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Rise of Violent Christian Extremism: Whither Inter-Religious Ties?

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

The case of a self-radicalised Christian youth planning to attack two mosques in Singapore highlights the global nature of an extremist threat that may manifest as ethno-religious supremacism or as faith-driven. How will this affect inter-religious relations?

COMMENTARY

THE 16-YEAR old youth recently detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) is the first far-right Christian extremist detained in Singapore. The planned attack on a mosque and self-radicalisation of a Christian are not entirely unexpected. The threat of what is often loosely termed the “far-right” is a [global one](#), and this Singapore example of an ethnic Indian Protestant Christian shows that it extends beyond what might be seen as a “white” agenda. As Singapore (and [ASEAN](#)) [considers its CVE](#) (countering violent extremism) strategy, it needs to be aware that this goes beyond the threat posed by [militant jihadism](#).

While the inspiration for [this youth](#) seems to have been the [Christchurch attack](#) of 2019, with the catalyst being [an attack in France](#) last year, there are multiple sources of far-right anti-Muslim sentiment within the South and Southeast Asian context. As such, [“white” far-right extremism](#), including claimed Christian identity, is just [one factor](#) in the potential for such violence. While diffuse, [“far-right”](#) as a marker is often used widely to refer to diverse groups, ranging from White supremacists to the ethno-religious Buddhist, Hindu and also violent Christian extremists.

Anti-Muslim Resentment

To mention some examples, the ISIS-inspired attack in Sri Lanka in 2019 has further

stirred existing Buddhist animosity towards Muslims – who have been scapegoated by militant Buddhist extremists in the aftermath of the civil war against the Tamil minority. This in turn created distrust [amongst Christians too](#), who previously often found common ground with Muslims.

In [Myanmar and Thailand](#), particular vectors have seen prejudice stoked against Muslims. Again, in India, [far-right militant Hindu](#) extremists have come to view Muslims as their most potent enemy.

Different far-right Islamophobic groups are also working together. The Hindu militant far-right, for instance, has been [developing ties](#) to far-right networks in Europe and America, and has a heritage in Italian fascism.

[In media representations](#), Muslims tend to be portrayed, often sweepingly and unthinkingly, as those most likely to be involved in terrorism and violence. In truth, many innocent Muslims are the victims of attacks both by militant jihadis and far-right violent extremist groups from the other faith communities, be they Buddhist (as seen in Myanmar and Sri Lanka), Hindu (in India) and Christian in Europe, the United States, and New Zealand.

Examples of such violence extends from direct killings such as the Christchurch attack to violence against individual Muslims in terms of [beatings and assault](#), and prejudicial policies such as then US President Donald Trump's ban of travel from predominantly Muslim countries. Therefore, some argue, Muslims are the group who [suffer most](#) from global terror attacks.

The Far-Right Threat and Global Terrorism

Far too often, CVE has been [disproportionately aimed](#) at Muslims, with the [threat of the far-right](#) ignored. In what we may broadly term Western nations, various events – from the Christchurch attack, to the storming of the US Capitol, and the [murder of a British parliamentarian](#) – have made the threat of far-right violent extremism more obvious and part of both the media, political, and security services agenda.

That Singapore picked up this individual at the planning stage is fully to its credit. It recognised that an Indian Protestant Christian inspired by the far-right could be just as much a threat as somebody profiled as a “Muslim”. Gearing CVE policing to more directly focus on the far-right needs to happen, and globally this does seem to be the direction of such policies which is good. The [threat is global](#).

The media also play a key role in how they speak. While there are dangers of stoking fear, an acknowledgement of use of the term “terrorism” to describe attacks committed by the far-right is needed. Social media and Internet companies, as well as traditional media, also play a key role in what is allowed on their sites and in the level of vetting of content that takes place.

Looking Ahead: Role of Religious Communities

Singapore's Home Affairs & Law Minister K. Shanmugam is right to suggest that

religious buildings should [not become “fortresses”](#). To some extent, the securitisation of buildings and societies means terrorists have succeeded in instilling fear.

Religious communities must also speak together, and in Singapore [Muslims and Christians were side-by-side](#) condemning the action of the 16-year-old Christian youth. This display of unity is important in countering enmity narratives. In a [UK case study](#), a 2010 planned march through the London borough of Tower Hamlets by the English Defence League left many Muslim youths afraid that “the Christians are coming to get us”.

But an interfaith counter response that saw local Christian priests on stage with Muslim leaders speaking against this march helped local Muslims realise that this was not the case. Symbolic displays of unity can be key, more so [than statements](#) or speeches from one side. Plans for joint action by religious communities to [tackle online radicalisation](#) and extremism is also to be welcomed.

Singapore is also to be commended for subjecting the individual detained to counselling, both religious and psychological. In many places radicalisation in jail is a problem, with examples of radicalised inmates influencing others and even hunkering down further into such worldviews. Moreover, the only long-term solution is through rehabilitation, which will involve in such cases religious narratives.

While Singapore has got much right in its response to this case, it has made very real the long-posed global threat – including in this part of the world – from far-right terrorist actors, including those of the ethno-religious kind. While the Christian youth is a lone wolf, and caught before acting, the possibility for inspiring copycat acts must not be overlooked.

Moreover, both mainstream populist political actors and extremist ideologues continue to see traction in spreading prejudiced Islamophobic narratives. The very real possibility that this is not a one-off event must therefore be taken seriously.

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