

GNET-CENS Workshop

## **Religious Nationalism and Extremism in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and India: Assessing the Impact of Structural Conditions**

Zoom, Thursday 26 April 2022, 19:30-2100 (Singapore)

The Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) is an academic research initiative backed by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), and convened by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London. CENS organised and facilitated this event as part of its function as a GNET member.

### **Summary**

Elements of Buddhist and Hindu nationalist movements in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and India have displayed violent extremist tendencies in recent years. Each nation is now experiencing a degree of turbulence or political change. Sri Lanka is suffering from a devastating economic crisis, Myanmar is embroiled in a post-coup societal rebellion, and India has recently held highly contested state elections. How are these political and economic developments influencing religious nationalist movements in these three countries? Drawing on recent research and social media analysis, our three speakers discussed dynamics in the present context and the possible implications for societal cohesion in each nation.

### **Speakers**

- **Mr Alan Davis**, Asia & Eurasia Director, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, United Kingdom
- **Dr Neil DeVotta**, Professor of Political and International Affairs, Wake Forest University, United States of America
- **Mr Pravin Prakash**, Doctoral Fellow, Heidelberg Graduate School for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Universität Heidelberg, Germany

### **Moderator**

- **Dr Shashi Jayakumar**, Senior Fellow & Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), RSIS.

## Attendees

- 25 participants from civil society organisations, technology companies research institutes, and universities in South/Southeast Asia, and Europe.

### **Alan Davis**, Asia & Eurasia Director, Institute for War and Peace Reporting

The military coup in early 2021 had an impact on the prevalent hate speech within Myanmar. Davis explained that his organisation employed 20 Myanmar journalists and analysts as monitors, all of whom were from the Buddhist Bamar majority population, which makes up almost 70% of the nation's population. Initially they did not grasp the concept of hate speech, as they said that the examples provided were simply how ethnic and religious groups had always talked to and about other groups.

However, it was clear that the Rohingya people have been particularly affected by the majority through this 'normalised' discourse. There is a commonly held view among the Bamar that the Rohingya pose an existential threat to the nation's cultural heritage. Afghanistan, which was once largely Buddhist, is held up by ultra-nationalist Bamar as a warning sign of what could happen in Myanmar.

In the wake of the coup, with the overall security of the people deteriorating and risks increasing, independent media and activism has gone to ground. As official outlets are controlled by the military, people rely on social media for information, but this remains dangerous as phones are often inspected at military checkpoints, which are now pervasive across the country.

The military sees anyone who threatens the integrity of the union as the enemy, and pre-coup this was mostly ethnic minorities, particularly the Muslim Rohingya. Now, in the context of the armed resistance, the repression extends to anyone who opposes the military's claimed authority, including the Bamar. However, those with religious-nationalist views are still closely aligned to the military, as they see themselves as the custodians or guarantors of Burmese 'integrity'.

Before the coup, politics were still dominated by the Bamar with little to no minority representation. Hate speech directed from Buddhist nationalists to Muslim groups received substantial attention, but in fact hate speech has been common across a number of ethnic identity divides. Emerging from the current crisis will require more tolerant communication among a variety of different groups, otherwise the nation may face potential 'balkanisation'.

**Neil DeVotta**, Professor of Politics and International Affairs, Wake Forest University

DeVotta described the ongoing protests against Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa as a display of “great unity across class divides”. Protestors come from different ethnicities, faiths, and sectors without being led by a single political party. Public anger is not only aimed at the presidency but everyone in government linked to the Rajapaksa clan. The COVID-19 pandemic appeared to exacerbate deep-seated economic problems.

Protestors point to the borrowing spree of the Rajapaksa administration as the purported cause of Sri Lanka’s economic problems. Foreign loans were allegedly used for prestige projects. Another issue brought up regarding these loans was their opaque nature. For example, the total amount loaned from China remains unclear according to some protestors.

DeVotta assessed that a critical vulnerability of President Rajapaksa’s administration is how it relied too much on its appeal to the country’s Sinhalese Buddhist majority. Before the current political crisis, the Rajapaksa clan felt that it did not need the support of minorities to govern. DeVotta estimated that government employees were around 90% Sinhalese. The proportion of Sinhalese military personnel is even higher, between 94% to 95%.

Once the economic crisis hit, it appeared that even the most ardent Rajapaksa supporters “cannot defend the regime without food on the table” according to DeVotta. As shortages of essentials such as fuel, cooking oil, and milk powder became widespread, even some of the dependents of civil servants and military personnel felt compelled to protest.

In response to mounting pressure, pro-government supporters have revived discourses to contest prevailing protest narratives. This includes some Islamophobic content, couched in anti-ISIS propaganda. Minorities such as Sri Lanka’s Tamil population were also used to whip up “anti-minority” sentiment. This includes claiming that the Tamil diaspora overseas are plotting a revival of the now defunct separatist group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

**Pravin Prakash**, Doctoral Fellow, Heidelberg Graduate School for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Universität Heidelberg

The ruling Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) came to power in 2014 and since then, India has seen an erosion of democratic institutions and norms, and a rise in majoritarian violence against minority groups. This was especially pronounced after the electoral win in 2019, which entrenched the position of the BJP in the country. Religious Hindutva leaders routinely give warnings of genocide against minorities and have made multiple calls for abduction, rape, and boycott of their businesses. These

incidents are viewed as part of a systematic campaign by Hindutva activists to marginalize and remove Muslims from the public sphere both culturally and physically.

In India, the BJP, a staunch Hindu nationalist party, has successfully established a hegemonic rule in a functioning democracy. Hindutva, as an ethno-religious ideology, views India as a fundamentally Hindu State and defines Hindus as anyone to whom India is both “fatherland” and “holy-land”. This definition excludes religious minority groups like Christians and crucially Muslims, who are seen as enemies of the Hindus.

The Hindu Far-right have been successful in peddling conspiracy theories that antagonize Muslims by adapting myths associated with minority groups and pseudo-historical narratives. ‘Love Jihad’ is an example of a popular conspiracy theory which alleges a “vast conspiracy by the Muslim community to train young men to seduce, marry and convert Hindu woman” as a means of cultural warfare. This theory has been the basis for a systematic grassroots campaign by Hindu Nationalists with the aim of manufacturing moral panic within the Hindu community and has also facilitated the rise of extreme vigilante groups who orchestrate violence with the support of Hindutva associations, politicians and state police. The collective vigilante violence plays a critical role in entrenching the legitimacy and hegemony of Hindutva in India.

While the general practice is to analyse these developments as the rise of religious fundamentalism and draw parallels with the rise of Islamic radicalism and extremism, Prakash argues that Hindu nationalism shares far bigger parallels with the rise of the far-right in the West.

To locate the context of the Hindu Far-right within the wider discourse on the global rise and threat of the far-right, Prakash stressed on the dangers of pernicious polarisation. Far-right movements attempt to create a state of pernicious polarisation that divides society into two singular poles, finding a singular divide that subsumes all other divides. In India for example, the trauma of partition ensured that religion would remain a formative rift that remains an effective means of pernicious polarisation, which is now weaponised by Hindutva actors.

## Q&A

*A participant asked whether any of the hate speech involved in Myanmar’s digital public sphere was coming from outside the country.*

Davis replied that indeed some of the most vicious hate speech came from Buddhists in Singapore, and Western nations such as Australia, Canada, and in Europe. One might expect that these expats have integrated into democratic, stable societies, but it appears that many want to take the histories of division and feed them back into Myanmar society through social media.

*Another participant asked how the hate speech against the Rohingya, and other Muslim minority groups started in the first place.*

Davis said that racism and ethnic conflict is certainly nothing new in Myanmar. There were race riots in Yangon (then Rangoon) in the 1940s and 1960s, and there has been a lot of anti-Hindu sentiment through the colonial period. The current dynamic largely emerged with the development of democracy and particularly the easing of controls on free speech. It was like releasing flood water – all the pent-up animosity and scapegoating came rushing out all at once, which was then facilitated by social media networks.

Another factor was the context in which the Islamic State were making global headlines for atrocities and violence in the Middle East and elsewhere in the mid-2010s. The dissemination of associated Islamophobic narratives was seized upon by Buddhist nationalists in Myanmar, which combined with the liberation of space to speak up during the democratic transition, and the facilitation of mass communication provided by Facebook.

*A further question asked whether inter-faith dialogues or some type of cross-cultural intervention could be useful in the Myanmar context.*

Davis explained that there was some effort to experiment with these approaches during the pre-coup democratic transition period, but there were also fears of a backlash from the Buddhist nationalists, which created hesitancy among donors. In the post-coup environment, there are clearly more pressing priorities, but failing to address these deep-seated differences poses a genuine threat of the nation splintering across ethnic lines.

*A question was posed about how the Rajapaksa administration has been engaged online*

The son of Gotabaya Rajapaksa is known to be a “savvy” operator online, but public sentiment has shown how the “tables have turned”. Members of the Sri Lankan diaspora have also mobilised online but are complementing their online activities with physical rallies in cities such as London and Rome, where they currently reside. Celebrities and online influencers are also at the forefront of online campaigns to criticise the Rajapaksa administration.

*A question was asked on how Indian diasporas engage with Hindutva rhetoric, given the ethno-centrism of the movement.*

The diasporic Hindu nationalist community has a very strong presence in many countries including in major Western democracies like the United States and United Kingdom. They provide a lot of the funding for the Hindu nationalist movements as well.

*Considering that a comparison between the Hindutva and the Western Far-right was established, a further question was asked if there was a possibility of an alliance between the two different movements.*

Prakash explained that the sharing of communication between Hindutva movement and the Western Far-right predates modern technology. There is a lot of evidence that the Hindu Far-right had strong connection with the Nazis and exchanged information in the 1930s and 1940s. These connections have not disappeared and ideologically are still very interconnected.

*A participant raised the question of how the Hindu Far-right have managed to successfully build up this image of being the saviours of Muslim women, by freeing them from the misogynistic and oppressive practices, despite not aligning themselves or the Hindu women to feminist ideas.*

Group hegemonic ambitions within Far-right movements co-opt traditionally sub-altern groups who are ideologically opposed to theirs and then continue to evangelise their narrative. Hindutva groups have been successful in aligning with Muslim women because it tends to demonise the image of the “dangerous Muslim male”, who have been at the receiving end of all the harmful cultural tropes that feeds into their main rhetoric.