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## **Buddhist Nationalism in Asia: What It Means for Europe**

*By Rafal K. Stepien*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Buddhist nationalism is on the rise in Southeast Asia, and has already led to armed conflict and the persecution of the region's minority Muslim populations. There is much at stake that Europe cannot afford to ignore.*

### **COMMENTARY**

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM, religious extremism, the rise of the religious far-right... headlines worldwide proclaim the fact that, far from dissipating into irrelevance in secular post-modernity, religion is alive – and kicking.

While much has been made in the European context of the challenges of Islamism among immigrant communities and of attacks on the rule of law in the conservative Christian strongholds of the European Union's East, Buddhist brands of religious nationalism in Asia have passed largely unnoticed. But as tensions between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand continue to spill over into overt violence, the need to investigate the implications for the religiously plural democracies of Europe becomes ever more urgent.

### **Violence and Victimization**

In the Buddhist-majority countries of South and Southeast Asia, popular resentment against perceived injustices involving Muslim neighbours has led to observable shifts in the political landscape.

Thus, groups such as the hardline Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) or Buddhist Power Force in Sri Lanka and the radical Pandin Dharma Party in Thailand have consolidated their recently won popular gains by continuing to peddle

the need for armed protection on behalf of a Buddhism purportedly under existential threat from Islam.

In Myanmar, the state-sponsored military persecution of the stateless and predominantly Muslim Rohingya people has proceeded on such a scale that in 2020 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) unanimously ruled to adopt “provisional measures” requiring Myanmar to prevent outright genocide.

The moral arguments for mediation are clear, but why intervene? What’s in it politically for Europe?

### *Politics and Geopolitics*

While Buddhists make up less than a single percent of the European population (a figure not forecasted to increase), the Pew Research Centre estimates that Muslims will make up a full 10% of the overall population of Europe by 2050. Given so, the relevance to Europe of the turn towards intolerance by some South and Southeast Asian nations lies not so much with the perpetrators as with the victims.

If current trends continue, political parties within Europe will need to adopt concrete counter-measures or face losses among an increasing Muslim electorate: A direct long-term consequence of the changing demands of democratic representation as the European population increasingly comes to embody the continent’s pluralist ethos.

Geopolitical factors also need to be weighed. The alleged imprisonment, surveillance, and even forced sterilisation of vast numbers of overwhelmingly Muslim Uighurs by the Chinese government has been labelled genocide by the US government, and organisations including Amnesty and Human Rights Watch have published reports accusing China of crimes against humanity. More recently, the EU Council imposed sanctions on associated Chinese officials as part of its newly founded global human rights sanction regime.

Violence against Muslims in South and Southeast Asia is only likely to intensify given the support it continues to receive from Buddhist political players in the region. In light of this, the increasingly tough stance European powers adopt with regard to the Uighurs of China may have to be replicated with respect to the disenfranchised Muslims of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand.

Otherwise, not only will charges of hypocrisy ensue, but European states will find it harder to countenance the influence of China on domestic as well as international political stages. Furthermore, the religiously fuelled inter-ethnic fighting already seen may easily spill over into broader armed conflict. This in turn would further destabilise the region, threatening the security of European political and economic interests there.

### *Shifting Trends in Mediation and Conflict Transformation*

Given the strong reasons in support of intervention, the question of how to intervene naturally arises.

Although the EU has not tended to rely on religious groups on the ground to foster

conflict resolution, this is likely to shift following the appointment in 2016 of the bloc's first-ever Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) outside the European Union.

The European Parliament has in fact already proven attentive to issues in FoRB facing religious minorities worldwide, as evinced by the work of its Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance.

The European Commission's Department of Migration and Home Affairs, meanwhile, has founded both a Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) of frontline practitioners and a Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers "leading, funding, and supporting training for the diplomatic and international community, as well as religious and traditional peacemakers on engaging religious worldviews in peacemaking and peacebuilding processes, particularly in peace mediation" and preventing violent extremism (PVE).

### *Religion, Politics & Conflict*

Moreover, independently of the peacemaking and reconciliation role EU agencies may foster among religious stakeholders in conflict situations, European institutions at governmental and non-governmental levels themselves have extensive experience in mediating religiously-motivated conflicts.

Thus, the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, based in Finland and closely supported by the UN Mediation Support Unit and the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC), "builds bridges between grassroots peacemakers and global players in order to strengthen the work done for sustainable peace".

Outside the EU but wholeheartedly within Europe, furthermore, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland has launched a Thematic Area concerned with 'Religion, Politics, Conflict' devoted to finding concrete solutions leading to the renunciation of violence and the restoration of peaceful coexistence.

More specifically pertinent to the problem of Buddhist nationalism, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) based in Geneva recently launched a webinar series on Buddhism and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) designed to explore the mutual relevance of the Buddhist and IHL ethical and legal traditions.

### **Complex Challenges**

Naturally, the modes and means of involvement will differ among actors. EU agencies and states, for example, may permit themselves a level of overt interventionism incompatible with the historically enshrined principle of neutrality in Switzerland or the fundamental principles of impartiality and independence of the Red Cross. But this diversity of approaches may itself enable advances unavailable to any individual initiative alone.

Nonetheless, although European actors have a long history of contributing to conflict de-escalation, mediation, and reconciliation in diverse contexts, effective engagement

with Buddhist nationalists in South and Southeast Asia faces distinct strategic challenges.

Apart from obvious cultural barriers, the political and commercial interests of global players including China and the United States will need to be accounted for. Pressure is also growing on majority-Muslim nations in the region such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan to intervene on behalf of their beleaguered co-religionists.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has already denounced Myanmar's persecution of the Rohingya as a genocide, and increased intervention by Islamic powers is predicted. This means that whatever avenues of action Europe may take will need to be more broad-based and involve non-European countries.

Regardless of the complexities and challenges, however, one fact emerges clearly from ongoing analyses: Europe cannot afford to ignore the rise of Buddhist nationalism in Asia. Already implicating a multitude of factors and actors, its importance will only grow as the inter-religious conflicts it causes continue to deepen.

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