

Many Asian nations are experiencing a revival of religion in public and political life

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Religion is returning to public and political life in many Asian countries contrary to previously dominant ideas about the inevitable decline of religion through the process of modernisation. Economic development and socio-cultural progress in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, India, and China have brought religion back to the political and socio-cultural spheres.

Asia is the only continent where virtually all major world religions today originated and developed: Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Contrary to the classic sociological theories on the decline of religions in the face of modernisation and secularisation, which go all the way back at least to Max Weber, Karl Marx and David Durkheim, all these great religions are still going strong in most of Asia. In fact, like the other parts of the globe, Asia in the last four decades has been experiencing a religious revival.

In many parts of Asia, religions have long played a significant role, not only in the lives of the faithful, but also in public and political life. Hinduism, plays an important role in India, and Buddhism is a crucial element in private and public lives in Thailand and Sri Lanka. Judaism is closely bound up with national identity in Israel, while Christianity, specifically Catholicism, is the single largest religion in the Philippines and Timor Leste. At the same time, Protestantism is making inroads in

South Korea, Japan, China, Singapore and other places in Asia. Islam, the latest of the Abrahamic religions, is the predominant religion in Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, and Malaysia; in South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; as well as in the Middle East and Central Asia, while being an important minority faith in India. Even though most Japanese would say that they do not practice Shintoism, it is easy to find traces of this religion in their lives.

Despite the predictions of classical sociology and classical modernisation theory, this has not changed in the face of socio-economic transformation since the end of World War II. Instead, the variety of ways in which religion has become integrated into social, political and cultural life have become more complex. This has ramifications for geopolitical and security issues across the Asian region. In the case of Muslim majority countries such as Indonesia, the most obvious problem is the link that is often made between Islam and political violence, although fundamentalist strains prone to violence have emerged from other religions as well.

Asian geo-politics, religions and security issues

For centuries, as suggested earlier, religion has been part and parcel of human life in Asia, spanning the social, cultural, and, of course, political spheres. In short, religions have been embedded in private and public life.

However, after World War II, newly-independent nation-states had different constitutional arrangements on the matter of the place of religion in each country. India, Singapore, Japan and South Korea, for instance, are 'secular' states that officially give no special place to religion; religion is regarded as simply a private matter and, therefore, should not interfere in political and public life.

On the other hand, religions were accommodated in political and public lives in

Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, and yet the role of religion appeared to have declined with the initial introduction of modernisation and economic development programmes by the states. Religion in general had been regarded as not compatible with modernity and economic development by many state officials who expected modernisation processes would bring 'secularisation'.

In other countries, the decline of the role of religion was connected with the adoption of political ideologies such as communism in China, North Korea and some others. The communist ideology is hostile to religion; indeed, religion has been considered 'opium' that led people to escapism and therefore should be banned from public life.

Another historical variation emerged in the Middle East in Iraq and Syria, which adopted authoritarian-socialism based on the ideology of Baathism that in many ways was also unfriendly to religion. This inspired and drove some Muslim groups to oppose the political regimes, creating cycles of violence that are difficult to break. Opposition to these regimes continued into the 1990s when they failed to deliver their promises of better economic and social lives.

Momentum for change came when waves of globalisation (which also accelerated inequalities in Muslim-majority societies) and democratisation swept the region from the end of December 2010 onwards, creating the so-called 'Arab Spring'; sweeping not only Tunisia, Libya and Egypt in North Africa, but also Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria in West Asia. And, those who won the upper hand in the resulting political change were the Islamists (demonstrating that Islamic forces can be democratising), even though potential dissent from authoritarian and secular elements in each country are far from over. Though varied in orientation, some of these Islamists had come to consider Islam as not incompatible with democracy.

Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and others that in one way or another adopted a friendlier attitude to religion where it was (and still is) given special status in constitutions and political realities. Despite that, religions initially tended to be

sidelined in these countries during the process of modernisation in the decades following their independence post-World War II.

In Indonesia, Islam has increasingly reappeared in power politics since the early 1990s when the Soeharto regime introduced reconciliatory policies for Islam and Muslim groups many of which had been suppressed. These policies included the foundation of the All-Indonesian Muslim Intellectual Association (ICMI/Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim se-Indonesia) with B.J. Habibie (Minister of Science and Technology in the Cabinet) as the chairperson, and permitted the foundation of Bank Muamalat, the very first Islamic bank in the country. This development continued into the post-Soeharto period, when Islamic forces have been intensively involved in political life. Yet, despite many signs of increased attachment to Islam among the people, Islamic political parties fared poorly in the successive general elections of 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019.

In China, phenomenal economic progress has resulted in many people regarding Confucianism as the spiritual base of development. At the same time, there is also a clear policy of new openness and rapprochement towards religion implemented by the Chinese government. Also, in Singapore for instance, senior government officials as well as experts have been discussing what they call 'New Confucianism' as the spirit and ethos behind their economic progress.

Together with the return of religion to private and public lives in many Asian countries, in the last two decades at least, religion has been also increasingly regarded as a problem of security. Firstly, this has a lot to do with the rise of radical and terrorist groups in some Asian countries that use, and abuse, their respective religions for their own political and religious purposes. Secondly, and related to that, is the rise of religious fundamentalism which is in one way or another condoned by the regimes in countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar or Afghanistan (under Taliban I, 1996-2001).

Religious violence and the case of Islam

Terrorism

Religious-linked terrorism or violence is clearly not unique to Islam, although public discourse in the West tends to associate such violence with the behaviour of particular groups of extremists responsible for events such the September 11, 2001, attacks on the US, for instance, and the aftermath in many places in the world. But one can find throughout human history a great number of terrorist acts that in one way or another are linked with different religions. With increased globalisation and the instant flow of information, the radicalisation of religious individuals and groups has tended to accelerate.

Religions with central authority seem to be less prone to violence and terrorism as opposed to (Sunni) Islam which has no central ecclesiastical authority. Religions without central authority could also become vulnerable to being co-opted by extremists, because of the decline of their religious authority and de-centering of religious authority and leadership.

Practically no religion is free from that kind of abuse by small groups of its followers. Radical groups can be easily found among Hindus in India; Buddhist in Sri-Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar; among the Shinto in Japan; Jews in Israel; Muslims in Indonesia, the southern Philippines, southern Thailand, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq; and among Christians such as the national Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) in north East India.

The case of Islam

The root-causes of radicalism and even terrorism among believers are very complex. In fact, there is a combination of various factors including unjust politics, economic issues such as widespread poverty and unemployment, and also internal and external religious differences that can result in bloody conflicts. In most cases,

politics seems to be the most important factor. To take the cases of radicalism and terrorism perpetrated by some very small groups in the name of Islam in Indonesia since the time of the Bali bombing in 2002 until today, it is apparent that politics, both domestic and international, is the main cause of terrorism. At the domestic level, the perpetrators of the bombings have been motivated by their anger and hatred of the Indonesian political system that they regarded as being 'un-Islamic'.

As for international politics, it is clear that even before the tragic events of September 11 in the US, the perpetrators of terrorism in the name of Islam condemned what they saw as injustice in international politics and relations. For them, the US and other Western countries are the enemies of Islam and Muslims; and Western countries, particularly the US, are hostile to Islam and the Muslim world. In fact, they believe, the US and other Western countries have conspired to destroy Islam and Muslims. The US' support of Israel at the expense of Palestine and US-led military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have only added fuel to their anger and hatred of the US and its allies.

Therefore, religion is seldom the only cause of terrorism. Political, economic, and other non-religious factors, get religious justification by perpetrators of terrorist acts.

The use, abuse, and manipulation of religious justification is perhaps potentially larger in Sunni Islam, which does not have a single body of religious authority. In the matter of leadership, Sunni Islam is of course different from Shi'i Islam such as in Iran which has a centralised leadership in the hands of the *mujtahid Mutlaq* (the absolute decider) in the body of *wilayat al-faqih* (the authority of experts in Islamic law) consisting of the most prominent *ulama* (Muslim scholars).

I believe that certain doctrines of Islam can be used and abused for justifying acts of terrorism. The doctrine of *jihad*, for instance, could easily be taken as a justification by certain Muslim individuals and groups to conduct holy war against any perceived enemies, including even Muslims. Certain verses of the Qur'an and the Tradition

(*Hadith*) of the Prophet Muhammad are also prone to be interpreted in this way.

Arguably, the literal and *sharia*-oriented (*zahir*) understanding of Islam is more prone to radicalism. This kind of religious understanding is divisive even among Muslims. Those who are opposed to a *sharia*-oriented understanding of Islam are, in fact, regarded by others as having gone astray and, therefore, could be the target of *jihad* (war). This can be seen clearly in the cases of the Wahabis in late 18th century Arabia and the Padris of West Sumatra in the early decades of the 19th century.

The non-literal understanding of Islam, such represented by Sufism, is less prone to violence. This is mainly because of the strong emphasis Sufism puts on inclusiveness and the ‘inner’ (*batin*) aspect of Islam. Even though the Sufi, like the literalists, also appeal for purification through religious acts, they do it in a peaceful manner through spiritual exercises rather than by using force like the literalists.

Furthermore, the absence of a single authority in Islam—particularly among the Sunnis—makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to issue religious rulings (*fatwa*) that would decide once and for all that terrorism as *jihad* is religiously unjustifiable and invalid.

Also important is the precedent in Muslim history of radical acts that can be included in the definition of terrorism. The radical acts perpetrated by the Kharijis (Seceders) who came into existence during the Siffin war 667 C.E. in the post-Prophet Muhammad period have inspired many, if not most, contemporary radical Muslim groups. There indeed exist certain radical ideologies among Muslims which basically believe that it is religiously valid to wage radical and terrorist acts.

There is an urgent need, therefore, among concerned Muslim scholars (*‘ulama’*) to rethink, reinterpret, and reformulate certain interpretations of classical and medieval *‘ulama’* concerning *jihad*. For that purpose, the *‘ulama’* and Muslim leaders must discard the defensive and apologetic attitude that is apparent when they respond to terrorist acts conducted by certain individuals or Muslim groups. They

should admit that there are indeed terrorists among Muslims who—based on their own one-sided unauthoritative understanding of Islam—conduct terrorism. Admitting this problem, then the *'ulama'* could proceed to address the issue objectively from a religious point of view.

Religious-linked terrorism, such as that found in Indonesia, is not commonly associated with the state. Most radical groups are opposed to the state; they are usually non-state activists, often from obscure backgrounds. Moreover, they are, as a rule, outside of mainstream Muslim movements. In fact, they have bitterly criticised mainstream Muslims as accommodating and compromising what they regard as 'un-Islamic' political, social, cultural, and economic realities.

There is a tendency, however, for radical individuals or groups to be recruited by or have links or connections with those in government or military. This is not new in Indonesia. The terrorist hijacking of a Garuda Indonesia airplane in Bangkok in March 1981 during the Soeharto period, for instance, was perpetrated by terrorists of ex-Islamic state movements in the 1950s that were recruited by certain Soeharto generals to launch the so-called *'komando jihad'* (*jihad* command). There have been many indications that certain military have incited and manipulated some radical groups in the post-Soeharto period.

Conclusion

It seems that religion in contemporary Asia will continue to be an important factor in many communities. But at the same time, religion will also continue to face many problems, not only related to society at large, but also within and among religions themselves. There will be differences and conflicts between different interpretations and schools of thought within any religion.

Violence among religious groups can also originate from their bitter response to modernisation and globalisation which they perceive as serious threats to religious belief and practices. The globalisation of instant communication and increased

global travel has also contributed to the spread of transnational religious radical ideas.

Internal and external dialogues for mutual understanding and respect among religious leaders are essential. This in turn should be spread to the faithful as a whole. Through this kind of effort, religion once again can contribute to the creation and strengthening of more harmonious and peaceful societies.

Image: Asian lanterns. Credit: [Heartlover1717/Flickr](#).