

Where Countries Are Tinderboxes and Facebook Is a Match | The New York Times

By Amanda Taub and Max Fisher

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MEDAMAHANUWARA, Sri Lanka — Past the end of a remote mountain road, down a rutted dirt track, in a concrete house that lacked running water but bristled with smartphones, 13 members of an extended family were glued to Facebook. And they were furious.

A family member, a truck driver, had died after a beating the month before. It was a traffic dispute that had turned violent, the authorities said. But on Facebook, rumors swirled that his assailants were part of a Muslim plot to wipe out the country's Buddhist majority.

"We don't want to look at it because it's so painful," H.M. Lal, a cousin of the victim, said as family members nodded. "But in our hearts there is a desire for revenge that has built."

The rumors, they believed, were true. Still, the family, which is Buddhist, did not join in when Sinhalese-language Facebook groups, goaded on by extremists with wide followings on the platform, planned attacks on Muslims, burning a man to death.

But they had shared and could recite the viral Facebook memes constructing an alternate reality of nefarious Muslim plots. Mr. Lal called them "the embers beneath the ashes" of Sinhalese anger.

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