

# **Violent Religious Extremism in South Asia: Challenges and Contentions**

## **Convenors**

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## **Introduction**

Religious extremism is amongst the most pertinent challenges to state and society in the contemporary world. It is a global phenomenon and the subject of considerable academic scholarship, political debate and journalistic inquiry. And yet, its causes and origins are often little understood and the pathways to respond to and manage its growth and impact remains without clear consensus. This is not surprising since the manifestation of religious extremism is neither monolithic nor immutable. While religious extremism appears to be part and parcel of our contemporary world, in South Asia the challenges religious extremism presents are particularly widespread, complex and imposing. The question is why? Whether it is the coordinated suicide attacks led by the Pakistani Taliban against the state, or the public lynching of Muslims carried out by Hindu extremists in India under the guise of enforcing doctrines of cow protection, or a wave of violent extremism in Bangladesh or rising Buddhist-Muslim clashes in Sri Lanka, few challenges produce instability, threaten life, permeate mistrust and division within communities, deepen fear and resentment of state authorities, inspire radicalism, and create violent conflict as fervently as religious extremism does in the region. With such a significant presence of violent extremism, it is not surprising that transnational terrorist groups, in particular the ISIS, are establishing roots in this part of the world.

Religious extremist groups are not uncommon in Western societies. But they are located by and large at the fringes of these societies. In South Asia, extremist groups frequently occupy centre-stage within mainstream politics. They can operate freely in civil society, contest elections, influence the makeup of governments and even further their interests and agendas through conventional political pathways of courts and legislatures. How is this so? And even when they are outlawed they can conduct their affairs at times without overt government interference. They are often known to form intricate networks and complex associations across countries, possess international links and tap into a wide variety of resources to sustain their religious and political activities.

The impact of religious extremism in South Asia reaches beyond the territorial borders of the individual countries in the region has been well documented, particularly since the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. To date Islamic militancy has been the focus of much of this literature and research has often been framed by questions and assumptions guided by the West's 'war on terror'. Certainly, Pakistan has been identified as the epicentre from where the global threat of ideological extremism currently emanates, and Bangladesh, another Muslim majority country, is touted to join it in this capacity. But what makes religious extremism in

South Asia even more worthy of investigation is that it is not only the home of the largest concentrations of Muslims in the world, it is also the birthplace of Hinduism and Buddhism. In Huntington-esque terms South Asia uniquely provides a fault line of religious intensity and inter-action. What clearly emerges is that religious extremism is not confined to Islam. Religious extremism can manifest just as violently and significantly in Hindu and Buddhist form.

A study of religious extremism in South Asia that re-examines conventional wisdom has much to offer not simply in the cause of countering radicalism and serving counterterrorism. The region presents complex political, sociological, historical and legal debates on the role of religion in politics. It provides interesting case studies related to the ways extremist groups belonging to different religions participate in formal political processes and the strategies they employ to manoeuvre and succeed in mainstream party politics. This may be of interest to political scientists. Such a study also offers historians the opportunity to inquire into the origins and evolution of religious movements as well as how extremists use and manipulate the role of memory and nostalgia in the effort to reconstruct the past and reinvent nations. There are also opportunities for legal scholars to explore the complexities of laws and jurisprudence both which aspire to deter extremism and those which appear to facilitate religious conflict. Finally, the study of extremism within the rich complexity and diversity of the South Asian religious experience would undoubtedly be of interest to sociologists concerned with social and religious change in the region.

**[In this project, South Asia is defined by the membership of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.]**

### **Potential topics**

- History, modernity and colonial continuities: The link between a shared colonial past and the growth of religious extremism.
- Trends and cross-border connections: What general lessons can be learnt from South Asia about religious extremism as a growing contemporary phenomenon in the modern world?
- Law and extremism: Has constitutional law been an effective instrument in reducing conflict between and within religious communities? Or has it hardened pre-existing conflicts and simply encouraged religious actors to use legal and political institutions to frame legal and political conflicts in religious terms?
- Religious and social change: Analysis of new extremist movements in the region. What is the relationship between law, religiosity and religious practice? What legal approaches to religious violence are being advanced and contested in the region?
- Theology and religious doctrines: The impact of religious extremism on theological toleration.
- Social media and violent extremism: How has social media and technological revolutions in South Asia complicated the impact and understanding of violent extremism? How have extremist groups exploited and instrumentalised these new technologies?
- Global factors: How has South Asia received or responded to discourses and practices on counterterrorism from around the world? What has been the effect of events of

political, religious or theological significance abroad (e.g. Syrian civil war, the rise of ISIS, Israeli offensives into Palestine) on religious extremism in South Asia?

### **Scope and outcomes**

This special issue will be a product of the Middle Eastern Studies Conference to be held during 29-31 October 2018 at Deakin University, Melbourne. At the conference, three panels will be organised on violent religious extremism in South Asia. The panels will be hosted by Deakin University with help from the University of New England.

A total of **12 papers** will be presented and discussed at the conference. There is a plan to publish a special issue of a reputable journal or an edited book with a prominent publisher. This project invites interdisciplinary contributions from scholars and specialists from history, political science, international relations, conflict studies, sociology, legal studies, culture and religion. This project hopes to make a substantial contribution in the field of South Asian Studies.

### **Timelines**

1. Abstract submission deadline: 31st May 2018 (350-500 words) with CV/Resume
2. Proposed acceptance notification: 15 June 2018
3. Submission of full papers: 15 September 2018

### **Submission information**

For individual abstract submissions: Please use the provided [template](#) to submit a 200-word abstract and 100-word bio to mesf@deakin.edu.au by May 31, 2018. For more information, please contact Dr Zahid Ahmed at: zahid.ahmed@deakin.edu.au