

GNET-CENS Online Workshop on Right Wing Extremism: East and West

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Abstract

Singapore's first reported case of a right-wing extremism (RWE) plot underscored how multicultural Asian societies are potentially vulnerable to ideologies more often associated with 'the West'. It sparked concern over this brand of radicalism that is relatively novel to Asia. Intolerance and the pervasiveness of echo-chambers online create a diffused movement across countries with opportunities for mimicking tactics and (re)appropriating narratives. This online workshop brought together a diverse group of leading academics and practitioners at the intersection of extremism and social resilience. While RWE may have roots in white-supremacy, it finds fertile ground in parts of Asia where minority identities are contested, and manifestations concurrently resonate and vary from the 'West'.

The event was organised by the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) and the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET). GNET was established in early 2020 as the academic research arm of 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. The GIFCT was founded by Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube in 2017 to prevent terrorists and violent extremists from exploiting digital platforms.

Speakers

Mr Adam Leff

Analyst, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, US Department of State, Washington DC

Dr Eviane Leidig

Research Fellow, Current and Emerging Threats at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), The Hague

Dr Cynthia Miller-Idriss

Professor, American University, and Director of the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL) in the Center for University Excellence (CUE), Washington DC

Dr Melyn McKay

Research Anthropologist and Expert Adviser, the Centre for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR)

Moderator

Dr Shashi Jayakumar

Senior Fellow and Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Singapore

Adam Leff

Analyst, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, US Department of State, Washington DC

Adam Leff spoke about the terminology used by the US Government when discussing the far-right extremist movement, the motivations of the associated groups and individuals, and the challenges of preventing different types of violent extremism.

The US Government employs the term, Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism (REMVE), defined as individuals or groups who promote or conduct violence in the name of defending a perceived ethnic identity, which can be cultural, racial or religious. This broad terminology is not connected to the political spectrum and can encompass many actors around the world, which is intentional.

The US government is primarily concerned with a REMVE sub-set that idealises the European 'white' identity and believes it is under threat by those who represent and support multiculturalism and globalisation. For this category of REMVE groups, the broad goal is the creation of either an ethno-state or enclave within a state. Many in the movement buy into a racist conspiracy theory that government elites are encouraging mass immigration intended to destroy their perceived identity.

Given the current level of threat, there is an understandable tendency to compare this REMVE movement with that of Sunni violent extremist groups such as ISIS. But while both use the internet for recruitment and propaganda, the REMVE movement lacks an organisational hierarchy and is diffused into small cells or individuals. There are no physical safe havens or areas of control, nor clear leadership or command-and-control structures. The vast majority of REMVE attacks are conducted by lone actors unaffiliated with a single group. They are inspired by the wider movement and connected to others online.

Dr Eviane Leidig

Research Fellow, Current and Emerging Threats at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in The Hague

Eviane Leidig's presentation analysed the Hindutva phenomenon using the terminology of right-wing extremism. Leidig argued the Hindutva movement can be classed as a far-right ideology, with extant transnational links to other right-wing groups in Western Europe and North America.

Hindu nationalism is rooted in the idea of the creation of a Hindu rashtra or 'state'. Proponents link identity to notions of 'blood and soil', similar to discourses espoused by other far-right groups. Today's Hindutva movement can be traced back to anti-colonial sentiment against the British Raj and attributed to the founding of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925. During the interwar period, the RSS was heavily influenced by both Italian fascists and Nazi Germany.

Leidig noted the Hindutva was ‘mainstreamed’ only in 2014, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi secured electoral victory. Modi managed to reinvent his political image and obtained support from a young, urban demographic. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) further entrenched its position by winning elections in 2019. The rise of the BJP coincided with rise of ‘Internet Hindus’, referring to Hindutva supporters both domestically and in the diaspora, who push anti-Muslim and pro-Modi and pro-BJP content. Like other far-right groups, Internet Hindus fall into different factions. Hindutva partisans, however, conduct their information operations in a more orchestrated fashion, with a degree of centralised command and control.

Hindutva presence on social media has found itself creating transnational alliances beyond India, among groups that share anti-Muslim or anti-immigrant policies. This includes the sharing of memes and misinformation originally produced for consumption by European audiences. More concerning is how Hindutva politicians legitimise their activities by exploiting state diplomatic efforts. This has included a visit by far-right Members of the European Parliament to Jammu and Kashmir in 2019, which was facilitated by members of the Indian diaspora in Brussels.

Leidig concluded by stressing the importance of viewing far-right extremism in post-colonial societies, beyond Europe and North America. The ascendance of Hindutva in India’s electoral politics also underscores how far-right ideologies can be legitimised by populist tactics, exploiting democratic processes.

Dr Cynthia Miller-Idriss

Professor, American University, and Director of the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL) in the Center for University Excellence (CUE), Washington DC

Cynthia Miller-Idriss discussed the global rise of the far-right. She focused on far-right discourse; how movement has coded itself into youth culture through memes and symbols; and the implications for the recruitment and indoctrination of potential far-right nationalists.

The ‘far-right’ can be conceptualised as a fragmented spectrum of four main categories: (i) exclusionary and dehumanising beliefs; (ii) anti-government extremism and antidemocratic beliefs/practices; (iii) perceived existential threats and conspiracy theories; and (iv) violent apocalyptic fantasies of bringing down and replacing societal systems.

Psychological drivers among far-right extremists typically involve combined sentiments of precariousness and entitlement. The vast majority of far-right terrorism is not committed by people attributed to specific groups. Most develop their views online through ‘self-radicalising networks’ which are inspired by group propaganda but not necessarily card-carrying members. Spaces for the cultivation of views and recruitment are diverse, from a Neo-Nazi vegan cooking show on YouTube, to mixed-martial arts clubs and festivals, to campaigns within higher education institutions.

The movement is also blurring the left-right spectrum. Some far-right groups claim they are the ‘true multiculturalists’, for example, as they seek to preserve cultures by separation and avoiding dilution. One common strategy is known as the ‘greening of hate’, whereby white supremacists claim that immigration degrades the environment, and often cite the Native American experience as a cautionary tale of what can happen if people don’t defend their land.

Over the past fifteen years, symbols of the far-right in iconography (in clothing brands, for example) have been recoded to evade legal restrictions on certain words and images, and have transformed and evolved into content for global meme culture. Other concepts have developed in online subcultures and are now commonly seen on flags at real-world events and violent rallies, further connecting the online and offline. Irony and humour are commonly employed to provide the protection of plausible deniability.

In conclusion, Miller-Idriss said we should not underestimate the ability of online youth culture to mobilise ideas that can signify and translate to offline violence.

Dr Melyn McKay

Research Anthropologist and Expert Adviser to the Centre for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR)

Melyn McKay explored the rise of Myanmar’s most powerful and prominent right-wing movement, Ma Ba Tha; how it was successfully contained, and how the power vacuum left behind is shaping the field of popular resistance to the 2021 Myanmar coup.

There is a terminological problem in using ‘Buddhist nationalism’ to understanding Ma Ba Tha in Myanmar. Parallels are drawn between Ma Ba Tha, pro-Brexit forces, Trumpism, Hindutva and Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka, but these comparisons fundamentally misunderstand longstanding debates and power struggles within Myanmar.

Many foreign observers see Ma Ba Tha purely as a hate group with political objectives. However, many of its grassroots members were drawn to the group because of its social work and Buddhist sociomoral / cultural promotion objectives. Ma Ba Tha never particularly wanted to participate in party politics, but rather, saw themselves as a social and moral force working to maintain the centrality of Buddhist values in public life.

Ma Ba Tha’s strategic diffusiveness and structural opacity made it resistant to various attempts at controlling its activities and direction. However, three developments eventually led to successful containment: (i) Facebook de-platformed popular members and many of the organisation’s pages; (ii) National League for Democracy (NLD) bureaucrats in local government positions stopped granting or delayed the processing of Ma Ba Tha event applications; and (iii) civil society activists countered Ma Ba Tha ideology online and offline.

Despite widespread concerns that Ma Ba Tha's appeal to pure Buddhism would be leveraged by the Myanmar military in order to ensure the success of the February 1st coup, this has not materialised in any meaningful way. Instead, religious symbolism has been central to anti-coup protestors, but in unexpected and transgressive ways. While this has generally been perceived as a sign anti-coup forces will attempt to build a more inclusive, pan ethnic protest movement, this approach also has disadvantages. For instance, because Myanmar's civil society and National League for Democracy were central to dismantling Ma Ba Tha and arguing for a separation of state and Sangha, they now find it difficult to engage monks on political issues, thus losing out on one of the strongest mobilising forces in Myanmar's society.

Attempts to undercut the legitimacy of more 'right wing' or 'hardline' actors can also shrink the space for moderate or progressive actors to participate in important conversations, including as allies. The tendency to view Ma Ba Tha as purely political or strictly anti-Muslim ignores its contributions in the areas of poverty alleviation, disaster response, and the transformative potential provided by organisations enabling women's participation in a wider variety of religious and social labours. As such, it is necessary to consider those inadvertently excluded by way of counter-movements, and if possible, offer them alternative avenues for participation.

Q&A

A question directed towards Eviane Leidig asked about online communities, and whether the Indian diaspora have been ideologically receptive to Hindutva narratives.

Eviane Leidig replied that it depends on who you ask within the broad diaspora. For some in the middle-class and upper caste, supporting Hindu nationalism is part of their identity – or a way of maintaining the status quo. The Hindu diaspora has played quite a pivotal role in supporting Hindu nationalism online since the 1990s, as many supporters were employed in the IT sector and had the skills required to obtain online resources and access online communities. But the Indian diaspora is vast and there will be different experiences in different regions, including significant opposition in some circles.

The next question highlighted the announcement by the US Department of Homeland Security that it would investigate possible violent extremist links among its own ranks, and asked whether sympathy for the far-right from within government could hinder prevention efforts.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss said one of the challenges in the United States is there has never been the type of data collection about the potential infiltration or existence of extremist beliefs among military or law enforcement personnel. There is currently a lot of attention on this, and following the January 6 storming of the Capitol building, the Pentagon instructed all its commanding officers and civilian supervisors to conduct a one-day 'stand down' to discuss domestic violent extremism. However, it's hard to know the extent of the problem without sufficient data.

In Germany there is an independent military agency solely tasked with rooting out extremism in the military. The US does not currently have this type of capacity or systematic attention, but there are moves in this direction, including the collection of data among some municipal agencies, as well as bias training among police departments.

Buddhist nationalism was the focus of another question, which asked how it could be conceptually situated in relation to other types of far-right extremism in the West, or whether Ma Ba Tha resonates more with what is often referred to as Asian Values.

Melyn McKay noted that it was difficult to fit Ma Ba Tha into some of the categories provided by the prominent terminologies. There are elements that are similar to what you get coming out of Brexit discourse, for example. Ma Ba Tha have also appropriated Hindu nationalist memes. So, there is certainly some cross pollination happening, but it's important to look at what Ma Ba Tha hope to achieve. They appear to have a revivalist agenda with socially conservative aspects.

However, Ma Ba Tha's contemporary members were active in the 2007 pro-democracy protests and refer to themselves as a democratic organisation. This is likely the reason the organisation has not voiced any support for the coup, despite sharing ideological perspectives with the Myanmar military and its political party.

A follow-up question inquired about Ma Ba Tha's relations with Buddhist nationalist groups in countries, such as Sri Lanka and Thailand.

The main relationship is with Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka, which has never had the same social development angle or grassroots following as Ma Ba Tha. The other big difference is the legislative environment in which these two organisations exist. Bodu Bala Sena have an MP in parliament and can be involved in politics in a way that Ma Ba Tha monks simply cannot. They certainly have ideological similarities, but because of the contextual differences it has been hard for the two organisations to align their agendas.

Similarities also exist with some groups in Thailand, but again context changes the modalities, as in Thailand there isn't the same post-colonial tradition. The colonial experience in Myanmar brought monks into the public eye as defenders of the Buddhist polity, which was in contrast to the perceived immoral occupation of the British in government. In Thailand, the relationship between the secular and religious authorities is very different, so those ties have not been as strong.

Directed to any and all of the speakers, the next question asked what type of regulation on social media would be useful in curbing some of the narratives and propaganda distributed by extremist groups and movements, or conversely whether regulation cannot make much of a difference.

Eviane Leidig answered that many of the policies and potential regulations of content on social media platforms tend to be Western-centric, and not terribly geared towards the 'global south'.

Adam Leff spoke of the relationship and ongoing discussion between the US government and the major technology companies, who often say they find it much easier to take action against groups that are specifically designated as extremist. This remains challenging with a movement as diffuse as the current REMVE threat in the West.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss said that while regulation in some form and to some extent is probably inevitable, it was far more important to look at core issues, such as why people are attracted to the content and susceptible to disinformation, the broader fragilities within the mainstream, and the associated threats to democracy from across the spectrum.

A final question asked whether there was a current shift in the way that elements of the far-right were recruiting, and whether groups may be seeking a wider or even more transnational audience.

Prof Miller-Idriss highlighted a clear shift in recruitment techniques and tactics over the past 5-10 years within western societies. The language has softened, with a lot of euphemism – such as ‘re-migration’ instead of deportation of ethnic minorities, for example. Another new tactic is entryism, where recruiters target young politically engaged people on university campuses, and try to get them to run on platforms with white supremacy ideas. These are initiatives to infiltrate the mainstream.

More recently there has also been a move to embrace conspiracy theories like Q-Anon and to channel some of the anti-vaccine views that may have traditionally been more on the ideological left. Strange intersections or coalitions are part of a wider fragmentation of the far-right movement, which may require a whole new classification system to capture what is happening. The political spectrum really doesn’t capture the changes and transitions in the phenomenon, nor how people are recruiting.