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Ultrationalist Buddhist Rhetoric in Sri Lanka

By Nursheila Muez and Jessica Yeo Jia Lin

Synopsis

Anti-Muslim sentiments in Sri Lanka can be attributed to the spread of ultrationalist Buddhist rhetoric propagated by Buddhist extremist groups which use Buddhism to justify their narrative. The ambivalent nature of religion allows it to be interpreted by its adherents both as a source of violence and a source of peace.

Commentary

A RECENT road accident involving a Sinhalese truck driver and four Muslim men in Kandy district, Sri Lanka quickly spiralled into violent conflict after news that the driver died of his injuries days later. Attacks by mobs on Muslim homes and properties prompted the Sri Lankan government to declare a state of emergency.

This recent spate of anti-Muslim attacks in Sri Lanka is neither new nor random. Anti-Muslim sentiments have risen in the country due to the spread of ultrationalist Buddhist rhetoric, similar to one seen in Myanmar recently. One of the key extremist groups in Sri Lanka responsible for such rhetoric is the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS).

Justifying Buddhist Violence

Formed in 2012, the BBS has been actively defending Sinhalese Buddhism by stoking fears of the perceived threats from other religious communities. It largely targets the Tamil-speaking Muslim community, but has also included the Christians in its ultrationalist Buddhist rhetoric.

Rumours that Muslims would outnumber the Sinhalese Buddhists and the belief that the minority was economically superior are often circulated online, causing fear and distrust among the Sinhalese Buddhist majority that they will be displaced through a Muslim "take over". The BBS has also capitalised on the rise of global Islamist

terrorism to demonise the Muslims. Aside from spreading fake news and stoking fear, it has also turned to resources within Buddhism to justify its violent actions.

The understanding of Buddhism is articulated through its five precepts: the first stipulates that a Buddhist should abstain from killing. Many scholars have argued that actions like the Buddhist-Muslim clashes in Sri Lanka contradict the humanistic aspect of Buddhism, yet ultranationalist Buddhist groups like BBS have argued that there are Buddhist texts that justify their actions.

A popular historical and religious resource often used is the *Mahavamsa*, a post-canonical epic poem that recounts the miraculous visit of Buddha to Sri Lanka. It focuses on the actions of Buddha, King Dutugemunu and King Ashoka. Many ultranationalist Buddhists have argued that the passages in the *Mahavamsa* permits *dharma yuddhaya* (the defence of the *dharma*, which is the eternal law and order of the cosmos, or just war) and the text has been used since Sri Lanka's colonial days.

A portion of the infamous canon details King Dutugemunu's conversation with the *arahants* (the living representations of the dharma). Here, the *arahants* told the King that he should not feel troubled even though he had killed over 60,000 men. To the *arahants*, war in Buddhism is justified if the violence contained a moral aspect.

They saw King Dutugemunu as one who was protecting the dharma and noted that no harm was done as the opposing army was attacking their belief. To the *arahants*, the lives of the 60,000 men was only equivalent to the lives of one and a half human beings. This same passage was also used by one of Myanmar's monastic leaders Sitagu Syadaw in November 2017 to legitimise the Tatmadaw's violence against the Rohingya population.

Another popular mention in the *Mahavamsa* is King Ashoka. Some believe that his act of war helped to spread Buddhism to the conquered population; a view that some hold in high regard. Yet another Buddhist text to note is the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta*. Even though it is not cited as often as the *Mahavamsa*, some ultranationalist Buddhists believe the text states that violence can be justified in Buddhism if it is used as a defensive measure.

'Ambivalence of the Sacred'

This does not at all suggest that Buddhism inherently promotes violence. It is also not to debate whether Buddhists are violent or benevolent people. Rather, the point is to acknowledge and accept that Buddhists who embrace the ultra-nationalist orientation – just like other extremist religious adherents be they Muslims, Christians, or others – are people who experience a spectrum of emotions, including fear, suffering, anger and violence. They may, as a result resort to their religious traditions to seek justification for their situation.

Religious scholar Scott Appleby highlighted the ambivalent nature of the sacred. He posits that there is nothing inherently violent or peaceful about a religious tradition; how a religion manifests itself as violent or peaceful is largely dependent on how its adherents interpret the different resources available within the tradition. This is why

terrorists and peacemakers can exist in the same community and adhere to the same religion.

Appleby argues that religion's ability to incite violence is intimately related to its equally impressive power as a force for peace. It is therefore crucial that the focus shifts to the positive resources within the religion in order to provide a compelling counter-narrative to the exclusivist and ultranationalist rhetoric spouted by groups like BBS.

Way Forward

In this context, other organisations and civil society groups which adopt moderate and humanistic teachings of Buddhism can lead the way in disseminating positive messages. A number of Sinhalese Buddhist leaders in fact have already denounced the ongoing riots, but this move needs to be supplemented with a more long-term strategy of promoting resources for peace in the country.

Additionally, beyond promoting a positive counter-narrative, it is also crucial that ultranationalist Buddhist groups re-think their attitude towards moderate Buddhist institutions, minority religious groups as well as the state in Sri Lanka. For the country to move forward, all these institutions need to work closely together in its peacebuilding process.

Nursheila Muez is a Research Analyst and Jessica Yeo Jia Lin is a Student Research Assistant in the Studies of Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg