U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

Religious Freedom in Southeast Asia: Techno-Authoritarianism and Transitional Influences

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Introduction

Chairman Gallagher, Chair Cooper, Vice Chair Davie, Commissioner Schneck and members of the Commission,

I wish to thank you and your organisation for this timely hearing, and for inviting me to speak today on the complexities and difficulties associated with the right to religious freedom in Southeast Asia, and trends in the digital sphere that might inhibit this freedom.

I speak today as a staff member of the Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. Established 14 years ago, the Centre works to mitigate the risks of atrocity crime and mass human rights violations in the Asia Pacific region. In so doing, working across three sectors: first, within the academic space, which is given over to research and to teaching at the University of Queensland; second, with governments as we a largely funded by the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT); thirdly, working with grassroots CSOs and NGOs across the region, including a cohort of 36 organisations grouped under the banner of the Asia-Pacific Partnership for Atrocity Prevention (APPAP), which work towards atrocity prevention via initiatives in communities. These initiatives include collecting evidence of sexual and gender-based violence against Rohingya women in the camps and surrounding communities in Cox's Bazar, using technology to help migrant communities in Malaysia report hate crimes, and working with organisations to influence policy amongst ASEAN and ASEAN member states.

I note these approaches as each speaks to the topic of today's commission, techno-authoritarianism in Southeast Asia and its sway over religious leaders and religious freedom. Each of these sectors, from the academic through to grassroot approaches, through to policy

advice at an ASEAN level, have all had to consider this new and ever-escalating phenomenon.

Technology and Religious Intolerance

Today I wish to make two points in relation to the topic of religious freedom and the digital sphere in our region.

First, I wish to highlight the region's habit of irresponsibility and the digital world, and the effect of irresponsibility on religious freedom. Second, the opportunity of Congress and the current Administration to promote religious freedom via engagement in the region.

At the core of our Centre's work is the promotion of responsibility; that is, a responsibility to protect peoples from becoming victims of atrocity crimes (genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, ethnic cleansing). While I will not talk on the specifics of R2P as a norm and as a means of encouraging State responsibility, what I wish to signal is a current malaise in the region around notions of responsibility in relation to the digital world. Namely, who is responsible? If, for example, Facebook has been cited as a platform that has been used to incite genocide (as was noted in the UN's 2018 Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar), who then is responsible for the content: the company, the user, ASEAN, domestic legislation, the UN and its various offices, or regional and global governments who might have influence on either the country committing the crimes, or on the platform that allows this incitement to violence to occur.

Unfortunately, given the lack of regulation across Southeast Asia, coupled with ASEAN's policy of non-interface in the politics of state (an example of which is the current crisis in Myanmar), this idea of responsibility is often overshadowed by a proliferation of irresponsibility that allows both legitimate and illegitimate governments (such as the junta in Myanmar), to use the digital sphere for political gain. This is often coupled with a religious agenda especially when governments are backed by conservative and hard-line contingents of religious followers and their leaders.

Problems occur when religion becomes State-sponsored and has an accompanying political motivation, or leaders of a religion are seen to gain politically by endorsing religious practices that influence a nation's politics; here I cite the growing trend in Malaysia towards State adherence to conservative Islam. And the digital world, from social media to the current

employment and development of artificial intelligence, is a core facilitator in promoting and propagating a politic that preferences one religion over other beliefs and practices.

Technology is also being employed by religious leaders and their followers to promote religious intolerance, leading to, in some cases (as was noted with the killing and mass expulsion of the Rohingya Muslim in Myanmar), a delegitimization of belief systems via the propaganda of hate-filled myth and disinformation.

Hand-in-hand is noted a rise in frustration across civil society, governments, academia, and intergovernmental organisations alike, that would like regulation and ruling akin to that being utilised in Europe by the EU and the European Council over religious intolerance and its ties to hate speech and disinformation within the digital sphere. This frustration is only expounded by social media's inertia to intervene, with decisions seemingly based not on responsible governance but due to economic benefit.

This frustration is also noted by peoples living in conflict-affected areas who see little-to-no response to religious restrictions and the subsequent political and social implications, from the international community alongside the ASEAN community. This includes frustration at ASEAN's ineffective five-point consensus plan for Myanmar that fails to address core problems, including a means of mitigating the regional risks of promoting one religion over others via social media, heightening intolerance and risking inciting violence. This frustration also stems from social media's small and seemingly tokenistic approach to mitigating problems associated with religious intolerance, especially when these are coupled with a political agenda, only made worse by the recent takeover of Twitter where content appears less regulated than ever.

Recommendations

These recommendations are divided between those for the President and his Administration, and for Congress.

To the Biden Administration:

1. Question social media companies over their role in inciting religious hatred, both within countries and regions that are already conflict-affected, such as Myanmar and West Papua, and within the broader Southeast Asian region.

2. Encourage a more proactive ASEAN that looks to models such as the European Union's legislation on social media and AI, to grow and foster religious tolerance via the development and adoption of regional laws and an ASEAN jurisdiction.

3. Work with ASEAN and the ASEAN Secretary General to develop educational programmes that foster religious tolerance throughout the region.

To the US Congress:

1. Increase funding to Southeast Asian civil society organisations to provide education on how social media works.

2. Bring the topic of Southeast Asia to Congress hearings that question the role of social media.

3. Expand the US State Department's Atrocity Prevention Education Programme to incorporate Southeast Asian government officials, and to include a module on how the digital world spreads hate and disinformation that reduces religious freedom. This initiative can be seen to respond to your Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act.

With this I once again thank the Commission for the ability to talk with you today.