



Media, State Control, and Freedom of Religion in South and Southeast Asia



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This brief provides a comparative analysis of media landscapes and major issues that hinder, prevent, or support religious freedom in South and Southeast Asian countries.

It is directed to peacebuilders and policymakers at country and regional levels. It highlights two crosscutting themes: how social hostilities between religious and ethnic groups are represented in the media and the leverage of state-controlled digital media. The brief offers practical recommendations that can be pursued at national and regional levels to advance the right to religious freedom.

Media has long shaped narratives about political and social impacts of religion. How religion is portrayed in media thus merits closer attention. Much of what people know about religions is conveyed through media.¹ The term media is all-encompassing, including television, film, radio, and print publications, and contemporary internet-based social platforms such as Facebook and related communication technologies.² Both digital and social media have seen an explosion in supply and demand due to technological advances and plummeting costs of content production.

Today, religion is highly mediatized. Therefore, we can find religion mediated through various digital and social media platforms.³ Pew Research (a Washington DC “think and do” tank) reports document increasing online exchanges about religious faith and awareness of other community members who share their religious faiths related content online.⁴ American scholar Stewart Hoover argues that “a dizzying array of religious, spiritual, quasi-religious, implicitly religious, and near-religious claims, productions, symbols, networks, and movements can find their voices in the media marketplace.”⁵ Increasing commodification and popularization of religion are some of the results. New religious signs, symbols, and languages reshape religious expression, shifting various religious perceptions and practices, as people have a broader range of choices.

The contemporary growth and transformation of religious media presence has significant policy implications. Liberalization and global mass followings of media, particularly social media, in recent decades affect how religious institutions and matters are perceived and reproduced, and their practical impact. This includes notably matters concerning conflicts and efforts to build peace.

A complicating and often distorting factor is that all religious communities do not have equal access, resources, or mechanisms to utilize the media space. Within the context of increasing

¹ Stout, Daniel A. *Media and Religion: Foundations of an Emerging Field*. Routledge, 2013.

² Evolvi, Giulia. “Religion, New Media, and Digital Culture.” Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion, February 23, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.917>.

³ Hoover, Stewart M. “Religion and the Media in the 21st Century.” *Tripodos*, no. 29 (2012): 27–35. Specific page where the quote is from

⁴ “Sharing Religious Faith Online.” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), November 6, 2014. <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/06/religion-and-electronic-media/>.

⁵ Hoover, Stewart M. “Religion and the Media in the 21st Century.” *Tripodos*, no. 29 (2012): 32.

focus on religious topics, the “digital divide⁶” marginalizes ethnic, religious, linguistic minorities, and indigenous peoples and their equitable access to various forms of media⁷ (i.e., almost half the world’s population is still not connected to the internet⁸). The digital divide is also gendered: women are around 12% less likely to have internet access than men globally. The divide is wider in least developed countries (33%).⁹ In comparison to majority groups, minority ethnic and religious communities around the world also have more limited access to Internet.¹⁰ Since social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter are digital spaces where freedom of speech, expression, and religion and beliefs are becoming increasingly exercised, discriminatory digital divides represent a “new face of inequality.”¹¹

Along with more religious presence in media, social hostilities that are framed in religious terms have also gone up globally in every aspect of life—the number of countries reporting significant social conflict involving religion increased from 39 in 2007 to 56 in 2017.¹² Social media has been a major platform for spreading hate speech and mis/disinformation, and targeted attacks on faith groups. The UN Special Rapporteur on minorities, Fernand de Varennes, calls these phenomena “poisoning of minds” that must be addressed and countered:

The last decade has seen minorities around the world facing new and growing threats, fueled by hate and bigotry being spewed through social media platforms. [...] This has contributed to the rise of violent extremist groups and to a dramatic increase in many countries of hate crimes targeting religious, ethnic and other minorities, including migrants. The more hate speech is widespread, the more it becomes part of the mainstream and creates a permissive and toxic environment where calls for violence against the ‘hated’ group, usually a minority, become normalized. This propagation of hate against minorities online must be stopped.¹³

⁶ According to Stanford University’s Compute Science Department, digital divide is defined as “the growing gap between the underprivileged members of society, especially the poor, rural, elderly, and handicapped portion of the population who do not have access to computers or the internet; and the wealthy, middle-class, and young Americans living in urban and suburban areas who have access.”

⁷ Minority Rights Group. “Minority and Indigenous Trends 2020.” Accessed May 26, 2021. <https://minorityrights.org/trends2020/>.

⁸ “With Almost Half of World’s Population Still Offline, Digital Divide Risks Becoming ‘New Face of Inequality’, Deputy Secretary-General Warns General Assembly | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases.” Accessed May 26, 2021. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/dsgsm1579.doc.htm>.

⁹ OECD, *Bridging the Digital Gender Divide*, 2018, p. 25.

¹⁰ Weidmann, N.B., Benitez-Baleato, S., Hunziker, P., Glatz, E. and Dimitropoulos, X., ‘Digital discrimination: political bias in internet service provision across ethnic groups’, *Science*, 353(6304), pp. 1151—5.

¹¹ “With Almost Half of World’s Population Still Offline, Digital Divide Risks Becoming ‘New Face of Inequality’, Deputy Secretary-General Warns General Assembly | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases.” Accessed May 26, 2021. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/dsgsm1579.doc.htm>.

¹² “How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World.” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), July 15, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/>.

¹³ “OHCHR | UN Expert Denounces the Propagation of Hate Speech through Social Media.” Accessed May 27, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25626&LangID=E>.

In countries where internet and social media are synonymous, as is the case in Myanmar where Facebook is the primary source of basic internet use¹⁴, the problems of mis/disinformation and fake news are compounded and worsen because users have almost no other way to verify the information they see on these platforms. Most journalists and internet content producers are not trained in their own religion, let alone other religions and thus are susceptible to spreading distorted information.¹⁵

Existing government oversight of media and other relevant regulations have limited capacities to appreciate and act on the fluid and constantly evolving nature of the digital space. More significantly, internet/media policies and actions lean towards authoritarian restrictions. Globally, government restrictions on religious laws, policies, and practices (both online and offline) are increasing, with evidence of rising trends (see case studies below). The Pew Research Center undertakes regular global surveys regarding restrictions on religion. These surveys show that 52 countries imposed either “high” or “very high” levels of restrictions on religion in 2017, an increase from 40 countries in 2007.¹⁶ Governments have generally controlled the media, as opposed to developing and relying on comprehensive and long-term social cohesion policies. Shutting down internet, increasing surveillance, implementing blasphemy laws, and retaliating against the religious and ethnic minorities based on their social media presence are some of the examples of state control that directly and indirectly jeopardize freedom of religion and belief. For instance, in 2020, the digital rights organization “Access Now” reported 155 internet shutdowns in 29 countries affecting hundreds of millions of people.¹⁷

The importance of free and independent media is highlighted in the **Sustainable Development Goals** of the Agenda 2030, which has direct relevance to FoRB. Target **16.10** expects countries to “Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.” Under this target, two specific indicators measure success (or lack thereof):

16.10.1: Number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates in the previous 12 months.

16.10.2: Number of countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information.

¹⁴ “Myanmar Coup: How the Military Disrupted the Internet.” *BBC News*, February 4, 2021, sec. Asia.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55889565>.

¹⁵ Writer, Liz Mineo Harvard Staff. “When Journalism Meets Religion.” *Harvard Gazette* (blog), December 7, 2016.

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/12/religious-lit-symposium/>.

¹⁶ “How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World.” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), July 15, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/>.

¹⁷ Access Now. “Freedom of Expression Archives.” Accessed May 26, 2021.

<https://www.accessnow.org/issue/freedom-of-expression/>.

The following section presents five brief country cases from South and Southeast Asia and underlines outstanding issues that prevent successful implementation of the **SDG Target 16.10**. In each case, government restrictions on media are increasing at an alarming rate with the effect of growing marginalization of religious groups and individuals and undermining their freedom of religion and belief and related human rights.

Bangladesh

Data (from 2019) indicates that the most popular broadcast medium in Bangladesh is television¹⁸ but radio, print media, and social media also play vital roles. State-run Bangladesh television (BTV) and radio stations (Bangladesh *Betar*) alone have national terrestrial coverage. There are more than 40 privately owned satellite-based TV stations and more than 20 private FM and community radio stations.¹⁹ Bengali is the predominant language in all these channels and stations. Indian satellite TV stations (both Hindi and Bengali) have a large following in Bangladesh.²⁰ Print media is vibrant in Bangladesh, with 1,191 daily newspapers among 3,025 registered print media (2018²¹). The online media landscape is growing steadily as well. According to 2019 data, 3,595 news portals applied for government registration—only 92 securing the registration.²² The number of Internet and cell phone users has grown massively in recent years. According to Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission's (BTRC), there were 108.1 million “internet subscribers”²³ as of August 2020—a two-fold increase from 2015.²⁴ However, internet user data shows that around 47.61 million people use internet regularly and the total number of social media users in the country is 45 million out of those 108.1 million users.²⁵ 100.2%²⁶ of the population has a cell phone subscription.²⁷ Internet World Stats (IWS) estimated

¹⁸ “Bangladesh Profile - Media.” *BBC News*, August 27, 2019, sec. Asia. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12650946>.

¹⁹ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. DFAT Country Information Report Bangladesh. 22 August 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/country-information-report-bangladesh.pdf> Is there another source?

²⁰ Home Office. Country Policy and Information Note Bangladesh: Journalists, the press and social media. V2. January 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1350971/download>

²¹ *ibid*

²² The non-registered media can be shut down by the government without any bargaining power. Source: bdnews24.com. “Bangladesh Greenlights 92 Newspapers to Register Websites.” Accessed May 27, 2021. <https://bdnews24.com/media-en/2020/09/04/bangladesh-greenlights-92-newspapers-to-register-websites>.

²³ The term ‘internet subscriber’ means subscribers/subscriptions who have accessed the internet at least once in the preceding 90 days.

²⁴ “Internet Users in Bangladesh Double in Last Five Years.” *The Financial Express*. Accessed May 27, 2021. <https://www.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/trade/internet-users-in-bangladesh-double-in-last-five-years-1602834123>.

²⁵ Dhaka Tribune. “Bangladesh Charts 9m New Social Media Users,” April 26, 2021. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/04/26/bangladesh-charts-9m-new-social-media-users>.

²⁶ Such inflationary number indicates that people own multiple cell phone SIM cards.

²⁷ DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. “Digital in Bangladesh: All the Statistics You Need in 2021.” Accessed May 27, 2021. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-bangladesh>.

nearly 34 million Facebook users in January 2020.²⁸ There are 13,967 blog websites, making it another popular form of media.²⁹ As most of the digital and print media portals are secular, there is no data on how religious contents are produced and consumed in the country.

Bangladesh has the highest gender gap in the region in terms of access to internet and cell phones: the percentage of men using mobile internet is double (33%) compared to women (16%). Large gaps exist in the ownership of mobile phones: 61% of women own mobile phones, whereas 86% of men own at least one mobile phone.³⁰

Bangladeshi media are frequently polarized and have political affiliations. A 2019 report suggests that the majority of the private TV channels are either owned by or have affiliations to the ruling political party.³¹

Government-exercised control over media content and censorship are often politically motivated and significant factors in the promotion of freedom of media particularly for religious minorities.

Bangladesh has enacted laws to counter and reduce practices such as defamation, spread of fake news and propaganda, and religious hatred. However, the laws are often misused to “curb free speech and rein in press freedom in the country.”³² The Bangladesh Penal Code (chapter XV) involves punishment for statements or acts that demonstrate a “deliberate and malicious” intent to insult religious sentiments. Reports suggest that Bangladeshi courts have generally interpreted the “intent to insult religious sentiments” in favor of the country’s majority religion—Islam. The government may “confiscate all copies of any newspaper, magazine, or other publication containing language that ‘create enmity and hatred among the citizens or denigrate religious beliefs’” as stated in the Penal Code.³³ The Information and Communication technology (ICT) Act allows government to sue journalists on the grounds of defamation and hurting religious sentiment, with jail terms up to 14 years. The Digital Security Act (DSA) of 2018 allows stricter restrictions, mandating up to 10 years of imprisonment for harming someone’s “religious sentiment,” and up to seven years in prison for deliberately publishing information that can spread hatred among communities.³⁴

²⁸ Home Office. Country Policy and Information Note Bangladesh: Journalists, the press and social media. V2. January 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1350971/download>

²⁹ “Blog Usage Distribution in Bangladesh.” Accessed May 27, 2021.

<https://trends.builtwith.com/cms/blog/country/Bangladesh>.

³⁰ World Wide Web Foundation. Women’s Rights Online: Report Card Bangladesh Measuring Progress, Driving Action. 2020. Retrieved from: <http://webfoundation.org/docs/2020/09/Digital-Gender-Audit-Scorecard-Bangladesh-Final-Sept-2020.pdf>

³¹ <http://dhakacourier.com.bd/>. “Bangladesh TV: Ownership Patterns and Market Crisis.” Accessed May 27, 2021. <http://dhakacourier.com.bd/news/Column/Bangladesh-TV:-Ownership-patterns-and-market-crisis/1334>.

³² Staff, Reuters. “Factbox: Bangladesh’s Broad Media Laws.” *Reuters*, December 13, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-election-media-factbox-idUSKBN1OC08S>

³³ Home Office. Country Policy and Information Note Bangladesh: Journalists, the press and social media. V2. January 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1350971/download>

³⁴ “Bangladesh Enacts New Law That Could Silence Dissenters.” Accessed May 27, 2021. <https://thedi diplomat.com/2018/10/bangladesh-enacts-new-law-that-could-silence-dissenters/>.

According to the DFAT report, “The DSA gives authorities the power to review digital communications, including on social media and closed-source platforms, and criminalize various types of online speech, ranging from defamatory messages to speech that “injures religious values or sentiments.”³⁵ Similar to the Penal Code, the DSA has often been used to protect majority religious sentiments.

Social hostilities and official sanctions against faith groups that have allegedly criticized Islam have increased rapidly in the recent past. At least 10 bloggers, social media activists, writers, and publishers were killed between 2013 to 2016 for criticizing Islam and its role in the state.³⁶ Hardline Islamic organizations have demanded stricter sanctions against “atheist” and “secular” bloggers and writers from time to time. Violence and widespread social unrest have been sparked by social media posts. Hundreds of Hindu and Buddhist households and businesses were attacked and burned down by zealots in Ramu (2012), Pabna (2013), Cumilla (2014), Nasirnagar (2016), Rangpur (2017), and Bhola (2019), and four people were killed over alleged social media posts undermining Islam’s Prophet Muhammad and the holy Quran.³⁷

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has a vibrant landscape of electronic, print, and internet-based media, though it ranks 127th out of 180 countries in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index.³⁸ According to 2019 data, 4.8 million households own a television. Privately owned networks dominate the media space in television. Sri Lankan TV stations, radio networks and newspapers use Sinhala, Tamil and English, with a clear Sinhala dominance.³⁹ 2021 data on internet use in Sri Lanka show a range between 34.1%-50% (7.32-10 million) of the total population with internet access⁴⁰ and 7.9 million (36.8% of the total population) people using social media. Facebook is the largest social media platform in the country, with 7 million users. 98.7% of people use Facebook on their mobile phones.⁴¹

Ethno-religious tensions permeate Sri Lanka’s digital, print, and social media, with the effect of marginalizing minority communities.

³⁵ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. DFAT Country Information Report Bangladesh. 22 August 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/country-information-report-bangladesh.pdf>

³⁶ Global Voices Advox. “Bloggers Under Fire: The Fatal Consequences of Free Thinking in Bangladesh · Global Voices Advox.” Accessed May 27, 2021. <https://advox.globalvoices.org/campaigns-research/bloggers-under-fire-the-fatal-consequences-of-free-thinking-in-bangladesh/>.

³⁷ Ali, Sumon. “Uses of Facebook to Accelerate Violence and Its Impact in Bangladesh,” no. 36 (2020): 5.

³⁸ RSF. “World Press Freedom Index.” Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2021>.

³⁹ Seven Media Group. “Media Landscape Sri Lanka 2019.” Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://sevenmediagroup.com/media-landscape-sri-lanka-2019/>.

⁴⁰ DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. “Digital in Sri Lanka: All the Statistics You Need in 2021.” Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-sri-lanka>.

⁴¹ *ibid*

Three key events have contributed to the rising effects of such tensions: the 2014 clashes between Sinhala Buddhist and Muslim communities in Kalutara district, the 2018 anti-Muslim riot in Ampara and Kandy, and the 2019 Easter bombing. These events reinforced the rhetoric propagated by Sinhala hardliners “that Muslims are a threat to Sinhala nationalism.”⁴² Further, Sri Lanka’s mainstream media showed their bias against minorities during post-war violence, for example by downplaying casualties.⁴³ The government shut down social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Snapchat to stop the spread of false news reports after the 2019 terrorist attacks.⁴⁴ The United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association reported in 2020 that the ethnic and religious minorities raised their concerns about systemic discrimination in media through vilifying language by high officials, disparity in legal treatment, hateful media campaigns, and hate speech in both online and offline media.⁴⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already existing social divisions making social media sites a fertile ground for breeding hatred against minority groups.

Government control over media has increased over the years. The proposed Cyber Security Bill, the Data Protection Bill, and Computer Crimes Act (2007) have good intentions but these can be potentially used against minority groups. The Constitution and the Penal Code are supposed to protect against discrimination and online violence. However, legal instruments are often “applied against members of minority communities, while blatant acts of hate speech from majority communities often go completely unchecked.”⁴⁶

Myanmar

Most of radio and television media in Myanmar is state-controlled. Myanmar’s media landscape is broadly shaped by the country’s volatile political sphere.⁴⁷ The 1988 student-led uprising and following military crackdown sparked a decades-long de facto exile of many media outlets. Following the Saffron Revolution led by the monks in 2007, citizen journalists and bloggers were better able to expose the military junta’s brutality. The 2015 election brought hope for free media, but there has been backsliding in ensuing years. Since the

⁴² Tennakoon, Thamesha. May 26, 2020. “Implications of COVID-19 on Ethno-Religious Tensions in Sri Lanka.”

Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs. Georgetown University. Accessed May 28, 2021.

<https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/implications-of-covid-19-on-ethno-religious-tensions-in-sri-lanka>.

⁴³ Peiris, Sulochana. “An Introduction to Religious Pluralism in Sri Lanka.” 2019. Internews Sri Lanka, 46. Retrieved from: https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/2020-01/SriLanka_Handbook_Religious_Freedom_English_2020.pdf

⁴⁴ “Sri Lanka Attacks: The Ban on Social Media.” *BBC News*, April 23, 2019, sec. Technology. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-48022530>.

⁴⁵ “Promotion and Protection of All Human Rights, Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Including the Right to Development.” Koninklijke Brill NV. Accessed May 28, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1163/2210-7975_HRD-9970-2016149.

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ Dolan, Theo, and Stephen Gray. “Media and Conflict in Myanmar: Opportunities For Media to Advance Peace,” 2014, 40.

military reclaimed power by overthrowing the elected government in February 2021, there has been even stricter control of the flow of information.⁴⁸

One estimate suggests that Myanmar has more than 300 newspapers, most of which have online presence as well. However, the number changes frequently as the dynamics of politics shifts.⁴⁹ According to a 2017 survey, 8% of respondents said they use newspapers as source of their news.⁵⁰ According to 2021 data, around 53.1% (29 million) of the total Myanmar population use social media. There are 27 million Facebook users of which 44% are female.⁵¹ Facebook is (practically) synonymous to Internet in Myanmar. Other popular social media outlets are Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp. There were 69.43 million mobile connections in Myanmar in January 2021—a whopping 127% of the total population, indicating that many people had multiple subscriptions.

Social hostilities are central and find their place in Myanmar's social media platforms, such as Facebook.

Hate speech against the Rohingya population has been prevalent over the past years dehumanizing them by for instance, comparing them to animals. One study indicated that one in ten social media posts made by politicians of the Arakan National Party (ANP) in Rakhine state contained hate speech.⁵² Reuters found more than 1,000 posts, comments, images and videos attacking the Rohingya or other Myanmar Muslims.⁵³ Rakhine state's lawmakers have posted hateful anti-Muslim content and explicit calls for violence on Facebook that received thousands of "likes".⁵⁴ The government response to these events has been draconian, resulting to the shutdown of Facebook and internet in Rakhine and Chin states. In recent months, the ruling State Administrative Council (SEC) has drafted a cyber-security law that allows collection of an internet user's personal data and has provision against misinformation and disinformation, information "causing hate, disrupting the unity, stabilization and peace," and statements "against any existing law" at the discretion of the state authority.⁵⁵ Online and offline surveillance have also increased in recent years under

⁴⁸ Welle (www.dw.com), Deutsche. "Myanmar's Media under Pressure from All Sides | DW | 02.05.2021." DW.COM. Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/myanmars-media-under-pressure-from-all-sides/a-57405936>.

⁴⁹ Dolan, Theo, and Stephen Gray. "Media and Conflict in Myanmar: Opportunities For Media to Advance Peace," 2014, 40.

⁵⁰ Media Landscapes. "Myanmar." Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://medialandscapes.org/country/myanmar/media/print>.

⁵¹ DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. "Digital in Myanmar: All the Statistics You Need in 2021." Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-myanmar>.

⁵² Minority Rights Group. "Minority and Indigenous Trends 2020." Accessed May 26, 2021. <https://minorityrights.org/trends2020/>.

⁵³ Stecklow, Steve. "Why Facebook Is Losing the War on Hate Speech in Myanmar." Reuters. Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-facebook-hate/>.

⁵⁴ BuzzFeed News. "How Facebook Failed The Rohingya In Myanmar." Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/facebook-myanmar-rohingya-genocide>.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch. "Myanmar: Scrap Sweeping Cybersecurity Bill," February 12, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/12/myanmar-scrap-sweeping-cybersecurity-bill>.

programs such as “Safe City initiative.”⁵⁶ The military junta has published a “wanted” list of more than 100 public figures including bloggers arrest of popular bloggers on TV and state-run newspapers.⁵⁷ Several of the bloggers have been arrested and taken to custody in recent months.

Indonesia

Indonesia has seen a dramatic expansion of its media landscape since the Suharto regime ended in 1998. The Indonesia Press Council’s 2017 report indicates that the country has as many as 47,000 media outlets including 2,000 print media, 1,166 radio stations, 674 television stations, and 43,300 online media.⁵⁸ January 2021 data shows that around 73.7% (202.6 million) Indonesians use internet, 170.0 million people use social media, and 98.2% of internet users between age 16-64 own smart phones. YouTube and WhatsApp are the two most used social media platforms, with around 45% female users (January 2021 data).⁵⁹

The popularity of social media and the recent rise of religious conservatism and intolerance have resulted in “hybrid media systems” in Indonesia.⁶⁰ A media content analysis between January 2017 and January 2018 found that the mainstream media in Indonesia support freedom of religion and interfaith tolerance through peace journalism. However, some smaller media outlets tend to “run provocative and sarcastic stories that raise sectarian tension in communities.”⁶¹ Blasphemy laws such as Article 156 of the Indonesian Penal Code KUHP are being used to silence minority voices, both online and offline, in the name of hurting the religious feelings of the majority.⁶² Under the *Ministerial Regulation #5*, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology reserves the right to compel “any individual, business entity or community that operates “electronic systems” (ESOs) to restrict or remove any content deemed to be in violation of Indonesia’s laws within 24 hours.”⁶³

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch. “Myanmar: Facial Recognition System Threatens Rights,” March 12, 2021.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/12/myanmar-facial-recognition-system-threatens-rights>.

⁵⁷ the Guardian. “Myanmar Celebrity Model Arrested as Military Targets Public Figures,” April 8, 2021.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/08/myanmar-celebrity-model-arrested-paing-takhon-military-targets-public-figures>.

⁵⁸ Media Landscapes. “Indonesia.” Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://medialandscapes.org/country/indonesia>.

⁵⁹ DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. “Digital in Indonesia: All the Statistics You Need in 2021.” Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-indonesia>.

⁶⁰ Postill, John, and Leonard Chrysostomos Epafra. “Indonesian Religion as a Hybrid Media Space: Social Dramas in a Contested Realm.” *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 5, no. 1–2 (February 14, 2018): 100–123. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-12340086>.

⁶¹ Suryana, A’an. *Media Content Analysis - On Freedom of Religion and Interfaith Tolerance in Indonesia 2017-2018*, 2018.

⁶² Wijayanto. “Fearing the Majority: Catholic Media in Muslim Indonesia.” *Media Asia* 44, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 33–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2017.1374319>.

⁶³ P, Jyoti and ay. “Regulation of Digital Platforms in Asia.” *Internet Governance Project* (blog), March 18, 2021. <https://www.internetgovernance.org/2021/03/18/regulation-of-digital-platforms-in-asia/>.

While intolerance and abuse have increased against religious and ethnic minorities in the digital space, several groups and organizations are actively fighting conservatism and the spread of mis/disinformation. Cyberwarriors are one such group of volunteers who are actively and innovatively producing counter-violent narratives online.

[Cyberwarriors] battle Islamic radicalism on social media with memes, hash tags, comics, and videos as their weapons of choice. By practicing a threefold 'politics of threat', 'exceptionality', and 'inspiration', cyber warriors construct a counternarrative in which ulama and kyai, traditional figures of religious authority, are transformed into hip, strong, cool, and 'iconic' 'counterstars', whose legacy shields the country from radicalism.⁶⁴

Trained youths are spreading the “virus of peace” by combating fake news and mis/disinformation through local organizations such as Peace Generation, Peace Camps, Bandung’s Peace School, and the Peace Train in Western Java.

Thailand

Similar to other South and Southeast Asian countries, most of Thailand’s terrestrial television and radio networks are controlled by the government and the military.⁶⁵ Terrestrial TV stations are Thailand’s largest consumed electronic media outlet. 34.8% of the TV audience in Thailand have satellite-TV or cable-TV subscriptions, with more than 60 TV stations, 524 radio stations, and 40 major newspapers.⁶⁶ As of January 2021, 48.59 million (69.5%) people had access to internet, while social media users boast a staggering 78.7% (55.00 million people) of the population.⁶⁷ Facebook and YouTube are the two most popular social media platforms, with 51 million and 37.3 million active users, respectively. Both platforms reported of having more than 50% female users (51% on Facebook and 52% on YouTube).⁶⁸ However, the internet access varies based on socioeconomic class and geographical location.

“Buddhism in decline” is a significant media narrative in Thailand, and it has major implications for the country’s religious and ethnic minorities.⁶⁹

The insurgencies in the southern states, influx of Rohingya refugees, and increased presence of foreign laborers from Bangladesh, India, and China have fueled such sentiments and

⁶⁴ Schmidt, Leonie. “Cyberwarriors and Counterstars: Contesting Religious Radicalism and Violence on Indonesian Social Media.” *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 5, no. 1–2 (February 14, 2018): 32–67. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-12340088>.

⁶⁵ “Thailand Profile - Media.” *BBC News*, June 2, 2014, sec. Asia. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15639421>.

⁶⁶ “Thailand Media Landscape - ITV-Asia.Com.” Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://www.itv-asia.com/market-research/526-thailand-media-landscape?lang=en>.

⁶⁷ DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. “Digital in Thailand: All the Statistics You Need in 2021.” Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-thailand>.

⁶⁸ *ibid*

⁶⁹ Association for Asian Studies. “Buddhism in Decline: Media Narratives in Thailand,” June 15, 2017. <https://www.asianstudies.org/buddhism-in-decline-media-narratives-in-thailand/>.

demands for limits on their freedom of movement from majority Buddhist groups. The Asia Center's 2020 report confirms that: "Thailand has exhibited dramatic levels of hate speech by various political factions, including conservative politicians attacking more frivolously liberal-minded politicians, while pejorative terms such as "water buffaloes," "cockroaches," "serfs," and "dogs" have been used by supporters of each political camp to dehumanize and insult one another. Some of these incidents extend to incitement to violence."⁷⁰

Islamophobia among Buddhist groups is on the rise in Thailand as well as in other regional countries. The organization Freedom House contends that internet in Thailand is "severely restricted."⁷¹ As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Thai government enacted an Emergency Decree on Public Administration in a State of Emergency. The Decree restricts both free expression online and press freedom and allows law enforcement to arrest and prosecute more freely.⁷² Under the Decree and the infamous Cybersecurity Act, several "internet users were arrested, criminally charged or subjected to targeted harassment for sharing a range of content, from unverified information about the pandemic to commentary criticizing the government's response."⁷³ Further, Thailand has developed one of the most sophisticated systems of digital surveillance in Southeast Asia since the military coup of 2014.⁷⁴

Areas for particular attention and advocacy

Versatile and adaptive data collection methodologies are needed to capture the creation and dissemination of hate speech, mis/disinformation, and fake news about any particular religious community, as media is a fast-transforming field. Regional cooperation among ASEAN and SAARC countries would be an essential part of action to counter media-based discrimination and violence because of the countries' shared history and contemporary geopolitical milieu.

There is wide scope for actions that could enhance media roles in articulating positive views towards freedom of religion or belief and in linking media appreciation of their roles in intergroup tensions. Peacebuilders can benefit from sharpened attention to media roles as part of strategies to calm interreligious tensions. Developing well-crafted case studies to be used in peacebuilding workshops and other encounters could yield significant benefits.

Journalists from all media, particularly online news portals, need education and training focused on religious pluralism. Journalists should be more aware of the impact

⁷⁰ Asiacentre.org. "Hate Speech in Southeast Asia," July 23, 2020. <https://asiacentre.org/hate-speech-in-southeast-asia/>.

⁷¹ Freedom House. "Thailand: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report." Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/thailand/freedom-net/2020>.

⁷² ibid

⁷³ ibid

⁷⁴ "Thailand's Creeping Digital Authoritarianism." Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://thediomat.com/2021/02/thailands-creeping-digital-authoritarianism/>.

of provocative news. National and regional peacebuilders should work closely with journalists and associations to enhance their sensitivity towards vulnerable groups, women, and minorities. Targeted workshops could focus on risks of stereotyping, freedom of religion and belief, interfaith empathy, and social cohesion, relying, for example, on case studies. Regional professional organizations for the journalists and media advocates such as the South Asian Journalists Association (SAJA), the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA), and the Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet) could be mobilized to develop a network of FoRB trained journalists.

Targeted educational programs for the religious/secular influencers and digital content creators could usefully be included in the mainstream development projects. Civil society organizations and NGOs need to be more aware of recent shifts in media and religious landscapes, notably with the advent of the social media. Peacebuilding projects need to consider the dynamics and the diverse ways religious messages are permeated, appropriated, reproduced, and consumed by people.

Major media literacy, digital literacy, and religious literacy campaigns should be carried out among youths. Young people need to be able to identify and differentiate between real and fake news and reliable information and mis/disinformation. Religious literacy could inform people about their own and others' religions and beliefs. Media literacy programs generally should enable consumers to critically understand three main tenets: a) all media messages are constructed for a purpose, b) media plays an instrumental role in controlling our perceptions, and c) media can reach a diverse group of audience who may interpret messages differently.

Civil society organizations need to engage in public discussions, mobilize, and advocate for freedom of expression. They should also work with the government and offer alternatives to the existing or proposed discriminatory laws.

Tech companies, social media spaces, and news portals need to be held accountable for social hostilities and spread of hate speech. The Myanmar situation illustrates the challenge well. Defining better and in practical ways the rights of social media users needs to be the subject of dialogue and action.

Governments can work to create pluralistic space for media where all religious and ethnic minorities can access and use media, create independent and appropriate content, and disseminate without fear, intimidation, and unwanted interception by other groups. Governments should also work with academic and civil society organizations to develop contextually relevant hate speech and mis/disinformation identification mechanisms in order to prevent incitement to violence.

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The Network for
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Religions for Peace