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The Growing Challenge of the Extreme Right

By Kumar Ramakrishna

SYNOPSIS

Two decades since the 11 September attacks in the United States, a new trend has emerged in political and religiously-inspired violence in the broad form of Extreme Right Movements, at times fomenting hate crimes, violence and even terrorism.

COMMENTARY

THE MOB that stormed the Capitol building in Washington DC on 6 January 2021, in a futile effort to prevent Congress from certifying the November 2020 election victory of Joe Biden over incumbent president Donald Trump, displayed a bewildering range of symbols representing the diverse populist and extremist forces supporting Trump.

Intriguingly, *The New York Times* described the storming of the Capitol as “a holy war” in which “white evangelical Christians fused with Trump extremism” to provide the “political and theological underpinnings” of the [rampage](#).

New Trends in Right Wing Extremism

While the threat of violent Islamist extremism has occupied policy attention in the nearly two decades since the September 11 2001 attacks in the United States, the 6 January assault on the US Congress by the pro-Trump mob was symbolic of a wider, emergent trend in political and religiously-inspired violence across the world: Extreme Right Movements, at times fomenting hate crimes, violence and terrorism.

Three types of Extreme Right movements appear of particular interest: White Supremacist, Buddhist and Hindu extremists. According to Julia Ebner, the Extreme Right comprises groups and individuals that espouse “at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy”; the Far Right represents the “political manifestation of the extreme [right](#)”.

Ebner's point that non-violent Far Right political figures and parties are ideologically related, albeit distantly, to the relatively more violence-prone Extreme Right, were a distinct feature of White Supremacist, Buddhist and Hindu extremist movements in 2020.

The White Supremacist Extreme Right

Extreme Right White Supremacist movements remain a complex, continually evolving, if fragmented, phenomenon. The movement is a bewildering amalgam of White nationalists, some White Christian evangelicals, racists, anti-government militias, misogynists, anti-globalisers, and anti-vaxxers, amongst others, seeking "to capitalise on the global social and political upheaval" – including the current pandemic – to promote intolerant ideas and at times inflict [violence](#)".

According to some estimates, 67 percent of all domestic terrorist attacks and plots in the US between 1 January and 31 August 2020 were carried out by right-wing [extremists](#). Meanwhile in the United Kingdom, in 2020, "of the 27 late-stage terrorist attack plots in Great Britain disrupted by MI5 and CT Policing since 2017, eight have been right wing [extremist](#)".

One important ideological strand of the White Supremacist Extreme Right – that, as we shall see, is very much in common with its Buddhist and Hindu ideological counterparts – is the notion of an existential threat to core group identity, in this case, White European identity. According to this discourse, a "White Genocide" is underway, perpetrated by non-White European out-groups like Jews, Hispanics and Muslims.

White Genocide is allegedly the result of the stronger, insular identities and greater relative fertility rates of such out-groups, coupled with lax national immigration policies. Hence the "Great Replacement" of the White Christian European races needs thwarting [urgently](#).

While such notions have certainly fuelled violent Extreme Right attacks such as the New Zealand mosque shootings in 2019, they have been increasingly mainstreamed into Far Right political discourse as well. For example, European Far Right political parties portray themselves as the "defenders of European values, culture, and civilisation", while slogans such as "Europe for Europeans" have been increasingly [prevalent](#).

The Buddhist Extreme Right

In Sri Lanka, in 2020 the leading Extreme Right Buddhist monk Galagodaatte Gnanasara, who has long been "accused of instigating hate crimes against Muslims in the country" secured a seat in the parliament, on behalf of his Far Right-oriented Our Power of People [party](#). Gnanasara, leader of the Extreme Right Buddhist movement Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), or Buddhist Power Force, has long urged the Sinhalese Buddhist majority to defend their identity and interests against Islamist [extremism](#).

Meanwhile in Myanmar, another Extreme Right Buddhist monk, Ashin Wirathu, days prior to Myanmar's November 2020 general election, voluntarily surrendered to the

police in Yangon. Wirathu has long been an influential social media personality, following the country's transition from military rule in 2011. In several incendiary sermons over the years, he has targeted Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim [minority](#), accusing it of posing an existential threat to Myanmar's Bamar Buddhist majority identity.

Despite Wirathu's arrest, Myanmar's 2020 election saw the Rohingya almost completely excluded from [participating](#). Meanwhile, members of the Extreme Right Buddhist movement Ma Ba Tha openly campaigned for the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development [Party](#) (USDP).

The Far Right orientation of the USDP was somewhat reflected in its exploitation of the race and religion card during the campaigning, further suggesting that the politicisation of Buddhism in Myanmar will [persist](#).

The Hindu Extreme Right

Meanwhile in India, the same close nexus between Extreme Right Social Movements and Far Right political parties is also evident. The Hindu Far Right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government remained very much in sync with the broader Extreme Right Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) social movement — characterised as “the holding company of Hindu supremacism” or “Hindutva” [ideology](#).

The BJP is widely regarded as the “political wing” of the [RSS](#). The mainstreaming of the Hindutva worldview within India's national politics in 2020 contributed to several incidents that appeared to target the country's Muslim community. These included the Delhi riots in February 2020 against the backdrop of the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) [protests](#). The CAA and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) were criticised as allegedly discriminatory against Muslims.

Furthermore, the government's “unilateral revocation of Kashmir's semi-autonomous status and the subsequent decision to allow non-residents to purchase properties in Kashmir”, as well as the castigation of the Tablighi Jamaat missionary movement for allegedly ignoring safe distancing measures, thereby contributing to the spread of COVID-19, reinforced Hindutva accusations that Muslims were an existential [threat](#).

In sum, dealing with “the extreme right threat” — across all three extremisms — has proven “deeply complicated for states”, because the “bleed into the political mainstream” has rendered the problem “very difficult to isolate and eradicate” [surgically](#).

Implications: Interlocking Extremist Movements?

Going forward, greater research is needed to explore at least two issues.

First, how do Extreme Right movements network with and influence one another? This can occur within and between such movements. For instance, it is known that Buddhist extremist figures like Sri Lanka's Gnanasara and Myanmar's Wirathu have institutionalised [ties](#), while White Supremacist extremist groups have also established transnational [links](#).

Moreover, ideological cross-fertilisation across Extreme Right movements also occurs. Thus Gnanasara asserted in 2019 that his “ideology” was influenced by “Hindu right-wing group Shiv Sena, the British National Party, and French far-right leader Marine Le Pen — all of whom have made incendiary remarks on Islam and [Muslims](#)”.

Second, it would be particularly important to better grasp what trigger factors could cause Extreme Right ideological ecosystems of interlocking social movements and various institutions, charismatic influencers, political parties and social media platforms, to generate violence — as we witnessed in Washington DC on 6 January.

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