

## **Violence tests Myanmar's media, and its censors**

**By Reuters**

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When Myanmar emerged last year from army rule, state censors started to loosen their powerful grip, allowing newspapers to report freely on what had been unthinkable, from the views of opposition politicians to allegations of government corruption.

But as sectarian violence rages between majority Buddhists and Muslim Rohingyas in western Rakhine state, the old ways are returning. Censorship is creeping back, raising questions about whether the pre-screening of copy will be dropped, as the government has said.

"We cannot write whatever we want," said Maung Wuntha, a prominent author and journalist who was jailed for publishing work deemed subversive by the former regime.

"We can only write when the press scrutiny board approves ... and despite that, we were warned," he said, referring to government warnings about stories on the unrest.

The Rakhine state violence is perhaps as big a test for Myanmar's media as it is for a government desperate to put on a presentable face for the outside world.

The unrest is an extremely sensitive issue in Myanmar. The Rohingyas are not recognized as one of Myanmar's numerous ethnic groups and their very presence is contested by many.

State media has said a five-day rampage of rioting in Rakhine state killed at least 21 people. What started it remains a mystery but it seems almost certain to have stemmed from last month's rape and murder of a Buddhist Rakhine woman, allegedly by three Muslims who are now on trial.

The incident led to calls for retribution that were swiftly answered by Buddhist vigilantes, who lynched 10 Muslims with no ties to the alleged killers.

### **JAIL RISK**

Myanmar's censors leapt straight back into action when the Snapshot news journal published without its permission a photograph, still doing the rounds on the Internet, purporting to show the body of the woman who was raped and murdered.

The chief minister for Yangon, Myint Swe, issued a warning late on Sunday to journalists with private media that they faced nine years in prison if they used inflammatory language that could incite violence and endanger stability.

Ironically, the government may have broken its own rules when state media reported the deaths of the 10 Muslims using the word "kalar", a derogatory term for people of South Asian descent in Myanmar. The references were removed from websites.

Myint Swe's words appear to have been heeded, with self-censorship taking a hold in the media.

"Everyone was quite disgruntled at the warning," said a Yangon-based editor, who declined to be identified, adding that most domestic media had written very little about the violence.

For half a century, every song, book, cartoon, news story and piece of art required approval by teams of censors working for a board known as the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division.

Since the military ceded power to a quasi-civilian government in March 2011 after elections in late 2010, the authorities have relaxed censorship and in May announced that print media content would soon no longer need to be screened.

## INFLAMMATORY POSTINGS

The latest warning, editors say, has cast doubt on whether that will really happen.

"It's quite laughable but also worth contemplating that just as they were talking about loosening censorship, it seems to become more restrictive," said Thiha Saw, editor of Myanmar Dana business magazine.

"For us, we just have to continue to do our part and write what we can accurately," he said.

Meanwhile, thousands of unfiltered opinions and comments about the unrest, many inflammatory, have appeared on the web forums of news journals and on Facebook pages as nationalist anger runs wild.

Some people, journalists included, have taken aim at exiled media such as the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) and foreign media organizations that were praised for their truth-telling during the military's oppressive 49-year reign.

Now they are being accused of bias towards stateless Rohingyas, whom many Buddhists blame for instigating the arson, rioting and machete attacks in Rakhine state.

David Stout, a copy editor with the DVB, said nationalist passions expressed in unfiltered postings on websites run by some media organizations had highlighted the need for balanced and responsible reporting of what was really taking place.

"It's kind of hard to tell what's true and what's rumor," he said. "There are alleged incidents about things that have happened, things that could happen and things that will happen ... I see a lot of irresponsible reporting or postings, things that haven't necessarily been verified."

Internet access is low in Myanmar, with only 0.2 percent of the population online by some estimates. But young people are increasingly using social media to share news and opinions and there is a large Myanmar diaspora worldwide.

Maung Wuntha, the veteran journalist, warned of trouble ahead if Facebook pages or websites carrying inflammatory content became more widely viewed, but censorship wasn't the answer, he said.

"I don't believe you should restrict them or censor them," he said. "The readers should be rational and use their own reasoning to differentiate between right and wrong."

(Writing by a Reuters staff reporter; Editing by Martin Petty, Alan Raybould and Robert Birsell)  
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