

Introduction

CSW (Christian Solidarity Worldwide) is a human rights organisation specialising in the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

CSW is encouraged by the attention the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Dr Fernand de Varennes, is giving to the issue of hate speech in his report to the 46th session of the Human Rights Council. We wish to draw the Council's attention to instances of hate speech and incitement against religion or belief minorities, including through social media, in the Republic of Cuba, the Republic of India and the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (hereafter Cuba, India and Myanmar respectively).

Disinformation and defamation social media campaigns targeting religious minorities in Cuba

CSW is concerned by continued reports of threats, arbitrary detentions, false charges and the harassment of religious leaders and FoRB defenders in Cuba. The main perpetrator of FoRB violations remains the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), which has the authority to regulate religious affairs on the island.

In addition, in recent years, the Ministry of the Interior has been developing and running an escalating disinformation campaign targeting key religious leaders by posting false accusations about a group or individual on Facebook which are rapidly shared across numerous other accounts. CSW has noted that the same accounts are repeatedly involved, many of which have known links to Cuban state security.

One of the most egregious examples has been a series of articles posted on a blog believed to be run by State Security. The blog primarily attacks human rights defenders; however, over the past year, a series of articles on the blog focused on one religious leader, Reverend Alain Toledano Valiente. The articles were salacious and sensationalistic, running the gamut of accusing Reverend Toledano Valiente of domestic violence, of rape and of embezzlement – all completely invented. Even more disturbingly, many of the articles targeted his daughters, some of whom are minors, with disturbing false accusations.

In September 2020, the Cuban Foreign Ministry tweeted that they had condemned the United States' use of unnamed religious and fraternal organisations in Cuba as channels for its aggressions on the island, and that

religious freedom could not be used as a pretext to attack other states or to promote the violation of the law.

CSW also learned that an email invitation sent by our Washington DC office regarding a panel on FoRB in Cuba during the July 2019 International Religious Freedom Ministerial was being circulated within WhatsApp and Telegram groups in Cuba, as an example of an 'act of violence' under the pretext of FoRB.

We are concerned that disinformation spread by the Cuban government has not only delegitimises the fight of religious minorities in Cuba who are trying to defend their right to FoRB, but undermines the very concept of freedom of religion or belief as a fundamental right.

Incitement by government officials and the spreading of misinformation in India

India's Constitution defines the country as a secular state (Preamble) and designates freedom of religion as a fundamental right and prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion (Article 25). However, hate speech by far-right Hindu nationalist groups continues to fuel hostility towards religious minorities, abetted by officials in the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

For example, CSW is concerned by public statements made by the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, which call for forced sterilisation of Muslims and Christians, for Hindus to fight back against the perceived attack from Muslims and Christians, for Muslim voting rights to be revoked, and for asserting that India is facing a battle between demons and gods. These statements are perceived by some to give moral legitimacy to communal violence and are illegal under Section 153(A) of the penal code.

The spread of hate speech and disinformation following the outbreak of Covid-19 is also of great concern. In March 2020, six attendees at the Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic religious gathering in Nizamuddin, Delhi, reportedly died of Covid.

Local monitoring groups subsequently observed a surge in false allegations on social media which claimed Muslims were actively trying to spread the virus in India, leading to violent attacks.

On 2 April 2020, Babita Phogat, a BJP member who contested in the 2019 State Assembly elections, tweeted: “#nizamuddinidiots – Bats may have spread it at your [China]. But here in Hindustan, ignorant pigs are spreading it” [translated from Hindi]. Ms Phogat, a former

professional wrestler who has represented India internationally, has almost six hundred thousand followers on Twitter. On 9 April, she contributed to an article in *Haribhumi*, a local newspaper, where she alleged that a Muslim man in Charkhi Dadri had deliberately infected other villagers. Her article was discredited when man tested negative but local reports indicate that following the accusations, the man and many Muslim villagers continue to live in fear.

The rise of Buddhist nationalism and incitement against religious minorities online in Myanmar

CSW is concerned by grave setbacks to the fragile democratisation process in Myanmar and by evidence of significant regression in some areas, particularly freedom of expression and freedom of FoRB. Human rights defenders, journalists, and individuals expressing dissenting views continue to be harassed and prosecuted for exercising their rights, further eroding the space available for the exercise of democratic rights and freedoms.

Throughout Myanmar, minority religious groups, including Muslims and Christians, have been the targets of discrimination, hate speech and violence by militant Buddhist nationalists. Fear of non-Buddhists has been promulgated by the state for decades, leading to the rise of widespread suspicion of non-Buddhists and left space in public discourse for the spreading of anti-Muslim or anti-Christian hate speech. Social media, material culture, preaching, print and television have all been appropriated for the nationalist cause. Buddhists themselves who try to counter extremist Buddhist nationalism also face dangers.

The transition towards a fragile quasi-democracy may have enabled the expansion of space for civil society but have also magnified the power of the voices of religious leaders, including Ma Ba Tha monks, who have spread anti-Christian and anti-Muslim hate speech posts online.

Facebook and other sites have been used as platforms to spread slander and fake news. A prominent anti-Muslim Buddhist monk, U Wirathu has over 260,000 followers on Facebook and another monk, Ashin Sopaka, operates four social media accounts, each with thousands of followers. These accounts regularly release a high volume of content, sharing the monks' preaching agenda alongside political content, sometimes spreading hatred of and inciting violence against Muslims. Memes, videos

or doctored images which show Muslims as dangerous rapists or terrorists are common. These images are crude and dehumanising, and yet are legitimised by the fact that religious leaders are willing to share them. CSW is concerned that little action has been taken to tackle hate speech and incitement to hate by Buddhist nationalists, who continue to act with impunity.

Recommendations

To the Human Rights Council:

- Take meaningful action to address hate speech and discrimination, while also ensuring that the right to freedom of expression is fully respected.
- Implement the tools of the Rabat Plan of Action and other international programmes for countering religious hatred.
- Increase efforts to reverse the culture of impunity that leads to communal violence by ensuring that perpetrators are brought to justice and adequate levels of compensation are granted to victims.
- Prosecute those responsible for perpetrating hate speech against religious minorities, and introduce legislation to address hate speech, while being careful to protect and enhance freedom of expression.
- Take measurable steps to hold social networks/online accountable for content inciting hatred and violence.
- Invest in and support initiatives to address racial and religious hatred, to support voices of peace and moderation, and to encourage a reconciliation process.
- Issue a standing invitation to all UN Special Procedures - including the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression.