

Myanmar moderates risk ire to calm sectarian rift

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Myanmar blogger Nay Phone Latt speaking during an interview with AFP at his house in Yangon on August 9. The Myanmar blogger who was a poster boy for online resistance to the former junta has become the target of a backlash by social media users for speaking out against hatred aimed at Rohingya Muslims.

A Myanmar blogger who was a poster boy for online resistance to the former junta has become the target of a backlash by social media users for speaking out against hatred aimed at Rohingya Muslims.

The case of former political prisoner Nay Phone Latt, a rare moderate voice on recent fighting between Muslims and Buddhist Rakhine, underscores the level of anger sparked by the unrest which erupted in western Myanmar in June.

The 32-year-old has faced the ire of social networkers for publishing an

article warning of "genocide" if anti-Muslim sentiment spreads around the Buddhist-majority nation.

"I try to be neutral in this case but most of the Facebook (users) criticise me for being neutral. They want me to be on the side of the Rakhine," he told AFP.

The blogger was sentenced to two decades in prison in 2008 for his links to the "Saffron Revolution" monk-led protests against the junta the previous year.

While detained he won the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award in New York for showing the "strength of the creative spirit" in the face of repression. He was released in January as part of a political prisoner amnesty.

Recently, however, a photograph used during the campaign to free him -- showing his friends with "Nay Phone Latt" written on their palms -- has been circulated online with his name crossed out and replaced with the word "kalar", a derogatory term for Muslims in Myanmar.

But he said some people realised the situation could lead to "endless fighting" if left unresolved and he had no regrets about speaking out.

Fellow [blogger](#) Nyi Lynn Seck, who has challenged one [government official](#) for posting controversial Facebook comments on the Rakhine violence, said anger was being stoked by misinformation.

"Some people are intentionally spreading [fake news](#)," he said.

Matthew Smith, a researcher at New York-based Human Rights Watch, said it was difficult for ordinary citizens to be objective because there was a widespread belief that all Rohingya are "illegal immigrants from

Bangladesh", including at the highest levels of government.

"Young bloggers seeking the truth and attempting to approach the issue objectively should be applauded," he said.

"Sometimes the protection of human rights depends on courageous voices willing to stand up despite great social pressure, and this is one of those times."

The official toll from the violence stands at about 80 people dead from both sides, although human rights groups fear the figure could be much higher. Renewed violence left several people dead earlier this month.

Tensions in Rakhine are related not only to religion, but also to a flood of immigration from the Indian subcontinent during British colonial rule, which ended in 1948, said independent Myanmar analyst Richard Horsey.

"There are just such strong prejudices on this issue that it's even harder for the government to deal with it in this new democratic era than it was in the past," he said.

Myanmar's government, which has denied allegations of abuses by security forces in Rakhine, has veered from statements extolling the racial and religious plurality of the country, to suggestions that the Rohingya should be kept in refugee camps or deported.

Some elements of the country's democracy movement have also dismayed the Rohingya by rejecting them as an ethnic minority.

One exception is comedian and former political prisoner Zarganar, who has called for equal rights for all regardless of religion or ethnicity.

Even Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has disappointed some campaigners by not offering stronger support to the country's estimated 800,000 Rohingya, viewed by the United Nations as one of the world's most persecuted minorities.

But Aye Lwin, a Muslim community leader at the Islamic Centre of Myanmar in Yangon, said he was satisfied with Suu Kyi's call for even-handed distribution of aid, adding that any strong pronouncement that seemed to favour the Rohingya would be a "fatal blow for her politically".

He hopes to send an inter-faith group to Rakhine state to reach out to some monks who he described as "hot-headed" and said had been supporting the unrest.

"Most of the younger generation, they need to be educated, not just emotional," Aye Win said.

"That goes for the international Islamic community also -- they should know the actual facts or else they will do damage instead of helping us."

Aye Lwin said the mission to Rakhine would try to help both communities.

"In that way we will be able to win them over gradually. But it will take a lot of time. A lot of damage has been done."

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