

“Maggots.”

“Rapists.”

“Dogs.”

These slurs—translated from Burmese and aimed at Rohingya—are among more than a thousand examples of content that transformed Facebook into a weapon for ethnic cleansing in Myanmar.

Military-led killings and persecution of the Rohingya Muslim in Myanmar’s Rakhine State forced millions to flee, creating a refugee crisis in Bangladesh and other neighboring countries. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres characterized the Rohingya as “one of, if not the, most discriminated people in the world.”¹

Facebook’s entry into Myanmar in 2010 added fuel to a deadly fire. In the absence of democratic pluralism and a free press, military personnel set up pages on Facebook, spreading ethnic-nationalist “history,” amplifying the ahistorical idea that Rohingya are illegitimate citizens of Burma.² Their social media posts incited hatred and violence against millions of Rohingya.³

Historical genocides and mass persecutions show how governments can weaponize state media to spread hate and misinformation. In 1990s Rwanda, the government planned a genocide against the Tutsi minority in 1994, killing approximately 800,000 people in 100 days. It used radio broadcasts to incite violence—analogous to the majoritarian Buddhists’ use of Facebook to instigate violence in Myanmar.⁴

¹ “Myanmar Rohingya: What You Need to Know about the Crisis,” *BBC*, January 23, 2020.

² Wa Lone, e-mail interview by the author, May 21, 2020.

³ See: Christine Fink, “Dangerous Speech, Anti-Muslim Violence, and Facebook in Myanmar,” *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1.5: 43-51; Gregory H. Stanton, “The Ten Stages of Genocide,” *Genocide Watch*; Steve Stecklow, “Why Facebook is losing the war on hate speech in Myanmar,” *Reuters Investigates*, August 15, 2018.

⁴ Dominique Vidalon and Elias Biryabarema, “Rwanda Genocide Suspect Kabuga Arrested in France after Decades on the Run,” *Reuters*, May 26, 2020.

Likewise, in contemporary China, state media creates an alternative narrative around mass detention of the Muslim Uighur community in XinJiang, claiming that China is fighting radical extremism and the detention camps preserve the Uighur culture.⁵ Myanmar's former civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese government similarly spread Islamophobic misinformation that the Rohingya are terrorists.⁶

In some instances, robust international media coverage of mass persecutions has catalyzed positive change. During the Armenian genocide, which began in 1915, western media published first-hand accounts of American missionaries who witnessed the Turks' killings of Armenians. The coverage categorized the atrocities as "systematic," "authorized," and "organized by the government"—sparking public sympathy and triggering an international philanthropic rescue.⁷

International media largely ignored the Myanmar military's persecutions of the Rohingya, though—just as it underreported the killing of 1.4 million Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge after many foreign journalists initially discounted the veracity of refugee accounts.⁸ Myanmar security forces forcibly detained multiple journalists investigating its actions. Pandering to local Burmese practice, the UN in Myanmar neglected using "Rohingya" in its early press releases, instead calling them "Bengali," a term linked to the government's vilification campaign.⁹

In all genocides, words carry urgency. In 1974 and 1982, Myanmar changed the definitions of citizen, indigenous, resident, and foreigner to further marginalize the Rohingya and

⁵ Victor Gao, "How China Spins the Xinjiang story to the Chinese," *Al Jazeera*, September 8, 2019.

⁶ Krishnadev Calamur, "The Misunderstood Roots of Burma's Rohingya Crisis," *The Atlantic*, September 25, 2017.

⁷ Brian Fong, "How Mass Media Saved Thousands During the Armenian Genocide," *Facing History and Ourselves*, April 24, 2018.

⁸ Matthew Weaver, "The Khmer Rouge and Cambodian Genocide: How the Guardian Covered It," *The Guardian*, August 7, 2014.

⁹ Jonah Fisher, "UN Failures on Rohingya revealed." *BBC*. September 28, 2017.

render them stateless.¹⁰ Backed by implemented policies, words can ensure human rights and safety. The Rohingya must be classified as legitimate residents in Myanmar. The UN and companies including Facebook also must recognize the situation as “genocide,” a term that the Myanmar state and former Nobel Peace Prize-winner Suu Kyi deny. If Facebook continues to operate in Myanmar, it must have enough Burmese-speaking moderators who will block hate speech. International institutions must use their powers to sanction Myanmar, prevent further atrocities, and advocate for a safe home and citizenship for the Rohingya.

¹⁰ Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Genocide* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2018), 51-52.

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