

Threatened by Facebook Disinformation, a Monk Flees Cambodia | The New York Times

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BANGKOK — In just four days, the reputation of a Buddhist monk who had spent decades fighting for the human rights of Cambodians was destroyed.

First, grainy videos appeared on a fake Facebook page, claiming that he had slept with three sisters and their mother. Then a government-controlled religious council defrocked the monk for having violated Buddhist precepts of celibacy. Fearing imminent arrest, the monk fled Cambodia, destined for a life in exile, like so many people who have stood up to Asia's longest-governing leader.

The monk, Luon Sovath, was the victim of a smear campaign this summer that relied on fake claims and hastily assembled social media accounts designed to discredit an outspoken critic of the country's authoritarian policies. A New York Times investigation found evidence that government employees were involved in the creation and posting of the videos on Facebook.

His downfall shows how repressive governments can move with stunning speed to disgrace their opponents, using social media and technology to amplify their divisive campaigns. Under Prime Minister Hun Sen, the Cambodian government has repeatedly used falsified Facebook posts or manipulated audio to defame and imprison politicians, activists and other human rights defenders.

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