



Religious Extremism in South Asia: Promoting Rights of Minorities

A Round Table Report



Religious Extremism in South Asia: Promoting Rights of Minorities

A Round Table Report



ISBN: 978-955-1489-23-9

Supported by:

The round table discussion on Religious Extremism in South Asia and this publication is possible through the financial assistance of the European Union.

Published by:

**International Movement against All forms of
Discrimination and Racism - Asia Committee
(IMADR- AC)**

1149, Kotte Road, Rajagiriya,
Sri Lanka
Telephone: +94 11 5757 323
Email: info@imadr.org

South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR)

345/18 Kuruppu Road
(17/7 Kuruppu Lane)
Colombo 8, Sri Lanka
Telephone/Fax: +94-11-2695910
Email: sahr@southasianrights.org
Website: www.southasianrights.org

Printed in Sri Lanka - January 2018

Design and pagination: Originals Creative Print Solutions

All rights reserved. This material is copyright and not for resale, but may be reproduced by any method for teaching purposes. For copying in other circumstances or for re-use in other publications or for translation, prior written permission must be obtained from the copyright owner.

Contents

Foreword	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Religious Extremism in South Asia: An Overview	1
Religious Extremism in South Asian Countries	
Bangladesh	3
India	5
The Maldives	7
Nepal	7
Pakistan	8
Sri Lanka	10
Recommendations	12
Best Practices in addressing religious extremism	15
Annexure 1 - Programme	20
Annexure 2 - List of Participants	21

Foreword

In the backdrop of increased hostility between certain member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and increased travel restrictions, it has become both difficult as well as a crucial task to build regional solidarity and to sustain the collaborative work done by South Asian organizations. While religious extremism has been a continual issue facing the region since the violent partition of India and Pakistan in 1945, at present the religious divisions between communities have widened, and are at times overtly manipulated as a political tool resulting in both armed and structural violence, particularly against minorities. Often violence against a religious minority in one South Asian country triggers violence among communities in another country in the region where the minority-majority status of each community is reversed thereby calling for a regional perspective on religious extremism. In this context a round table discussion was convened by the International Movement against All forms of Discrimination and Racism – Asia Committee (IMADR-AC) and South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR) in order to formulate a regional strategy to safeguard the rights of religious minorities.

The objectives of the round table were to facilitate the exchange of information on the status of religious extremism, existing laws and policies to protect the minorities in the region; contribute to the exchange of experiences including threats and challenges faced by those engaged in advancing tolerance, pluralism and human rights in the region; identify broad principles for the development of national/regional policies on social cohesion; and strengthen networking among groups working on similar issues and increase joint action at the regional level.

This publication contains proceedings of the discussions held at the round table and both IMADR-AC and SAHR hope that it would provide increased awareness on issues of religious extremism and assist as an advocacy tool for individuals and organisations working on this issue.

Acknowledgements

IMADR-AC and SAHR wish to thank the European Union for providing funding assistance to conduct the Round Table on Religious Extremism in the South Asian Region and subsequently this publication.

The organisations would also like to thank all speakers and participants from across South Asia for their contribution to the discussions and conclusions at the round table.

IMADR-AC and SAHR also wishes to thank Ms.Thakshala Thissera for being the rapporteur of the round table.

Finally, the board members and staff of IMADR-AC and SAHR for planning and assisting in the logistical support for the round table and this publication.

Religious Extremism in South Asia: An Overview

The rise of religious extremism, at times with overt state support, is widespread within South Asian countries. Religious extremism however, is not an isolated phenomenon and must be considered within its socio-political and economic context, which uncovers the manipulation of religiosity to further widen existing rifts and create intolerance among different communities for political gain. As seen in many South Asian countries, the political manipulation of religion has seeped into the popular psyche, creating a climate of insecurity and fear. This phenomenon has allowed political parties and governments to further strengthen their claims to power in two ways. Firstly, the construction of religious “Others”, be it adherents of a numerically minority religion or vocal secular atheists, enables parties to project themselves as saviours of the community, religion and cultural heritage. Secondly, the general basis of religion on faith, as opposed to critical reasoning, enables such groups to manipulate people’s critical scrutiny. Often these divisions also have an economic background of unequal resource distribution.

Within this context, South Asian states have failed to protect the rights of citizens who belong to religious minorities, thereby creating an unequal citizenry and an unjust society. Religious extremism, or the manipulation of religiosity by both state and non-state actors, has also led to undermining democracy through increased militarization, silencing of dissent, and human rights violations. However, as manifested through the emergence of *gau raksha*¹ vigilantes in India² and the killing of bloggers in Bangladesh,³ religious extremism is not only a matter of state oppression. It often turns private citizens into oppressors committing acts

¹ right-wing Hindu cow vigilantes

² For more see Zeba Siddiqui et al. emboldened by Modi’s ascent, India’s cow vigilantes deny Muslims their Livelihood, Reuters, 6 Nov, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/india-politics-religion-cows/>; Abraham D & Rao O. 86% Killed in Cow-related Violence since 2010 are Muslim, 97% Attacks after Modi Govt Came to Power, Hindustan Times, 26 July 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/86-killed-in-cow-related-violence-since-2010-are-muslims-97-attacks-after-modi-govt-came-to-power/story-w9CYOksvgk9joGSSaXgpLO.html>

³ Graham –Harrison, E & Hammadi, S. Inside Bangladesh’s killing fields: Bloggers and outsiders targeted by fanatics, The Observer, 12 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/11/bangladesh-murders-bloggers-foreigners-religion>

of violence. Therefore, the manipulation of people's sense of religiosity and religious identity for political gain has the potential to escalate to communal violence. It is also important to keep in mind the gendered implications of religious fundamentalism which often negatively impact women's wellbeing. Thus, the rise of religious fundamentalism has wide implications for the social and political stability of the region.

Most South Asian countries have a long history of shared religious connections. Subsequently, in the twentieth century, the partition of British India into India and Pakistan occurred in 1947 on religious lines. The latter was further divided into Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1971. Given this background, often the religious majority of one country may be a minority in a neighbouring country. Thus, an act of violence against a minority in one country may have a spill over effect, spawning counter violence in a country where the majority-minority position of the two communities is reversed. On the one hand, recognizing this interconnectedness, governments sometime offer asylum to victims of religious persecution in other South Asian countries. For example, India accepts non-Muslim refugees fleeing Pakistan due to discrimination, while Buddhists fleeing Bangladesh find refuge in Sri Lanka. On the other, extremist groups too have regional alliances, as seen in Islamic extremists in Maldives receiving training in Pakistani Madrasas. Therefore, the interconnected nature of extremism in South Asian countries necessitates regional solidarity and a regional perspective and counter strategy.

Religion is also becoming an increasingly important aspect of individual identity, as manifested in its politically motivated manipulation mentioned above. As religion is a personal belief, working on religious extremism is often an unsafe and challenging task. However, engaging with the issue at a regional or international level provides both increased safety as well as evidence for the possibility of dialogue and exchange on the issue of religious extremism among people of different religious backgrounds and beliefs.

Religious Extremism in South Asian Countries

Bangladesh

Officially, a secular country, religious extremism is a relatively new phenomenon in Bangladesh. This is surprising given that the number of non-Muslims in the country has reduced from 20% at independence, to 9% at present.⁴ In addition, the number of Muslim only villages has risen. The first wave of noticeably violent incidents resulting from religious extremism commenced on 25th August 2005, when a series of coordinated simultaneous bombs exploded in 62 out of 64 districts.⁵ In the months that followed, prominent leftists in the north were attacked. Some of the perpetrators were apprehended and executed. The attacks led to the passing of anti-terrorist legislation in 2006. The second phase of violence linked to religious extremism commenced with attacks on freethinking bloggers in 2013 and worsened in the aftermath of the 2014 elections. The government party's uncontested victory at the elections led to further systematic silencing of dissent. The rise of extremism correlates with the spread of Wahhabism⁶ in the country and has resulted in a lack of freedom for women as well as changes in the education curricula which propagate Wahhabi interpretations of Islam.

The loss of democratic space, political alliances with religious parties/groups, the manipulation of religious sentiment for popularity, and the destabilisation of muslim majority middle eastern nations may be identified as contributory factors to the increase in religious fundamentalism and its concomitant violence in the country. As religions are based on faith and belief instead

⁴ Minority rights Group International,2016. Under threat: The Challenges Facing Religions Minorities in Bangladesh, http://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/MRG_Rep_Ban_Oct16_ONLINE.pdf

⁵ Star Report. 459 blasts in 63 districts in 30 minutes, Daily Star, 18 Aug 2005, <http://archive.thedailystar.net/2005/08/18/d5081801011.htm>

⁶ Wahhabism is a conservative movement within Islam's Sunni branch. It's named after its founder, theologian Mohamed Ibn Abdul Wahhab, who was born in the 18th century in what is now Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism advocated a return to a "purer" form of Islam, focusing on its origins and the absolute sovereignty of God. That means banning the cult of saints and forbidding tobacco, alcohol and shaving. Their mosques are plain and public prayer attendance is strictly enforced.

of critical examination, political parties have found it easy to gain popularity by aligning themselves with puritanical versions of religion, and exploiting people's fear of religious persecution or threats to their religion.

The following trends are characteristic of recent extremism:

Indiscriminate attacks on foreign nationals, secular activists, Hindus, Buddhist monks, certain Muslim sects and anyone who differs from the politically acceptable, hegemonic version of Islam

The presence of ISIS footprints in propaganda and attacks, despite government denial of any Bangladeshi connection with the organization

The involvement of a wide cross-section of society i.e. not only the Madrasa-educated but also members of the elite circles

No particular demand is made either as ransom or action: instead, the attacks are shown to be punitive measures intended to spread fear.

Measures to address extremism comprise tightened security, the establishment of a national committee for intelligence coordination headed by the Prime Minister, monitoring of sermons by Imams, banning the Islamic Peace TV, and reporting of student absenteeism. Legal measures include the passing of the Anti-Terrorism Act (2009) which has strong extra-territorial applicability, special provisions for tribunals and makes terrorism a non-bailable crime. However, its definition of terrorism as an act undertaken "for the purpose of threatening the unity, public security or sovereignty of Bangladesh"⁷ may be abused due to its vagueness. Subsequent amendments include capital punishment (2012) and accepting social media material as evidence (2013), although this contradicts national evidence law. Other measures include the Money Laundering Prevention Act and enabling the Bangladeshi Central Bank to oversee other banks to counter financing of terrorism. Thus, the state response has linked religious extremism to terrorism.

The legal response has many flaws, such as the lack of transparency in counter-terrorism mechanisms, a higher number of people being killed rather than being arrested in anti-terrorist raids despite their high frequency, and time wasted by law enforcement agencies in making

⁷ Akhter KK. Fighting Religious Terrorism in Bangladesh, Daily Star, 26 July 2016, <https://www.thedailystar.net/law-our-rights/fighting-religious-terrorism-bangladesh-1259245>

distinctions between ISIS and home grown terrorism. Above all, there is a failure to understand the root cause of terrorism, the appeal of religious extremism to the public psyche, and the conditions which drive people to opt for extreme actions such as suicide attacks. Thus, a major challenge facing Bangladesh is to redirect its state and citizenry towards the secularity enshrined in its constitution.

India

India has experienced a mainstreaming of *Hindutva* ideology⁸ with the rise of the *Bharatha Janatha Party* (BJP) to political power, although the 2011 census recorded an increase in the population of non-believers to 0.20%. Much of the tensions of Hindu extremism in India can be seen through the playing out of 'Cow politics' which is based on the belief that the cow is a sacred animal, and therefore must not be slaughtered and consumed. Cow politics is not a new phenomenon. In 1967, demonstrations were held in Delhi, and parliament was physically attacked by groups demanding the banning of cow slaughter. At present, with the exception of a few North Eastern states, cow slaughter has been completely banned. When Narendra Modi was Chief Minister of Gujarat, he increased the penalty for cow slaughter to seven years of imprisonment in 2011. It has now been increased to life imprisonment, in the background of the upcoming election. The BJP is also demanding that vegetarianism be enforced on the entire state.

The rise of vigilante groups enforcing the ban on cow slaughter has greatly affected Dalits and Muslims; some of whom have even been killed under suspicion of cow slaughter. Being a vocal and well-organised community, the Dalits have conducted counter demonstrations but have had little impact on policy. The ban also adversely affects the economy of farmers, slaughter houses and producers of leather goods, many of whom are also minorities.

Significantly, despite the difficulties caused by Prime Minister Modi's demonetization policy⁹ and cow politics, the BJP won an increased number of seats in subsequent state elections. In

⁸ Hindutva ("Hinduness"), a term popularised by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in 1923, is the predominant form of Hindu nationalism in India.

⁹ On November 8, 2016 Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that high denomination currency value of 500 and 1000 rupees will no longer be legal tender.

Uttar Pradesh, BJP won 312 out of 403 seats¹⁰ despite not having a single Muslim candidate. The BJP influence is spreading to North Eastern states such as Assam, Manipur and Nagaland and is now entering Bengal. Thus, the appeal of right wing groups is increasing, rendering them both more powerful and more violent. Worryingly, the central government and the Prime Minister does not comment on the increase in extremism and violence.

Extremism within Islamic groups causes both discrimination against women of Muslim communities and fuels Hindu extremism. For instance, from 11 May 2017, the Supreme Court heard petitions by Muslim women divorced under *triple talaq*¹¹ to consider abolishing the practice which is unconstitutional.¹² Government's desire to abolish *triple talaq* and the opposition of extremist Muslim groups who support its continuation will further enable Hindu right wing attacks against Islam. While the presence of ISIS is not visible in India, reports of Indians killed in other countries while fighting for the organization has been exploited by right wing groups to further their attack on the Muslim community.

People are afraid to speak against state policy as it may result in being labelled as "anti-national". This enables the government to take undemocratic actions such as the unconstitutional blocking of 22 social media platforms in Kashmir for a month¹³ month. The sentiment is that curtailing the right wing forces would require centrist and left parties coming together despite their differences on economic and political policy.

¹⁰ The Party of Narendra Modi wins a decisive victory in Uttar Pradesh , the Economist, 11 March 2017, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2017/03/11/the-party-of-narendra-modi-wins-a-decisive-victory-in-uttar-pradesh>

¹¹ Triple talaq is the practice under which a Muslim man can divorce his wife by simply uttering "talaq" three times. It is prevalent among India's Muslim community majority of whom follow the Hanafi Islamic school of law. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/05/tripple-talaq-triple-divorce-170511160557346.html>

¹² PTI, Triple Talaq impacts dignity of Muslim Women: Center to Supreme Court, The Indian Express, 11 April, 2017, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2017/apr/11/triple-talaq-impacts-dignity-of-muslim-women-centre-to-supreme-court-1592427.html>

¹³ PTI, J& K government bans 22 social networking sites citing their misuse, The Times of India, 26 April, 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/jk-government-bans-22-social-networking-sites-citing-their-misuse/article-show/58382769.cms>

The Maldives

Culture and values of the Maldives have been very strongly based on Islam as well as indigenous practices for 800 years, and the constitution stipulates that citizenship necessitates being a Muslim. However, in the last decade or two, there have been drastic changes in the Maldives including the a Wahabi interpretation of Islam. The 2008 constitution introduced a more democratic form of governance and more liberal laws. However, this was also accompanied by an increase in religious extremism. President Gayoom gave himself the supreme authority to interpret Islam, while the establishment of Saudi funded *Madrasas* has propagated a different interpretation of Islam from the more peaceful Sunni version, and spread parochialism. Maldives is the highest per capita contributor to ISIS fighters in the world. The recruits come from already radicalised youths who have often had jail sentences. They are made to believe that fighting for Jihad will redeem them spiritually, and the high monetary compensation provides an additional impetus.¹⁴

Religious extremism in Maldives is closely linked to politics as well. Afraid of losing support, the government prefers to appease rather than oppose extremist groups due to their increasing popularity. In addition, labelling oppositional political groups as un-Islamic, e.g. the Maldives Democratic Party as Christian missionaries, creates an uncritical public aversion to such groups thereby delegitimising political opposition with ease.

Nepal

Nepal's new constitution changed its religious landscape, making it a secular, a multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual 'state'. Article 18 of the constitution ensures non-discrimination and also allows the state to take affirmative action to protect historically marginalised groups. Article 26 ensures religious freedom, Article 32 language rights and Article 42 rights to social justice.¹⁵ In addition, all minority groups are ensured proportional representation in the state structure and various constitutional commissions have been created for marginalised groups such as the Muslims, indigenous groups and women. The Nepalese constitution is an outstanding achievement of inclusivity.

¹⁴ Andreas hohanson, Maldives crisis: a bitter religious divide comes to the fore, the Conversation, 10 February, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/maldives-crisis-a-bitter-religious-divide-comes-to-the-fore-91455>

¹⁵ The Constitution of Nepal, <http://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/documents/2016/01/constitution-of-nepal-2.pdf>

However, there exists a wide disparity between the law and the ground reality. The constitution of the Deputy Prime Minister's Rastriya Prajatantra Party envisages the establishment of a monarchical Hindu state. The Election Commission refused to register the party as it was unconstitutional and this has given rise to unrest and protest. However, there is an open call for declaring Nepal a Hindu country and Hinduism is used as a political tool for the revival of the monarchy. The *Hindutva* lobby in Nepal has been supported by the election of Yogi Adityanad to the position of Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. This renders the new constitution extremely vulnerable. Although the constitution states that legislation ensuring fundamental rights will be established within three years, no action has been taken so far.

Although Nepal is a small country, it has a considerable amount of diversity. It has a small economy and low literacy rate. It is still a volatile state. Keeping its democratic, secular and inclusive identity intact requires regional and international support.

Pakistan

In Pakistan, an Islamic nation, there is a close connection between the *Mullahs* and the military. The country has a history of religious leaders collaborating with dictators e.g. during the Bangladeshi liberation war, killing of non-Muslims through militia and siding with the United States of America during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in creating the Taliban. Moreover, the security apparatus plays a role in creating and supporting extremist groups for espionage.

At present, society continues to cede space to the clerics. Vigilantism has taken over discussion and debate e.g. lynching of a student by fellow students in a university for blasphemy¹⁶ and the burning to death of a Christian couple who were brick workers.¹⁷ The death sentence was enforced on the perpetrators of the latter case, but by and large, no action is taken against vigilantes. Non-Muslims in small communities like the *Zikris* and the *Kalash* are among the principal targets. Sindh women agrarian workers are abducted, forced to convert to Islam and married off to the abductor. State response to this religious extremism driven violence has been

¹⁶ BBC, Pakistan Blasphemy: The student lynched for being a humanist, BBC News, Asia, 14 April, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-39603126/pakistan-blasphemy-the-student-lynched-for-being-a-humanist>

¹⁷ Reuters, Christian Couple Lynching Incited by mullah of local mosque: Police, Dawn, 5 November 2017, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1142437>

minimal. In an instance of state sponsored religious discrimination, Ahamadi community was prohibited from using any verbal or symbolic expression of their identity as Muslims.¹⁸ This has also affected their access to resources including education and employment, while the Urdu media actively incites violence against the community. As an act of protest, the community refuses to participate in elections until they are recognised as Muslims. Although ordered by the Supreme Court to do so, the government has not yet established the minority rights commission.

The law provides no safety from false accusations and over 50 people have been killed on mere suspicion of blasphemy. Christians are the major victims of blasphemy laws. For instance, Asia Bibi was awarded the death penalty for blasphemy¹⁹ and has now been in solitary confinement for seven years. Scheduled hearing of her case has been continuously postponed because of intimidation of the judges by *Madrassa* students. Another instance of the government being successfully pressurised by extremist groups is in the stalling of the bill against forced conversions.²⁰

Among positive developments, legal mechanisms have been established for registering a marriage and Hindus have been allocated land for cremation in Islamabad. While the number of Hindus in Pakistan is not known, India has agreed to grant non-Muslim refugees from Pakistan citizenship. On the other hand, communal violence in India often triggers counter violence against Hindus in Pakistan.

The Public psyche is increasingly responsive to religious extremism and the use of violence in the name of religion. For instance, the burial place of the executed murderer of a liberal state minister has now become a shrine.²¹ Initially, suicide bombings were seen as anti-Islamic, but they have now become acceptable, reflecting a change in religious ideology and the normalisation of violence. In addition, certain television personalities who incite hatred and violence on religious grounds have large followings. Thus, the little religious plurality and tolerance that existed is being lost.

¹⁸ Sadia Saeed, How Ahmadiis Became Non-Muslim, Tanqeed, 15 Feb, 2015 <http://www.tanqeed.org/2015/02/how-ahmadis-became-non-muslim-tq-salon/>

¹⁹ Kaleem Dean, Asia Bibi – Another Lonesome Christmas in prison, Daily Times, 15 December 2017, <https://dailymtimes.com.pk/159577/asia-bibi-another-lonesome-christmas-prison/>

²⁰ Hafeez Tunio, Sindh governor refuses to ratify forced conversion bill, Tribune, 7 January, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1287146/sindh-governor-refuses-ratify-forced-conversion-bill/>

²¹ Madheeha Anwar, Convicted Murderer's Grave in Pakistan Becomes Shrine for Some, Extreme Watch, 25 March 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/convicted-murders-grave-becomes-pakistan-shrine/3781717.html>

Many Pakistani youth are attracted by extremist religious parties. This is in part due to the reluctance of secular parties to deal with corruption, which the youth consider a major issue. In addition, the banning of student unions in the country and the lack of open discussion among the youth on religion, contributes to the spread of extremism and blind following.

Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan constitution gives primacy of place to Buddhism while recognising other religions and espousing non-discrimination and equality. Thus, the state is governed by a Sinhala Buddhist hegemony that cannot be escaped. Under the last government, post-war Sri Lanka experienced a rise in extremist Buddhist groups, particularly the *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS) which came into prominence in 2014-2015 actively propagating intolerance against religious minorities, particularly the Muslim community which culminated in an attack against the predominantly Muslim, Darga Town.²² The BBS is thought to have political protection as the police and security forces failed to provide the inhabitants of Darga Town protection. The anti-Muslim rhetoric intensifies during festival periods, unmasking its economic aspect. For instance, during the Sinhalese-Tamil New Year, certain popular Muslim outlets are slandered and people are actively discouraged from shopping there.

Another development was that the establishment of Buddhist temples and iconography became a central tactic in the ethnicity-based *Sinhalisation*²³ of the former war torn North thereby changing the narrative of the conflict from a Sinhala-Tamil issue to a Buddhist-Hindu one. Inter-religious groups have been established to counter the rise of factionalism. But active state intervention is necessary to end the appropriation of the land and the exclusionary replacement of its history by Buddhist/Sinhalese iconography.

The change of government following the 2015 elections saw no end to physical violence against communities due to religious extremism, and past perpetrators have not been apprehended. Similarly, while religious leaders have not been publicly inciting violence, the involvement

²² Latheef F, Aluthgama Riots: Meticulously Planned and Executed to Military Precision, Colombo Telegraph, June 16, 2014 <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/aluthgama-riots-meticulously-planned-and-executed-to-military-precision/>

²³ Kannangara, N & Wickrematunge, R, Systematic Sinhalisation in the North? The Sunday Leader, 28 April 2013, <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2013/04/28/systematic-sinhalisation-in-the-north/>

of people, particularly youth, in the online space, in promoting religious intolerance and chauvinism has risen.

Intolerance among non-state actors and groups, sometimes of a sectarian nature, is also perceived. This includes attacks on evangelical churches, and Hindus, Muslims and Christians violently attacking each other. Such attacks on places of worship garners little to no media attention and the Human Rights Commission has failed to provide any solution. A major cause for dissent within the Muslim community is the call for progressive reform of the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Laws. While Muslim personal laws have been reformed in Muslim majority SAARC countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, in Sri Lanka they remain extremely unfavourable to women, allowing any girl who has attained puberty to be married off without reference to a minimum age. While the call for change comes from within the community, extremist elements and the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama oppose any revision of the existing law. The demand for state intervention has risen, while Muslim politicians remain silent and the state has not taken any remedial action.

In the light of the new government broaching on constitutional reforms, progressive civil society and minority groups have advocated for a secular constitution. This appears to be unlikely given that the Archbishop of the Catholic Church in Colombo also publicly refuted the need to displace Buddhism from its constitutional position.²⁴ On the other hand, where space for civil society is diminishing, places of worship are increasingly becoming spaces for activism. While this is happening in the Kovil and the Masjid as well, the most prominent is the Buddhist temple which alone has state patronage. Legally, Sri Lanka has sufficient provisions to deal with religious extremism and attacks against minority religious groups including hate speech but there is minimal operationalisation of these laws.

²⁴ Weerasinghe, C. Archbishop Rejects Secularization Ideology, Daily News, 26 July 2016, <http://www.dailynews.lk/2016/07/26/local/88604>

Recommendations

Violent religious extremism within countries in the SAARC region are often connected to and triggers events in other member nations necessitating a regional response. The following recommendations can be used in the construction of a regional strategy against the issue.

Identifying civil society groups with shared values who can become partners in countering religious extremism

Combatting religious extremism requires a wide network of different actors across the region and considerable resources. Therefore, identifying prospective partners is a first step in the building of a regional alliance which can take on the task.

Organising a joint meeting with other organisations and individuals in the progressive movement who wish to participate in countering extremism

The organisations of the participants could contribute to the cost of the meeting rendering it financially feasible.

Formulating a declaration and a letter to be sent to networks to enlist active participation.

The declaration could function as a framework for guiding the action plan.

Studying the effect of religious extremism on the polity and the people and common trends in extremism across the region

A regional perspective is needed at present and could provide valuable information in the construction of a regional action plan.

Examining the role of media in inciting inter-religious discord or propagating extremism and formulating a counter-strategy

Despite existing media ethics, the content of certain popular print and electronic media has been found to be actively propagating inter-religious discord and extremist views. A media watch would help identify such instances. Further, counter measures, including media campaigns must be undertaken to combat this situation.

Working with politicians to counter religious extremism

As reflected in the current situation of religious extremism in South Asia, people's sense of religiosity is often manipulated for political gain. Thus, it is imperative to work with politicians, including initiating dialogues with politicians with whom we do not have traditional alliances in order to counter extremism.

Providing a platform for dialogue and discussion

Dialogue and discussion between groups and individuals of different beliefs and convictions is a necessary counter to violence. Therefore, the creation of a platform which facilitates such discussion is vital.

Unveiling the human face of persecution and the suffering due to religious extremism

Religious extremism often seems faceless and works by the privileging a group identity over an individual one. Therefore, enabling victim voices and their narratives of the negative impact of violence on their lives to be heard, is necessary to highlight the cost of religious extremism on people.

Enlisting youth participation and the creative arts including theatre

The rise of religious fundamentalism among the youth as seen in the high numbers recruited by extremist groups renders their participation in countering the phenomenon vitally important.

The establishment of a regional framework inclusive of data sharing and regional norms to counter terrorism, given the close connections between religious extremism and terrorism

The establishment of an early warning mechanism based on continuous monitoring and following up incidences of human rights violations, including following up with the victim families

The establishment of a South Asian tribunal where victims can testify to the consequences of extremism

Best Practices in Addressing Religious Extremism

This report, so far, has discussed the role of religion in heightening community tensions, sustaining extremism and violence, exacerbating insecurity for minorities in general and challenges faced by human rights defenders, lawyers and victims including witnesses in seeking justice and building resilience.

Community efforts within the framework of fundamental rights and legal strategies against criminal acts have been used by civil society actors and religious institutions to address religious extremism. Nonetheless, the struggle against impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators have been complex as ethno-religious fervor has been one of the main tools/ideologies that has been used to sustain and consolidate political forces in power within South Asia. Engagement with religious actors to counter violent extremism and radicalisation has been identified as a potential effective strategy.

During the several discussions held since 2015 among activists, religious leaders and academics around the subject, certain common themes, questions, and issues have emerged:

1. Methodology and appropriate timing for engagement with religious actors

This recommendation was drawn from several major discussions where traditional and nontraditional religious leaders felt that they were too often consulted after decisions concerning them or their community had been made by government officials or others less intimately familiar with the issues confronting them. They reiterated effective policies on countering religious extremism and hate speech must be drafted after consultations and discussions with all relevant stakeholders including religious actors and others with grassroots access.

2. Conducting training, (skills-based and religious literacy etc), for relevant stakeholders including religious actors

Some religious actors requested physical safety training, noting their high risk and vulnerability when they work to counter violent extremism in their communities and furthering early warning processes. Others noted that they want better training in technology and communications to help them expand their reach and counter messaging to younger and larger demographics. Some religious actors expressed interest in expanding and formalising their roles as mediators and counselors in their communities through skills-based training. At the same time, a need for training in religious literacy was identified at several of these gatherings. Religious representatives expressed interest in improving their intra-interfaith engagements; and non religious actors, such as government or security or policymakers, said they would like to better understand religious nuances in various communities.

3. Strengthening the relationship between stakeholders such as religious actors, government, and security and promoting inclusion.

Better communication and increased trust on the part of both parties would mitigate risk and improve effectiveness with regard to issues such as returnee reintegration and rehabilitation or addressing the psychosocial needs of a marginalised community.

Many countries have experiences that government regulation of any religious space to be fraught with risk. It also increases the chances of politicisation of religion for the advantages of a government or a religious majority aggravating marginalised communities.

For a Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) policy to be effective, it is necessary that traditional and nontraditional religious actors, entailing women and youth, take into account the multiple identities and roles of different religious actors throughout the process of scoping, developing, and implementing new strategies and guidelines.

It is also important to ensure the alignment between counter narrative and the work focused on other drivers of violent extremism in order to gain a balanced approach in addressing religious extremism.

Given the fact that women, younger religious leaders, and traditionalist faith practices are key players in the religious landscape and often more influential than their formal and titled religious leaders, it is viable to have them included in a broader thinking beyond theology with regard to activities such as combating corruption, alleviating socioeconomic inequalities, resolving conflict, and peace building.



Bishop Kumar Illangasinghe speaking at the discussion



Mr. Dinesh Tripathi speaking at a panel



Ms. Zohra Yusuf, Dr. Nimalka Fernando and Mr. Jatin Desai at a panel



Ms. Sultana Kamal, Dr. Nimalka Fernando and Ms. Khushi Kabir at a panel

Annexure 1

'Religious extremism in the South Asian Region: Safeguarding Minorities' – Round Table Discussion

28 April 2017, Colombo Sri Lanka - Programme

09:00am – 09:30am	Registration
09.30am – 09.40am	Welcome Address and Introduction by Dr. Nimalka Fernando
09.40am – 10.00am	Religious Extremism in South Asia : An Overview by Hina Jilani
10.00am – 10.30am	State of Religious Extremism, existing laws and policies Country Perspectives (15 minute presentation) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afghanistan: Sarwar Mamound • Bangladesh: Dr. Asif Nazrul
10.30 am – 10.45am	Tea Break
10.45am – 12.30 pm	State of Extremism, existing laws and policies Country Perspectives – contd. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • India: Jatin Desai • The Maldives: Mohammed Latheef • Nepal: Dinesh Tripathi • Pakistan: Zohra Yusuf • Sri Lanka: Lakshan Dias
12.30pm – 01.00pm	Discussion
01.00pm – 02.00 pm	Lunch
02.00 – 03.00pm	Best practices of safeguarding minority rights – examples from national campaigns (Open Discussion)
03.00pm – 4.00pm	Formulating a strategy to safeguard minorities at regional level (Group Work) During this time the some of the participants will be interviewed for a video clip to be uploaded to the YouTube
4.00 pm– 4.30pm	End of Consultation

Annexure 2

List of Participants

Name	Country
Saroja Sivachandran	Sri Lanka
Sayeed Ahmed	Bangladesh
Asif Nazrul	Bangladesh
Freddy Jayawardene	Sri Lanka
Nalini Ratnaraja	Sri Lanka
Rev. B. Chadrarathana	Sri Lanka
Ameer Faiz	Sri Lanka
Mohamed Latheef	The Maldives
Yamini R	Sri Lanka
Jatin Desai	India
Rev. Bishop Kumara Illangasinghe	Sri Lanka
Kamran Arif	Pakistan
Khushi Kabir	Bangladesh
Sultana Kamal	Bangladesh
Mohammed Tahseen	Pakistan
Ravindran Daniels	India
Hina Jilani	Pakistan
Zohra Yusuf	Pakistan
Dinesh Tripathi	Nepal

IMADR is a global network of minority groups with regional committees and partners in Asia, Europe, North America and Latin America founded in 1988 by marginalised Buraku community in Japan.

IMADR Asia Committee (AC) was established in 2001 to initiate networking among civil society activists and human rights defenders in Sri Lanka to promote broadly objectives of the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination that forms the basis of the vision and mission of IMADR. In keeping with its broad objectives the AC is networking with regional organizations and networks addressing issues on multiple forms of discrimination of minority women and women's human rights including violence against women, peace and conflicts in South Asia facilitating lobby, advocacy and training.

SAHR is a democratic regional network with a large membership base of people committed to addressing human rights issues at both national and regional levels. SAHR seeks to contribute to the realisation of South Asian peoples' right to participatory democracy, good governance and justice by strengthening regional response, including regional instruments, monitoring human rights violations, reviewing laws, policies and practices that have an adverse impact on human rights and conducting campaigns and programmes on issues of major concern in the region.

SAHR comprises both institutional and individual members. An elected bureau works as the organisation's executive body while the membership committee oversees enrolment of members. The SAHR Chairperson and Co-Chairperson are Ms Sultana Kamal of Bangladesh and Mr. Mohamed Latheef of the Maldives respectively. The Secretariat is located in Colombo, Sri Lanka.



**International Movement against All forms of
Discrimination and Racism - Asia Committee
(IMADR- AC)**

1149, Kotte Road, Rajagiriya, Sri Lanka
Telephone: +94 11 5757 323
Email: info@imadr.org



South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR)

345/18 Kuruppu Road,
(17/7 Kuruppu Lane) Colombo 08, Sri Lanka
Telephone/Fax: +94 11 2695 910
Email: sahr@southasianrights.org
Website: www.southasianrights.org