Breaking Byte of Religious Extremism

By Muhammad Faizal Abdul Rahman

SYNOPSIS

Contemporary societies exist in challenging times because of internal schisms and intra-state conflicts where religious extremism is a significant contributing factor, harming religious harmony and social cohesion. Singapore's updating of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act will empower it to respond swiftly to threats on the religious front.

COMMENTARY

RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM poses a grave threat to religious harmony and public peace in diverse societies. This threat is further exacerbated by the proliferation of extremist content on the Internet and social media. Faith-based extremism, with its denigration of other religions and incitement of violence, aggravates the "us versus them" attitude that perpetuates misunderstanding, bigotry and hate. It "dehumanises" the "Other" and legitimises their persecution.

If left unchecked, religious extremism – online and offline -- leads to hate crimes, terrorism and violent conflicts between religious communities, and in some situations, confrontations between religion and state. In cosmopolitan societies with high Internet penetration, the problem worsens when it intersects with xenophobia and racial and religious fault-lines. While soft measures such as inter-faith dialogues, multi-religious events and digital literacy education are key to preventing religious extremism, hard measures such as strengthening legislation are necessary to address three categories of risk factors that can counteract the effectiveness of soft measures.

Category #1: Individual

The efficacy of soft measures is contingent on the individual's education, socialisation and openness to multiculturalism. It also depends on the individual's metacognition,

which is the awareness of one's biases, thought processes and online habits. It should be noted that not every individual is open to religious tolerance and moderation.

Such individuals may turn a blind eye on soft measures that promote narratives of critical thinking, digital literacy, peace, compassion, moderation and shared humanity. For example, in Sri Lanka, various online rumours of Muslims harming Buddhists had caused ethno-religious biases in individuals to flare up into riots in 2018 (clashes erupted again after the church and hotel bombings in April this year).

In Europe, ISIS terrorist attacks and Muslim migration have sparked off Islamophobic attacks by far-right extremists spurred by their online hate groups. In Singapore in July this year, online vitriolic views falsely framed public engagements between police officers and madrasah students as religious profiling that targets Muslims in Singapore. These online misrepresentations, rantings and criticisms can disrupt religious harmony, cast aspersions on security forces, and create distrust towards the state.

Strong measures are therefore necessary to deter the occurrence of religion-related incidents and violence as a result of online hate speech and incitement. This would ensure a climate that is free from fear, and allow soft measures to work with minimal impediments.

Category #2: Community

The religious community – offline and online -- provides the individual with socio-psychological and spiritual support to deal with the challenges in life. Shared religious beliefs and behaviour result in a shared identity that on the one hand, can emphasise inclusiveness and universal values with other communities. The result is a strong and cohesive society.

On the other hand, the shared identity can promote internal schisms by firstly emphasising religious differences with other communities. Secondly, the identity frames these differences as theologically inferior and the cause of existential threats to the survival of its community. For example, the rise of "militant Buddhism" in Sri Lanka and Myanmar is driven by the narrative that Muslims had taken over traditional Buddhist lands. The result is identity politics, which drives many intra-state conflicts in the past and the present.

A critical factor that influences the shared identity of a religious community is charismatic figures who have a wide following, online and off-line. The community trusts and reveres charismatic and influential figures who interpret and curate religious texts to provide answers to the challenges in life.

Religious extremism takes root when charismatic figures provide answers that call for religious exclusiveness and supremacy while demonising other religions. It can be difficult to persuade some individuals in the community to reject answers that are purportedly sanctified by religious texts.

It is therefore essential to have laws to prevent hate speech or provocative remarks against other religions from spreading or sparking off hate crimes or riots. In

Singapore, the authorities had proscribed foreign preachers after they made insensitive remarks against other religions.

While laws cannot stop individuals from following such charismatic figures in the online space, enforcement action against these figures firstly assures other religious communities that society's common space remains safe. Secondly, it sends the message that the survival of religious communities and maintenance of public peace require harmony instead of hostility.

Category #3: Global Village

The online space makes the world a "global village" by mentally and emotionally connecting societies across borders. Global developments increasingly influence religious narratives both at the individual and community levels. These developments can either encourage individuals and communities to be amicable despite religious differences or promote hostility and undercut soft measures to promote religious moderation and peaceful co-existence.

The numerous terrorist attacks by jihadists, for example, are underpinned by global extremist narratives relating to alleged oppression of Muslims, occupation of 'Muslim lands' and the need to resurrect the Caliphate to establish sharia law. Similarly, Western far-right extremists, particularly white supremacists involved in hate crimes and terrorist attacks like the shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, are influenced by far-right extremist propaganda.

This includes the "Great Replacement" theory, that assert that non-whites, particularly Muslims, are "invaders" that cannot co-exist as "good neighbours" in the same village with white Christian individuals. The shootings had the global impact of spreading fear and shared trauma among Muslim communities, and amplifying the extremist narratives in Jihadi chatrooms that Christians are an existential threat to Muslims.

Critical Peace Among Religions

In sum, laws such as Singapore's Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act would have the effect of deterring inflammatory and provocative statements, especially on the widely-used digital platforms. They also support soft measures that aim to imprint religious harmony in the politico-cultural DNA of societies that make up nations.

The importance of curbing religious extremism – especially online -- is far-reaching and as Swiss theologian Hans Küng once said, there is "no peace among the nations without peace among the religions".

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