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Understanding Singapore's "Multicultural White Supremacists"

By Kumar Ramakrishna

SYNOPSIS

It is important not to overplay the fact that in the two cases thus far of "far-right extremism" in Singapore, non-white Singaporeans were involved. Even in the West, multicultural white supremacy exists. More importantly, what seems more salient is the relative youth of the two cases. Hence, the policy responses to both cases of far-right and Islamist youth radicalisation can be broadly similar.

COMMENTARY

Reports that a 16-year-old male Singaporean Secondary Four student was issued with a Restriction Order under the Internal Security Act (ISA) in November 2023, have puzzled many. Although ethnically Chinese, he identified himself strongly as a white supremacist, and desired to conduct attacks overseas in support of this [cause](#). His aspiration seems odd as some white supremacist groups in the West have espoused anti-Asian views and have attacked individuals of East Asian [descent](#).

Furthermore, the Chinese youth is the second Singaporean who seems to have imbibed "far-right [extremism](#)". In December 2020, another 16-year old Protestant Christian of Indian ethnicity was detained under the ISA for planning terrorist attacks [against Muslims at two mosques](#) in Singapore. He was released this month after undergoing an intensive three-year rehabilitation programme during his [detention](#).

The central puzzle connecting both cases is why non-white Singaporeans would buy into far-right extremist ideologies associated with white supremacism.

"Multicultural White Supremacy"

This phenomenon of non-whites buying into white supremacist "far-right" views is not

unheard of in the West. For instance, Mauricio Garcia, a 33-year-old gunman who killed eight people in Texas in May last year, was a “Latino who allegedly harboured white supremacist [views](#)”. Additionally, Sai Varshith Kandula, a 19-year-old American man of Indian descent, was arrested after crashing a van into a barrier near the White House while carrying a Nazi flag. Kandula had expressed admiration for World War Two Nazi leader Adolf [Hitler](#). Furthermore, the former leader of the US white supremacist group, the Proud Boys, Enrique Tarrio, identifies as an “[Afro-Cuban](#)”. Paul Nicholas Miller, a white supremacist political commentator who had reportedly influenced the latest 16-year old Singaporean case, is associated with the Proud [Boys](#). Political scientists Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph Lowndes have drawn attention to a broader phenomenon in the US of what they call “multicultural white [supremacy](#)”.

Making Sense of the White Supremacist Extreme Right

There are various scholarly understandings of what is meant by “far-right extremism”. The influential Institute for Strategic Dialogue in London argues that one should conceive of a broader “extreme right” movement in the West, comprising groups and individuals espousing “at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and strong state advocacy”; while the “far right” represents the “political manifestation of the extreme [right](#)”.

The white supremacist extreme right movement in the West is a complex, continually evolving, and fragmented phenomenon. It 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 exploit “global social and political upheaval” to “promote intolerant ideas and at times inflict [violence](#)”.

Recent scholarship, nonetheless, suggests that the central core of this diverse white supremacist extreme right movement in the US, and the West more broadly, is what may be termed *white Christian nationalism*. Put simply, white Christian nationalism fuses white nationalist identity with Christianity. While mainline Christianity aspires to be racially inclusive, white Christian nationalism is based on exclusivist and potentially violent “white supremacist assumptions” about the superiority of “white-Christian” culture and its “traditional way of [life](#)”.

Importantly, white Christian nationalism is “empowered by anger and fear” of supposedly morally inferior, rapacious non-white migrant/minority communities, seeking to displace white-Christians politically and socio-economically in the “racial hierarchy” in [society](#).

This theme of displacement brings us to an influential white supremacist conspiracy trope that the French philosopher Reynaud Camus called *Le Grand Remplacement* (The Great [Replacement](#)) in 2012. This narrative holds that white Christian nations are being overrun by masses of immigrants from Africa, Asia and Latin America. A “White Genocide” is thus supposedly underway, perpetrated by non-white out-groups like East Asians, Hispanics and Muslims.

The stronger, insular identities and greater relative fertility rates of such out-groups, coupled with lax national integration and immigration policies, have exacerbated the

threat. Hence the “Great Replacement” of the White Christian race needs thwarting [urgently](#), especially through “[accelerating](#)” the movement toward a violent race war to set up a white ethno-state.

Significantly, both the self-radicalised “far right” Singaporean youths were reportedly exposed to the Great Replacement narrative online. While the earlier youth identified Muslims as the threat, in the second case, African-Americans, Arabs and LGBTQ+ individuals – the latter likely regarded as an aberration in the projected white Christian nationalist social order – were seen as the key non-white [enemies](#).

It's About Youth, not Ethnicity

Another important point to note is that rather than their obviously non-white ethnicity, what is particularly notable about both “far right” cases discovered thus far, is their relative youth. Youths are particularly suitable for extremist recruitment because during the emotionally turbulent teenage years, the executive reasoning parts of their brains are less developed than the emotional centres. Thus teenagers often come across as impulsive and rash. They constantly pursue black-and-white answers to complex issues and apparently virtuous, grand [causes](#).

A report last year by the Ministry of Home Affairs observed that the “structured and dichotomous” extremist worldview appears as “more appealing to the [young](#)”. Additionally, some youth coming from challenging family contexts tend to possess fragile identities. They tend to seek “external objects that claim to be perfect and ideal”, offering “that necessary sense of connection to something of value” that can “buttress” their “self-[esteem](#)”.

This is possibly one factor explaining why the two non-white Singaporean youths fell prey to what Professor Cristina Beltran of New York University calls “multiracial whiteness”: the desire to identify with “an ideology of power and [supremacy](#)”.

The Impact of the Small Group

Scholars have observed that at some point in the self-radicalisation process, an individual would likely have been immersed in a small group, whether physical or online. Such groups act as insulated echo chambers or filter bubbles, in which countervailing ideas tend not to circulate, and within which extremist ideologies are affirmed and internalised. For instance, last year, another self-radicalised Singaporean youth who had bought into the ideology of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), reportedly “took part in discussions on social media [platforms](#)”.

In the latest “far-right” case, the youth had honed his extremist beliefs “in far-right online chat groups and channels, where he shared violent anti-African American videos”, and also “expressed interest in a far-right online chat group in carrying out a mass shooting in the US in [10 years](#)”. Apart from giving such radicalising youth “a sense of belonging to the white supremacist [community](#)”, such small groups also encourage toxic, violent norms of masculinity, persuading young males that to be a “[real man](#)”, one needs to embrace violence. As in the latest case: the youth had wanted to “fight for the [whites](#)”.

Policy Implications

First, one should not overlay the fact that in both cases thus far of “far-right extremism” in Singapore, non-white Singaporeans were implicated. As shown, even in the West, multicultural white supremacy exists. More importantly, what seems more salient is the relative youth of the two cases. In fact, youth radicalisation is clearly a feature of both “far-right” extremism and that associated with the relatively larger number of cases associated with ISIS and/or Al Qaeda in [Singapore](#).

Second, while the violent extremism of the Islamist variety remains the central threat to Singapore and the region, the challenge of “far-right extremism” should not be ignored. Global trends clearly indicate that white supremacist tropes like the Great Replacement narrative have been increasingly mainstreamed in Western [societies](#), and reflected in the electoral success of far right political parties in recent [years](#). This has prompted the French far right leader Marine Le Pen to argue that white European societies are displaying a “growing attachment to the defence of national [identities](#)”. It is worth noting too that Donald Trump, seen in some circles as the “white-supremacist-in-[chief](#)”, has a good chance of recapturing the US presidency in this November’s elections. A Trump return would be a shot in the arm for white supremacist movements in the US and globally, and this would certainly be felt in the online sphere – which impressionable youth in Singapore can all too readily access.

Finally, the defence against youth radicalisation, regardless of ideology, is, in the final analysis, broadly similar: building emotional, psychological and intellectual resilience against violent extremism of all stripes. Possible policy approaches in this regard include strong socio-economic support for the stable families that youth need; access for such youth, where relevant, to authoritative religious education promoting inclusivity rather than exclusivism; facilitating their participation in peer networks fostering not just digital literacy but healthy norms of masculinity; and last but not least, helping them develop, in creative ways, a deeper appreciation for the much-valued tolerant nature of Singapore’s secular, cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, society.

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