Ethnoreligious Nationalism and Majoritarianism in Asia

Jeff Kingston


Majoritarianism is the scourge of Asia, as ethnic majorities are abandoning tolerance and accommodation of diversity in ways that threaten, inter alia, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities. This phenomenon is based on the precept that the numerically largest group in a society enjoys primacy and has the right to make policies that favor the majority, even at the expense of diversity and minorities. This is not entirely new in Asia as many nations have experienced previous paroxysms of majoritarian violence and pogroms, but in recent years this intolerance has become more institutionalized and sustained. This tyranny of the majority threatens the secular state model based on a commitment to pluralism, tolerance, and diversity. Authoritarian governance and democratic backsliding are an expression of, and reinforce, this tyranny, undermining secularism while amplifying risks for minorities.

Majoritarianism posits that an ethnic or religious majority has the right to determine a nation’s destiny without regard for minority rights. The rise of Hindu nationalism in India, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, and Bamar Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar are examples of ethnoreligious nationalism. Ethnoreligious nationalism is the conflation of national identity with the ethnic majority’s religious affiliation. In all these examples, only members of the majority are treated as full citizens while minorities are tolerated as long as they do not challenge the majority, are suitably deferential, and accept being marginalized – politically, economically, and culturally. In democratic societies,

---


populist parties that stoke majoritarian prejudices find this development encouraging and consequently tolerate violence against minorities because it pays off electorally. For China, taming restive minorities focuses on protecting the territorial fringes and stifling ostensible separatist aspirations.

In writing about the politics of religion, nationalism, and identity, I analyze how the mutually reinforcing dynamic between religion and nationalism carries powerful implications for how people view their world and act in it. The politicization of religion confers sacral legitimacy on the bond of people with the nation and on those who manipulate such bonds for political gain. Conflating national identity with religion in the diverse societies of Asia breeds majoritarian intolerance that marginalizes ethnic, linguistic, religious, and sexual minorities, subjecting them to various indignities and violence, both by state security forces and by vigilantes empowered by a sense of mission and impunity. Asia’s religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities are at risk from malevolent majoritarian impulses that, in some cases, spark a violent backlash. In 2019, Narendra Modi’s government rescinded Kashmir’s special autonomy that had, inter alia, restricted land ownership to locals in this Muslim majority region. Subjugated by some 700,000 Indian troops, tens of thousands of Muslim Kashmiris have been killed, jailed, and tortured under a harsh and sustained occupation that encourages extremism. Also in 2019, the Modi government unveiled an amended Citizenship Act that ostensibly aims to root out illegal migrants. In reality, the Act makes religion a criteria for citizenship and seeks to strip citizenship from many Muslims in northeast India.

In Myanmar, relations between Muslims and Buddhists are tense, in recent years punctuated by eruptions of violence and rioting. In the western state of Rakhine, from 2017, the military drove some 730,000 Muslim Rohingya into neighboring Bangladesh. This was not the military’s first ethnic clearance operation targeting the Rohingya. Prospects for repatriation appear unpromising given the hostility directed at the Rohingya and the fear of reprisals should they return. Ma Ba Tha, the ultranationalist Buddhist organization, did not orchestrate this exodus, but the hatemongering by Wirathu, a high-profile Burmese Buddhist monk in this movement, has incited wider anti-Muslim sentiments and stoked fears about an Islamic demographic time bomb. This same fear animates the Islamophobic hatemongering of Gnanasara, a Sri Lankan militant monk.

---

who was the leader of Bodu Bala Sena (BBS-Buddhist Power Force) and advocates a Sinhalese Buddhist national identity.\(^8\) These extremist Sinhalese and Burmese monks pine for Buddhist-only nations much like Hindutva activists yearn for a purified Hindu homeland and Islamic hardliners fantasize about regional caliphates where the secular boundary between religion and government is eliminated.

The nexus of politics, religion, and nationalism in Asia paints a disturbing picture of societies riven by violence and menace. The sanctified extremism on display is at odds with the dignified piety commonly associated with religion. Opportunists stoke the flames of sanctimonious passions and tap into anger and resentments looking for an outlet, often invoking religion to justify agendas that have little to do with the philosophical or humanistic tenets of their faiths. They provoke culture wars to manipulate the theater of politics, gaining attention and an aura of power from staging grand spectacles and grisly incidents as in the Bangladesh bakery attack in 2016 and the 2019 suicide bombings at churches and hotels carried out in Sri Lanka. Invented or exaggerated threats or insults to religion are a common pretext for deeds that are less about spirituality than enforcing conformity, neutralizing opponents, or exacting revenge. Taking umbrage has become the default response for those looking for an excuse.

Accusations of blasphemy have proliferated with the advent of social media, spreading allegations and unproven accusations that have the effect of guilty verdicts on the accused. Recent high-profile blasphemy cases involving Christians, such as Bibi, a farm worker in Pakistan, and Ahok, the ousted governor of Jakarta, draw international attention, but even more Ahmadiyya and Shi’a Muslims are targeted by the Sunni majority in these nations. This is a virulent “Othering” that is state sanctioned, where laws are used selectively as cudgels and vigilantes take justice into their own hands.

There are even apps for reporting transgressions, and social media is a hothouse for whipping up righteous indignation. This apparent plague of blasphemy is not due to a surge of impiety, but rather the onslaught of globalization and perceived (or hyped) threats to cherished traditions, values, culture, and identity. Under such circumstances, lines delineating what is acceptable and what is unacceptable are drawn more conspicuously and defended more tenaciously. Religious and spiritual leaders are also engaged in an intensified competition to attract followers and mobilize them, using social media to disseminate and inflame. In the crowded space for online clerics, nothing equals the pulling power of blasphemy charges, so what used to be overlooked, tolerated, or dealt with quietly is now packaged for mass consumption, the ultimate click-bait for the devoted. In a world in which religion is no longer the default option, one full of impious distractions, social media also generates solidarity and enforces conformity, enabling clerics to amplify and assert their authority among the faithful and those disenchanted with the political status quo.

---

Across Asia, the Internet is the accelerant of religious fanaticism, endowing keyboard trolls with a powerful voice in virtual communities where sensationalism rules in an echo chamber of spiraling indignation and resentments. Globalization propagates gilded lifestyles of reproach, providing constant reminders of relative deprivation that are the breeding ground of rancor and envy. The twenty-first-century “age of anger” described by Pankaj Mishra conveys a sense of the unhappiness, rage, and fury that find expression and a semblance of dignity in religious identities. Religion provides the seething and vexed with the vocabulary, moral purpose, and righteous calling to challenge and denounce the unwelcome and marginalized targets. The Internet is their force multiplier, creating virtual communities of the unhappy and enraged that enable engagement and mobilization based on shared values, traumas, and collective outrage. Whether targeting an imagined “love jihad” by Muslim lotharios in India or Myanmar, interfaith dating and marriage, allegedly licentious lifestyles, or income disparities, mobile phone networks are the infrastructure and connective tissue of mobocracy. By mobocracy, I mean the reliance on street politics and demonstrations to secure changes and advance policies that lack the legitimizing power of democratic elections and processes. While such mobs, as in the pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong during 2019, can enjoy extensive grassroots support and provide a means to express popular discontent in a constrained political space, they are often manipulated by and serve elite interests. Unelected religious leaders are whipping mobs into a frenzy while pressuring governments into making concessions, co-opting politicians, or derailing election campaigns. Religious groups like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in India, Islamic Defenders Front (IDF) in Indonesia, BBS in Sri Lanka, Ma Ba Tha in Myanmar, and Hezafat in Bangladesh wield considerable political influence to push agendas that are only partly about religion. It does not take much to ignite the dry kindling of discontent in Asian societies, generating opportunities and vulnerabilities to exploit in the name of faith and creed. Rigid dogmas of intolerance are proliferating and roiling once tolerant diverse societies. These majoritarian ideologies are amplified by hatemongering and vilification. The hawkers of dogma fan fears and threats to create a siege mentality that is also a call to arms. Militant monks in Sri Lanka and Myanmar have embraced such insidious tactics, leading Islamophobic campaigns that stir an irrational malevolence and paranoia that nurtures a remarkably baseless, self-pitying sense of victimization. They find their counterparts among Hindutva activists and Islamic clerics who also recklessly and purposefully unleash orgies of violence.

Hindutva, the angry face of Hinduism, swirls menacingly through the subcontinent, spreading vigilantism and bloodshed based on an embellished Islamic threat. Under Prime Minister Modi, it has become a state-sanctioned assault on India’s secular norms and vast Muslim population. Islamophobia is something of an industry, whipped up among the willing to achieve political goals and to “saffronize” history, heritage, education, and identity. The sorrows of inequality, poverty, and caste provide willing foot soldiers deployed in the name of an imagined Mother India, a purified Hindu homeland, where non-Hindus are the enemy to be reconverted (ghar swapsi) or eliminated. Activists and

---

leaders are shrewdly adept at the theater of politics, brandishing potent religious symbols, the collective trauma of Partition, and contested sacred sites to create a simulacrum of solidarity in a nation marked by deep divisions. They rend the fabric of a secular, diverse nation with their ethnoreligious grandstanding in pursuit of an unobtainable monoculture in a polychromatic society. In such circumstances, religion becomes the wellspring of prejudice and mayhem, igniting ferocity among the devoted unleavened by compassion. As Indian intellectual Pratap Bhanu Mehta remarked in March 2019, “Religion, that very thing that behooves us to transcend our identity, is being reduced to the identity that marks you, for which you will be targeted.”

Globalization is generally associated with the West, but Arabization is a competing contagion in Asia that emanates from Saudi Arabia. Through lavish Saudi funding of mosque building and educational programs, the Haj, and migrant labor, a puritan Salafist Islam has transformed the religious landscape of Asia, promoting intolerance and extremism. Moderate Sufi Islam has come under attack, as have adherents of Shi’a and Ahmadiyya in societies in which tolerance once prevailed. Zealotry has become mainstreamed and religion has been politicized, as Arabization takes global Saudi Arabia’s overall geostrategic ambitions and rivalry with Shi’ite Iran. Projecting a Saudi-based Salafist orthodoxy enhances Riyadh’s soft power in Islamic societies. The Internet connects Saudi-based clerics with regional counterparts who seek and enforce their opinions, both gaining authority and legitimacy through these exchanges that position Saudi Arabia as the Islamic homeland.

As much as Western influences may be alien, so too is the sociocultural baggage of contemporary Arabization. The spread of Islam in Asia has been a longstanding, evolutionary process of evolving fusions over several centuries that draws on successive waves of interaction from commerce, pilgrimages, and war. Contemporary orthodox zealots may want to cleanse local religious practices of syncretic “pollutants,” but these are deeply rooted, ensuring puritanical Salafism confronts cultural resistance and tempered accommodation. Interactions that were once intermittent and episodic, however, are now sustained and intensified by the Internet, eliminating borders and distances that are also eroded by improved transport. These developments help accelerate and deepen the processes of “purification” and reform. Moreover, outrages can be shared instantaneously that nurture imagined communities of the traumatized and outraged, generating solidarity among the faithful and opportunities for fanatics. It took the Internet to turbocharge *dakwah* (preaching) and bring preachers into every laptop and mobile phone. This high-tech immanence is certainly not only about what is sacred and holy. Christians in Asia are mostly minorities and have been the target of majoritarian brutalities across the region, with horrific consequences when suicide bombers attacked packed churches in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday in 2019 as mass was being celebrated, killing over 250 and maiming hundreds more. Liberation theology has been salient in Timor

---


Leste and the Philippines, where the Church, especially its local leaders, has played a key role in anti-authoritarian movements. Christianity has also played a decisive role in Korean anticolonialism and subsequently, in mobilizing dissent in modern South Korea. Yet the big story is the explosive popularity of evangelical Christianity, especially Pentecostalism, that is taking Asia by storm. In China, one of the most inhospitable nations in the world for religion, Pentecostalism has thrived. But it has done so at the sufferance of authorities and operates in the gray zone of official forbearance. This fragility has motivated pastors to embrace patriotism with biblical fervor as a way to mollify the government and thereby safeguard converts from the authoritarian excesses inflicted on dissidents and renegades. In South Korea, success has been predicated on flamboyant celebrations and embracing shamanistic traditions, while in Indonesia and India, targeted and disadvantaged minorities have found solace and safety. Everywhere, the gospel of prosperity has been a key drawing card, while the grid of rules and codes of behavior have appealed to many caught in the deracinating transformations of a “rising Asia” and the receding bonds of community in mobile, urbanizing societies.

Religion is eminently useful for those who have political agendas because it confers virtue and ignites passion. Combining religion with ethnonationalism taps into primordial fervor and unleashes fanaticism in the name of god and nation, transforming ignoble misdeeds into sacred duty. The conflation of religion and national identity is a formula for a glowering majoritarianism threatening to minorities. Proponents of ethnonationalism wrapped in the robes of religion target the evident diversity in their societies and agitate against it.

The essence of religion is peaceful, otherworldly, and enlightening, a way of living to abide by that inspires thoughtful, charitable, and altruistic engagement, except when it does not. The gap between precepts and practice does not impugn the former but rather highlights how the tenets are elusive aspirations. In sum, where there is power, there are scoundrels and opportunists who are adept at enlisting the ardor of religion and nationalism for political purposes. In doing so, they seek to bolster their moral authority and legitimacy, unleashing destructive torrents and inflicting traumas that scar and precipitate retribution, repression, and cycles of violence. Alas, all too often, such powerful manipulators sin with impunity. But why is this politics of ethnoreligious nationalism escalating?

My view is that humans cling to nonrational orientations. A wholly secular, rational, and logical world does not satisfy spiritual and psychic needs, and thus people respond to emotional-spiritual-mythic gestures, symbols, and rhetoric. The global surge in politicized religion and religious politics is driven by the radical disruptions of intensified globalization that threaten traditional verities and established norms. There is rampant disappointment and sagging confidence in secular nationalism because it seems so inadequate a defense against this relentless assault and does not provide a compelling assertion of values or articulate the basis for a moral community. In contrast, religious austerity and extremist violence respond to the yearning for renewal and purification in corrupt and flawed polities, offering an uplifting vision for a moral order and reassertion of
proper values in society. This revivalism, calling for sinners to repent and a vanquishing of evil, appeals to the disappointed, disillusioned, and deracinated. Grandiose spectacles and the contagion effect of the crowd transport people to a less mundane space where grim realities can be eclipsed by gilded glimmerings of hope and redemption swathed in spirituality and nationalist scapegoating. Decisive actions and agendas offer relief from governments wallowing in destructive and interminable bickering. Tough leaders who speak their minds, embrace bold plans, and challenge political pieties, in contrast to dull, consultant-trimmed wonks, appeal to the primordial and tribalist inclinations of human beings. Problematically, the populist craving for grandeur, moral certainties, and vengeance remains unquenched.

In assessing this angry and alarmed Asia, it is also important to consider the large youth cohorts in South and Southeast Asia facing uncertain job prospects in a rapidly changing world that is also displacing their elders and leaves them both feeling powerless. Globalization subverts established norms and the social order, shredding reassuring certainties, and undermining dignity and self-respect. This amorphous process, unleashed by distant global forces beyond national control, ramps up a desire for greater control and certainty that responds to the hyped promises of ethnoreligious nationalism. These ominous appeals reverberate with greater impact in Asia’s heterogeneous societies, in which diversity spurs enmities and rivalries that stoke an intensified longing for solidarity to ward off threats, imagined and real.

Moreover, the bonds of social cohesion have loosened and frayed as globalization is propelling intensified and sustained interactions in a cyber-charged encounter with forces of modernization. This phenomenon is transforming internal dynamics and aspirations and heightening competition across the board, creating more “losers” and accentuating divisive disparities. There has also been an upsurge of rights-driven movements spurred on by international norms and institutions that threaten the privileges and prejudices of the entrenched. In addition, migration creates diaspora communities that gain the wherewithal to meddle back in their homelands, while temporary overseas employment exposes workers to new influences and norms that they spread upon their return. It is thus a multipronged maelstrom sweeping Asian societies as they navigate the rapids of modernization toward becoming the fulcrum of the world economy. In such a situation, the passengers are looking for a strong helmsperson who projects confidence that better times are coming.

Asian political spaces are no longer just about mainstream parties and election campaigns, as social media has taken the keys away from the gate-keepers and given a voice to bloggers, clerics, monks, priests, outsiders, and anyone else with a mobile phone, enabling direct connections with the multitudes. This cyber-recasting of the political landscape has vast implications that mainstream politicians and parties ignore at the risk of irrelevance. The genie is out of the bottle and, with the exception of China, there is no going back to the circumscribed political arenas of the past that were much easier to control. This brave new world for Asia promises to be one in which the solace of religion retains a buoyant appeal for those threatened by escalating globalization and ethnonationalist
assaults on the bonds of cohesion and tolerance. While the rising tide of ethnonationalism is destabilizing and gaining momentum from the perceived threats of globalization, religion serves as both an oasis of order and a useful weapon amid intensified culture wars about identity. In the aftermath of ethnoreligious conflict, lingering enmities and prejudices are the sanctified embers of violence that can flare abruptly, leaving more scars to be avenged.

The momentum of majoritarianism in Asia has unleashed the nightmares of ethnoreligious nationalism and provoked a hardening of identities, reducing the scope for accommodation. This phenomenon has also triggered a backlash of minority sub-nationalisms contesting majoritarian chauvinism, as in Kashmir. The secular state is undermined by these developments, and this has led to democratic backsliding, concessions to religious hardliners, and resorting to repressive tactics that undermine secular principles. The postcolonial leaders were the champions of those secular precepts. However, facing a vastly different context, twenty-first century leaders’ commitment to these principles is ceding ground to the survival instinct, as they do what it takes to retain power and fend off challengers, by fair means and foul. It has long been an article of faith that the ends do not justify the means, but this tenet is fading in Asian democracies, where retaining power is depicted as an existential imperative because the opponents cannot be trusted. Citing Bangladesh, some argue that the government has a point because the main political opposition along with its affiliated groups champion antithetical views regarding national identity and have a violent track record in support thereof. Yet if such a zero-sum calculus prevails, then what is the purpose and meaning of democracy and secular ideals? Illiberal democracy may be better than no democracy at all, but it remains fool’s gold, appearance without substance, eroding the foundations of the state in the name of preserving it. Denying a voice in mainstream politics to the angry and alienated is not a sustainable solution to maintain that system or the integrity of the political process. The risk to inclusiveness and radicalizing the excluded is undeniable, while the consequences are unpredictable and could well come back to haunt both the venal and the well-intentioned.

Jeff Kingston is Director of Asian Studies and Professor of History at Temple University Japan where he has taught since 1987. As a Fulbright fellow he conducted fieldwork and archival research in Indonesia and the Netherlands 1984-1985 and completed his PhD in history at Columbia in 1987. He has written and edited several books and articles on Japan and also on nationalism and press freedom in Asia. He is currently editing a collection of essays on the pandemic in Asia. His current research focuses on transitional justice and the politics of memory.