

Religious dimensions in nationalism and national identity

The religious dimensions that exist within the national identities of a number of countries can be a major driver of wide-scale freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) violations. This is when nationalists and the state consider belonging to a particular religion as a necessary part to belonging to a nation. Other religions are considered a threat to this nation or national identity. This phenomenon is usually linked to the religion of the majority. The emphasis on a common religious identity can be for both ideological and practical reasons. It can also occur in countries that consider themselves secular.

The relationship between national identity and religious affiliation

Religious nationalism arises when belonging to a particular religion is seen as central, or is one of several features necessary to national identity and to assertions about what it means to belong to a nation.¹ Religious identity is often closely tied to the land, and determines one's commitment to it. In this context, other religious identities are perceived as a threat to the national interest. Thus land can become a significant component of identity formation, as religious nationalism is often rooted in a particular place. Apart from its relationship to a particular place, religious nationalism can arise when a religious collective claims that it is a political community.

An example of this phenomenon is Hindu nationalism, which has recently become prevalent in India. Hindu Nationalists aim to create a homogenous Hindu state; their brand of Hinduism is as an ideology for a modern, resurgent India. They argue that other religious groups must recognise the centrality of Hinduism to the land and the state, and oppose what they see as 'appeasement' of these religious minorities, particularly Muslims. Another similar example is Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, which asserts that Sri Lanka essentially belongs to Sinhala-Buddhists – a majority ethno-religious community constituting approximately 70 percent of the population.

While ideological factors underpin religious nationalism, so do apparently pragmatic factors. One of the challenges that developing countries find in nation-building is that primordial group loyalty can come before civic loyalty to the nation. This can pose a potential problem, as the country's legitimacy often depends on the idea of a national community. Post-colonial nations, with diverse ethnic populations often face this challenge when they seek to build a national identity. It is in this context that some nations decide that adopting one religion as a part of this national identity is key to nation building and stability. Religious nationalism can therefore run in diverse nations as well as ones that are largely homogenous.

This approach, for example, is considered a defining characteristic of Malaysia, where the importance of a uniform identity was highlighted during the period of attaining independence. Then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed stated that immigrants should be willing to assimilate totally with the 'definitive race' in terms of language and culture for true national identity to be established, especially in the early days of nation-building.

In secular as well as religious nations

Even states which consider themselves secular may promote a particular religious heritage as an inherent part of its national identity. When doing this, a distinction is made between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' religions. It is often the religion of immigrants that is considered 'non-traditional'. This distinction has been exacerbated by the rise of nationalism across Europe and the United States, which has been startling in its effect on the direction of mainstream politics in these countries. This rise in nationalism is often attributed to the 2008 economic crisis. The inequalities of its impact, stagnation in communities, and limited job opportunities for many individuals, gave rise to the perception that liberal elites were not looking after 'their own'. Populist parties played on

¹ See Phillips Barker, *If God be for Us* (2009)

these grievances, increasing anger and resentment not just towards the political establishment, but also towards minority groups.

The responsibility of the state

The state can hold a large part of the responsibility for FoRB violations related to religious nationalism, both indirectly and directly. When a state considers itself the guardian of one particular religion, it can lead to the underrepresentation of people from other religious backgrounds in employment, education and citizenship. States can be, and often are, directly involved in the creation of a culture of hostility, not just through restrictions enacted by government but by allowing hostility, such as hate speech, from non-state actors. Violence also becomes possible and socially acceptable in the midst of a larger ideology that fuels them. Moreover, a culture of impunity perpetuated by the state often leaves perpetrators of religious violence unpunished, and further incentivises such violence to continue.