

INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE: LESSONS FROM HISTORY

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THE CASE FOR INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

A few years ago, a survey on global religious diversity by the Pew Research Center revealed that half of the most religiously diverse countries are located in the Asia-Pacific region.¹ Another study examining changes in religious freedoms in the decade between 2007-2017 found that government restrictions around the world are getting worse, including in the Asia-Pacific.² The trend is often accompanied by social hostilities, including violence and harassment of religious minorities by private individuals, organizations, or groups.³ In making the case for inclusive governance, this chapter sheds light on religious exclusionary policies, in some instances combined with social hostilities by hardline religious groups, both drivers of political instability. It posits that trends in religious nationalism are also on the rise, showing a contagion effect across borders and endangering regional stability. It examines the evolving regional order shaped by the rise of an authoritarian China and its impact on human rights norms and institutions. It contends that China's regional geostrategic positioning and expanding influence is precipitating authoritarian trends and restrictions on religious minorities. This complex dynamic in turn is fueling religious nationalist movements. In the final analysis, the chapter highlights lessons from the Mongolian empire; little remembered is its legacy of secular politics, religious coexistence, and multiculturalism, potentially a way forward for the Asia-Pacific region.

EXCLUSIONARY POLICIES AND RISING RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

Religious restrictions and widespread social hostilities are on the rise, fomenting political violence and instability in a number of states. Sometimes they manifest in religious nationalist movements involving polarizing rhetoric: advancing the political legitimacy and primacy of an in-group while demonizing minority religious or ethno-religious groups and voices of dissent. Hostile social attitudes and behaviors promoting radical ideologies and political extremism pose a direct threat to state stability. Of pressing concern is the violation of the human rights of out-groups, often comprising religious minorities.

The impact of religious nationalism as a threat to national security is compounded when social discourses delegitimizing a religious identity group are condoned or supported by the state, an indicator of systemic inequality. This interactive process perpetuates a vicious cycle of discrimination and hostility so intimately intertwined that sometimes it is difficult to ascertain how it originated and who instigated it, the state or right-wing groups. Exclusionary policies and rhetoric embolden ultranationalist religious groups and exacerbate the societal perception of threat grounded in religious differences.

THE SOUTH ASIAN CONUNDRUM

The combination of exclusionary policies and social hostilities undermines good governance. This has been especially the case in South Asia, featuring some of the most notable cases in the region.⁴ In recent decades, this postcolonial subregion, navigating a political trajectory checkered by authoritarian rule and a relatively new experience with democracy has experienced this complex dynamic in various forms and degrees. The experience of each country has been unique, shaped by its history, culture, politics, economics, and many external influences. Undoubtedly, South Asia is amongst the fastest growing economic subregions of the world, yet the surge in sectarian politics is holding it back from reaching its full potential.

Pakistan offers one such case study. While the vast majority of Pakistanis practice a moderate version of Islam, polarizing discourses on the place of religion in government, and politically expedient alliances between *mullahs* (religious clerics) and ruling elites, have over the years, become fertile grounds for religious exclusion. This is partly an outcome of flawed national security policies and political misuse of religion. Exclusionary policies include anti-Ahmadi laws (1974) targeting a minority Mus-

lim sect, and a series of anti-blasphemy laws introduced by General Zia ul Haq, Pakistan's longest-serving dictator, in the 1980s.⁵ The anti-blasphemy laws make the death sentence mandatory for anyone defiling the name of Prophet Muhammad and prescribe life imprisonment for defiling the Quran. The ambiguous nature of these laws has contributed to the persecution of religious minorities and vulnerable Muslims to settle personal scores. The most comprehensive data available, collected between 1987 and 2016, suggest that at least 1472 people have been charged with blasphemy including 730 Muslims, 501 Ahmadi Muslims, 205 Christians, and 26 Hindus.⁶ While no one has been executed under these laws, the policies have enabled religious and sectarian violence, terrorism, and a crisis of assimilation.

Contrary to the spirit of religious pluralism envisioned by Pakistan's founding father, M.A. Jinnah, exclusionary policies have significantly impeded societal cohesion and economic development.⁷ Efforts by elites to undo these laws have led to political assassinations. While there are no easy solutions, advancing a whole-of-government and -society approach to build a moderate vision for Pakistan may foster a much-needed national consensus.

Bangladesh, widely recognized as a secular nation, has also been grappling with the rise of religious nationalism, although the process has been relatively insidious. Since independence in 1971, the construction of its national identity has been contested by different streams of society. While secularism was embraced as one of the foundational principles, it has gradually eroded due to the infusion of religion and authoritarianism in politics. The country's secular moorings have partly been undermined by long periods of military rule. Consequently, civilian rule tends to be authoritarian in character. While the use of religion by Bangladeshi politicians has not been particularly stringent, it has nonetheless emboldened religious fundamentalists.⁸ Bangladeshi society has come under the influence of transnational extremist groups and more than a hundred incidents of Islamist terrorism have been recorded during the past decade.⁹ Since 2013, an increasing number of religious minorities, secular bloggers, and atheists have become victims of extremist violence by religious mobs. To quote Lailufar Yasmin, the question central to political and social narratives remains, "is it a country of secular Bengalis or Muslim Bangladeshis?"¹⁰ Yasmin refers to the competing discourses on religion and nationalism as the nation's "split personality."¹¹ Going forward, a key challenge for the state will be its ability to restrict the space for religious nationalists and

steer the country towards its core foundational principles, fostering greater inclusion, political stability, and more robust economic growth.

The island nation of Sri Lanka is one of Asia's oldest democracies and a cultural melting pot. This trajectory, however, is being tested by a resurgence in Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism. Despite Buddhism's pacifist doctrine, ultraradical Buddhist monks have been at the forefront of hate speech, riots, arson, and mob violence targeting minority groups. Their narrative holds that the island is exclusively for Sinhala Theravada Buddhists. Hardline Buddhist organizations such as the Bodu Bala Sena have been key players in past conflicts between the majority Sinhalese Buddhists and Hindu Tamils. A long history of political disenfranchisement among minority Tamils, mostly Hindus, led to nearly three decades of civil war ultimately ending in 2009. Despite the government's best efforts, the post-conflict peacebuilding process in the northern province of Jaffna has not been easy. In more recent years, the island's Muslim and Christian minorities have been targeted.¹² Media reports suggest that ruling elites may have condoned religious nationalism contributing to the surge in attacks against minorities.¹³ In preventing conflict and sustaining its impressive economic growth, Sri Lanka may consider both top-down and bottom-up approaches to promote greater religious tolerance and harmony in its pluralistic landscape.

Inevitably, in all three cases, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, there is evidence of transnational influences and linkages. Notably however, despite exogenous factors, the threat is primarily rooted in internal conditions reflecting the relationship between religious nationalism and state legitimacy. Evidence suggests that the greater the mutually reinforcing interactions between religious nationalist groups and ruling elites, the greater the likelihood of systematic exclusion. The state response to societal attitudes and behavior toward minority groups may therefore serve as a reliable indicator for forecasting the likelihood of political instability.

Religious freedoms and state responses to social hostilities are an area of special concern. Public policy on religious inclusion and tolerance is necessary for shaping societal attitudes and promoting national cohesion. In the event of hostilities, states must act swiftly to uphold the rule of law. The provision and protection of religious freedoms is an indicator of commitment to international human rights norms. When international norms are violated by a state, they bear the potential for producing a contagion effect. When they are violated by a great power, it is even more likely to have a contagion, especially in neighboring states. It is in this context

that China's policies toward minorities are considered a threat to regional peace and are examined below.

THE CHINESE MODEL AND REGIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS NORMS

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officially subscribes to state atheism and prohibits religious belief among its rank and file. Although freedom of religious belief is provided for in Article 36 of the Constitution, such affiliations are viewed as political dissidence and are grounds for expulsion from the CCP. While religious intolerance has historically been a feature of policies adopted by the People's Republic of China, state-sanctioned persecution of religious minorities has intensified in recent decades. Minority groups at greatest risk include Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, and Uyghur Muslims. Exclusionary practices are evident in the imprisonment of pastors and priests, and demolition of Christian churches and Tibetan Buddhist institutions. Their religious activities have been restricted and placed under surveillance.¹⁴ The repression of approximately 13 million Muslims, native to and—in the case of the Uyghurs—namesake of China's largest province, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), has been particularly acute and is worth taking a closer look.

Exclusionary Policies toward Uyghur Muslims

The religious freedoms of Uyghur Muslims have been restricted by increasingly harsh legislation through both covert and overt policies over the years. These include regulations and amendments on religious activities in 1994, 1998, 2000, and 2001.¹⁵ According to Human Rights Watch, the government has restricted the scope of what is deemed “normal” religious activity, application of the “anti-separatist” clause to “all citizens who profess a religion,” and clamped down on religious organizations and publications with heavier penalties.¹⁶ Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, China found it opportune to label many of the Uyghurs and their mostly non-violent separatist movement as “terrorism,” launching its “Strike Hard, Severe Repression” campaign to detain and imprison thousands of Uyghurs.¹⁷ Since the late 1990s, thousands more have allegedly been sentenced to death and executed for religious practice or peaceful expressions of dissent.¹⁸ Uyghur Muslims are restricted from fasting and going to mosques during Ramadan and are generally not authorized to travel overseas or outside the province.¹⁹ Intrusive policies have ranged from the widespread use of facial recognition technologies, restricted ac-

cess to public spaces including shops, and violations of the sanctity of their homes by officials living there.²⁰

Sinicization: The Indigenization of Religion

In 2017, the XUAR government enacted a law to assimilate Uyghurs into Han Chinese society under a national policy referred to as “Sinicization.” The policy, implemented in various regions including Tibet, is broadly understood as the indigenization of non-Han communities. It is designed to minimize the influence of other cultures and religious heritage. Under this policy, restrictions have been placed on face veils, beards, and eating *halal* food.²¹ In the same vein, thousands of mosques have been razed, minarets have been taken down and onion domes replaced by traditional Chinese roofs under a “mosque rectification” campaign.²²

Mass Detention Camps

One of the most controversial aspects of Chinese policy toward Uyghur minorities is their mass internment in more than 500 detention centers, a gross violation of fundamental human rights.²³ Tracked via satellite imagery, these centers include suspected concentration camps, prisons, and Bingtuan labor camps.²⁴ In documents leaked to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, the camps are described as a network of high-security prisons involving systematic brainwashing, surveillance, strict discipline, and punishment.²⁵ In a new Frontline documentary, a Kazakh Muslim woman detained for 17 months, “remembers being surrounded by mesh and barbed wire, cameras everywhere and brutal treatment. Twice she says, she was made to sit on a hard chair for 24 hours. She went to the bathroom where she sat.”²⁶ It is estimated that more than 3 million Uyghurs and Turkic Muslims have been detained in what China dubs political “re-education camps” for offenses as minor as sporting a beard, speaking to a family member overseas, or observing Ramadan.²⁷

China’s systematic persecution of Uyghur Muslims in tandem with its rising economic and political influence in neighboring countries, increases its potential to recast regional norms in its own mold. The ensuing discussion sheds light on this problematic situation with reference to state behavior toward religious minorities in neighboring India and Myanmar, countries demonstrating deteriorating trends. Despite being rich in religious and ethnocultural diversity, recent developments in these two states,

one rightfully the world's largest democracy, and the other earnestly aspiring for the formation of a robust democratic system, do not augur well for the plight of religious minorities. The diagram below illustrates that policies and social behavior often tend to have a regional contagion effect with the probability increasing when it involves a great power, and particularly when countries have contiguous borders.

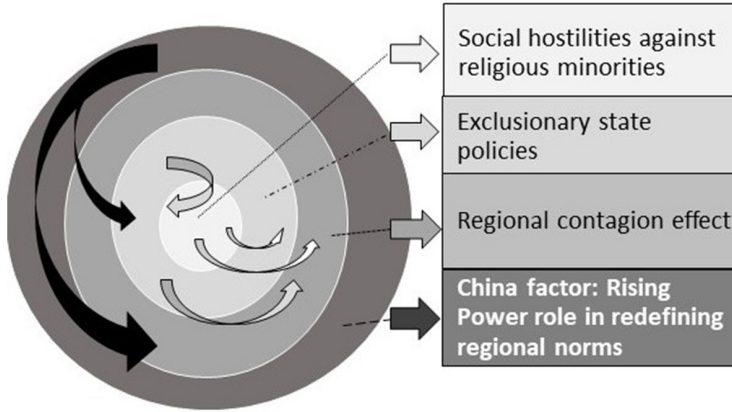


Figure 8.1: Interactive and Dynamic Process of New Norm Setting and Regional Contagion of Religious Exclusion

REGIONAL CONTAGION: THE NEXUS BETWEEN STATE AND SOCIETY

Rooted in its history, Myanmar has a stunningly diverse religious and ethnic landscape. A visit to the country offers an array of old religious architecture, attesting to the harmonious coexistence of disparate religious communities and the freedoms they enjoyed. Symbolic of inclusivity are legacies of Buddhist kings, Mindon (1808-1878) and his successor Thibaw Min (1859-1916), who gave gifts of land to Muslim minorities to build mosques. Since 1962, however, waves of forced displacement of Rohingya Muslims have been triggered by exclusionary policies. Currently, Rohingya refugees constitute the second largest group of displaced communities in Asia. They also represent a segment of the global population of forcibly displaced people which has doubled in the past two decades.

In the most recent exodus of Rohingya Muslim refugees beginning in August 2017, nearly a million were displaced from the western Rakhine state in “clearance operations” launched by the Tatmadaw, Myanmar’s

military, on the pretext of counterterrorism. The policy rhetoric has been similar to the Chinese response to Uyghur Muslims in the post 9/11 landscape. It is important to note that China has a direct economic stake in the displacement of Rohingyas as it is building a gas pipeline from the Rakhine state to Kunming in Southwest China. The project also gives China significant economic leverage over Myanmar. Of the recently displaced Rohingyas, an estimated 900,000 fled to Bangladesh, nearly 100,000 to Malaysia, and 40,000 to India.²⁸ Over the decades, Rohingyas have found refuge in a number of countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Australia, Europe, and North America.²⁹

As illustrated in the above diagram, exclusionary policies and ultranationalist religious discourses tend to be interactive and reinforcing. Consider an incidence of mob violence in 2012, when the rape of a Buddhist woman allegedly by Muslims sparked massive street protests and violence leading to the detention of 140,000 Rohingyas.³⁰ Detention centers for the Rohingyas have existed for years, lacking access to basics such as education or healthcare.³¹ Tens of thousands have tried to escape these detention camps by boat to find safety in other countries.³² Since the Rohingya boat people do not possess documentation, Myanmar has claimed they are not its citizens. The disavowal is grounded in a series of actions introduced by the military junta who ruled the country for nearly 50 years (1962-2011). These include policies introduced by General Ne Win in 1962, requiring communities to provide proof of their residence in Myanmar prior to 1824,³³ and the Burma Citizenship Act of 1982, limiting the Rohingyas' rights of citizenship by declaring them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.³⁴

Radical Buddhist actors are believed to have had a strong influence on the state's exclusionary policies. Media reports suggest that the military's clearance operations in Rakhine state were covertly supported by "local Rakhine Buddhist militias and vigilantes."³⁵ For many years now an ultranationalist Buddhist campaign has been fanning the flames of anti-Muslim sentiment. Organized by the radical Ma Ba Tha, Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion, the movement seeks to purify the land from Muslims and other religious minorities. It has been particularly instrumental in the passage of a 2015 legislation titled "Race and Religion Protection Laws" explicitly barring Buddhist women from marrying outside the religion. The law allegedly targets Muslims.

REGIONAL MIRRORING OF RELIGIOUS EXCLUSION

While the interactive and dynamic effect of ultranationalist religious discourses and policy is undermining Myanmar's democratic trajectory, it also appears to be spreading regionally, diminishing neighboring India's secular character and global democratic standing. For many centuries, India has been home to some of the most diverse ethnic and religious communities in the world. In more recent history, its liberal democratic order has been defined by its unifying constitutional principles and leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister who espoused secularism as a strategic vision, relevant even today.

At the time of this writing, however, Delhi, one of the world's greatest capitals, has barely recovered from the worst Hindu mob violence against Muslims in decades. It was triggered by the recently passed Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 (CAA), amending an old law to facilitate citizenship for migrants of different faiths with the exception of Muslims.³⁶ It has sparked widespread protests across Indian cities involving religious minorities as well as a secular civil society pushing back. A few months prior to the passage of the CAA, the government rolled out the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the restive northeastern state of Assam. The NRC, too, is an exclusionary mechanism, generating a list of people identified by the government as bona fide citizens. It "effectively strips"³⁷ nearly two million residents of Assam, mostly Muslim, from citizenship. In the meantime, the government is building detention camps for people who are not able to provide supporting evidence while calling other states to do the same.³⁸ India's planned detention of Muslim minorities is structurally similar to the exclusionary policies targeting religious minority groups in neighboring China and Myanmar. Presumably, once the government begins to haul people into detention camps, tens of thousands, if not more, may be forced to flee to other countries particularly if there are reports of human rights violations.³⁹

The anti-Muslim posturing in India is often attributed to the rising influence of the Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS is considered a Hindu supremacist group subscribing to Hindutva, an ideology seeking to establish the hegemony of Hindus and the Hindu way of life across all of India. Some Hindu nationalist politicians believe that India should be Hindu, not a secular nation. Accordingly, efforts to efface evidence of India's Islamic history, by changing names of cities, streets, and airports, many of them legacies of 600 years of Islamic rule, are underway. The campaign is part of a process

called “saffronization,” to remember and glorify India’s Hindu culture and heritage, while obliterating remnants of Islamic or Christian history and traditions.⁴⁰

INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE: LESSONS FROM THE MONGOL EMPIRE

Noted in the annals of history as a fierce Mongol warrior-ruler, Genghis Khan (1162-1227), was the founder of the largest contiguous land empire. While mostly remembered as a barbarian, he left behind a legacy of secular politics, religious coexistence, multiculturalism, free trade, communication, and international rule of law. Like Janus, the Roman god of new beginnings, he was able to look in opposite directions and see both the past and the future. On the one hand, he conquered hundreds of cities, towns, and villages and is estimated to have killed 40 million men, women, and children; accounting for about 11% of the global population at the time. On the other, having conquered them, Genghis Khan championed religious diversity and inclusion to advance peace and stability across his empire. Born Temujin, he was bestowed the title Chenghez Khan, or the “Universal Ruler,” by the nomadic Mongol and Central Asian tribes whom he brought together under a unified Mongol empire. The honorific title was prophetic. At its peak, the Mongol empire stretched across some 12 million square miles from what is now Mongolia to China and Central Asia, and the Middle East.⁴¹ It lasted for more than 150 years (1206-1368).

One of Genghis Khan’s greatest legacies is Pax Mongolica or Mongol Peace, a historiographical reference to the stabilizing effects engendered by Mongol influence on the social, cultural, and economic landscapes of territories conquered by him. In order to establish his political legitimacy, he adapted to local cultures, building on their best practices and encouraging innovation. He advanced Mongol gains in knowledge in newly conquered territories in genuine endeavors to develop them. Thereby he and his descendants transformed Eurasian cultures and civilizations in the 13th and 14th centuries on many levels. Notably, they ushered in an era of significantly greater interconnectivity between the East and West through free trade (facilitated by their near complete control of the Silk Road), technological advances, and enlightened diplomacy. The modern concept of diplomatic immunity is traceable to their policy of granting protected travel.

Although Genghis Khan did not subscribe to institutionalized religion he was widely viewed as a great unifier and assimilator of diverse

people. He was a visionary who sought to promote societal harmony and cohesion as a means to prevent rebellion and stabilize his vast multicultural empire. He upheld the principle of religious tolerance by passing laws granting religious freedom to all communities under his rule. Benefiting a wide diversity of people including Nestorian Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims, it set him apart from his contemporaries and is a reflection of both his genius and benevolence. His strategic paradigm was undoubtedly imperialistic as well as a win-win approach, helping to expand his influence and legitimacy while also eliciting cooperation. Notwithstanding Mongol adherence to Shamanism, an animistic belief system with little in common with more popular world religions, he accorded respect and complete religious freedom to all his subjects.

Genghis Khan's strategy was carried forward by his successors including his grandson Kublai Khan, the first Mongol to rule over China. Kublai Khan conquered the Song dynasty in southern China and founded the Yuan dynasty. Far from religious oppression and persecution, the Mongols offered tax benefits to leading foreign clerics including Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians alike, a tactic to win allies in newly conquered territories. Because the Mongols were so visibly inclusive of other faiths and ethnicities, it helped them maintain good foreign relations well beyond China where these communities wielded influence. This was especially true of Mongol relations with Muslims, resulting in increased connectivity between Persia and West Asia. The Mongols were cognizant of Islamic advances in astronomy, medicine, and financial administration at the time and recruited the best minds to run the affairs of government and other fields. For example, Kublai Khan appointed many Muslims in administrative positions across the 12 districts of Yuan. According to Iranian historian Rashidud-Din-Fadlullah, eight of the 12 governors of these districts and all vice-governors were Muslim.⁴² Muslims also frequently served as tax collectors. Kublai Khan built many mosques in China demonstrating his unwavering commitment to religious tolerance and modernity. While Genghis Khan himself did not mobilize many resources for the construction of religious spaces, his son Ogedei, the second great Khan of the Mongol Empire, and subsequently, Kublai Khan, built many monasteries, mosques and churches.

Karakorum, the old capital of the Mongol empire, one of the most important cities in the history of the Silk Road, stands testament. Described thus by the renowned explorer and historian, William of Rubruck, the first European to provide an account of his visit to the walled capital

in the 1250s, “There are twelve idol temples belonging to different peoples, two mosques where the religion of Mahomet is proclaimed, and one Christian church at the far end of the town.”⁴³ Indeed, Karakorum was a most cosmopolitan city with people of different ethnic backgrounds including Mongols, steppe tribes, Han Chinese, Persians, Armenians, and Europeans living harmoniously.⁴⁴ Therein are valuable lessons for advancing peace, stability, and socioeconomic development across the rich multicultural landscape in the Asia-Pacific region as elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

Government restrictions on religious freedoms combined with rising religious nationalism are contributing to increasing instability in the Asia-Pacific region. The interactive effects of this dynamic undermine the relationship between governments and citizens, sharpen preexisting societal cleavages and potentially increase the likelihood of civil unrest, conflict, and insurgency—evident in a number of states. Policies involving mass detention and citizenship-stripping, palpable in a regional contagion effect, have been particularly destabilizing. Unchecked, these trends could create exponentially more stateless and displaced communities across the world for a long time to come. Chronically displaced communities provide fertile grounds for human trafficking and radicalization by terrorist groups.⁴⁵ Additionally, human insecurity associated with forced displacement involves disrupted livelihoods, food and health insecurity, and gender-based sexual violence, rendering the environment more complex and insecure for the victims as well as the region. It must be emphasized that the status of religious minorities in the Asia-Pacific is increasingly being threatened by China’s rapid rise and its capacity to redefine regional norms based on its authoritarian model and vested interests.

Religious tolerance and inclusive governance are critical and necessary for systems based on justice and equality. Governments in plural societies should concern themselves with promoting religious inclusion as a strategic approach to advancing political stability and socioeconomic development. Pluralism in both religion and race should be celebrated and viewed as a win-win. States in the Asia-Pacific may consider leveraging their minority groups to build international alliances and expand their influence. They must also cultivate an awareness of the strengths of religious diversity and harness it as an asset in an increasingly interconnected world.

Notes

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