] In Malaysia, the Rohingya are being told to "return home" by xenophobic posters on a variety of social media platforms, though this sentiment has been most abundantly posted on Facebook. While Facebook has removed some of the content, a report by Reuters reveals that much hate speech remains on the site, including posts that compare the Rohingya minority to dogs and parasites.[4]

A rise in hate speech has also been noted once again in Myanmar, with a report by Burma Human Rights Network revealing anti-Muslim sentiment as well as the "spreading of fake news, viscous attacks, and incitement of violence against Burmese Muslims."[5] Hate speech has been spread by citizens and government alike, including hate speech on state-sponsored media.[6] With upcoming general elections in Burma in early November 2020, due to COVID-19, campaigners are taking their election campaigns online, resulting in an upsurge of hate speech and fake news in the virtual world. This increase in hate speech and fake news is also due to a rise in social media users this election from last election, with three times as many Burmese using the internet and social media platforms.[7]

There still remains something of a stalemate between governments and social media companies. Governments in the region are stalling at establishing hate speech laws, including The Philippines and Myanmar, while social media companies are, in some regions, adapting policies to counter and stop hate speech and fake news, though in other regions, again in The Philippines as an example, such initiatives are yet to be apparent.

Recommendations

Governments in the Asia Pacific region should:
1. Realise the importance of direct hate speech and danger speech legislation, and implement this legislation in its civil and penal codes.

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[1] Online Hate Institute, 2020, 'Coronavirus', 12 April. Available at https://ohpi.org.au/coronavirus/

[2] OCHA, 2020, 'Asia Pacific Humanitarian Update', 22 June. Available at https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/asia-pacific/card/6JuDRGYI5Q/

[3] Max Walden, 2020, 'Coronavirus crisis sees Rohingya face growing hostility in Malaysia,' *ABC News*, 27 April. Available at https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-27/coronavirus-sees-rohingya-face-growing-hostility-in-malaysia/12185296

[4] Reuters, 2020, 'Anti-Rohingya sentiment rears ugly head on Facebook as Covid-19 fear grips Malaysia,' *Malaysia Mail*, 14 October. Available at https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/10/14/anti-rohingya-sentiment-rears-ugly-head-on-facebook-as-covid-19-fear-grips/1912531

[5] Md. Kamruzzaman, 2020, 'Hate speech rife in Myanmar ahead of elections: Study,' *Anadolu Agency*, 4 November. Available at https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/hate-speech-rife-in-myanmar-ahead-of-elections-study/2031897

[6] Ibid.

[7] Leong Wai Kit, 'Fake news, hate speech hurting Myanmar's political parties amid online campaigning,' *CNA*, 6 November. Available at https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/fake-news-hate-speech-hurting-myanmar-s-political-parties-amid-13473032

2. Work with the private sector, including social media sites and internet companies more broadly, to implement a range of 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.