

Background and Introduction

This Element explores nationalism in the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism and how it manifests in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. At the core, nationalists contend that the continuation of their group is threatened by some other group. Many of these fears are rooted in the colonial experience and have been exacerbated in the modern era. For the Hindu and Buddhist nationalists examined in this Element, the predominant source of fear is the Muslim minority and its secular and leftist allies. For Sikhs, a minority within India, the fear is primarily of the state. For Muslims in Pakistan, the fear is more dynamic and includes secularists and minority sects such as Shias, Ahmadis, and Sufis. In all instances, the groups fear that their ability to practice and express their religion in the manner they deem appropriate is under immediate threat. Additionally, Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim nationalists wish for the state to adopt or promote their religious ideology.

Why It Matters

As of 2021, the countries of India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka all have some democratic features with competitive political parties and elections. However, each country has also experienced concerning democratic backsliding in the past five years (Freedom House 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). This is part of a broader global trend of democratic backsliding and the increased popularity of nationalist parties around the world. Because Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims make up the largest percent of their respective countries, it has become an effective electoral strategy to appeal to the dominant group while ignoring, even demonizing, minority religions or sects. Although Sikh nationalism has been unique compared to Hindu and Buddhist nationalism in this respect, Sikh political leaders have used a similar strategy at the local level, leading to local success for the Akali Dal party in Punjab. While these cases all have unique features, they also help provide greater understanding about the development and impact of nationalism within a regional and global context.

Nationalism in the twenty-first century is often accompanied by polarization and the threat of violence. Haggard and Kaufman (2021) find that

polarization is a particularly strong threat to vulnerable democracies. When the electorate and its leaders are increasingly polarized, the opposition, particularly minorities, goes from being a nonthreatening group with different ideologies to one that is an enemy and opposed to the interests of the nation. Once the electorate accepts that the opposition is a threat to the identity of the country, violence becomes increasingly tolerable. Thus with the rise in nationalism comes the twin threats of democratic backsliding and violence, both of which have been pronounced in the cases explored in this Element.

India, the world's largest democracy, has experienced significant democratic backsliding over the past decade. In 2021, Freedom House, the key agency measuring democracy around the world, made the notable downgrade of India from "free" to "partly free." Freedom House is a global report created by nearly two hundred analysts and advisors who are experts from academia, think tanks, and human rights committees. Each year, the "Freedom in the World" measures political rights and civil liberties among several categories, including political process, political pluralism and participation, functioning of government, freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights. Freedom House cited Narendra Modi and the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) "discriminatory policies and increased violence affecting the Muslim population" in addition to the "crackdown on expressions of dissent by the media, academics, civil society groups, and protesters" as the reason for the decline (Freedom House 2021a). According to their report, journalists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and critics of the government continue to be targeted and arrested despite a constitutional guarantee of their protection. India has officially rejected these classifications, saying they are "misleading, incorrect and misplaced" (*Hindustan Times* 2022).

Pakistan has not been considered "free" based on Freedom House's criteria, but its "partly free" status has continued to decline toward "not free" over the past five years due to the military's "enormous influence over security and other policy issues" and its intimidation of the media and "impunity for indiscriminate or extralegal use of force" (Freedom House 2021b). The military and thus the state have become increasingly supportive

of an expanding role of Islam within the state at the expense of minorities, including non-Sunni Muslims. Freedom House also cited the ongoing attacks on religious minorities and political opponents by Islamist militants as a concerning cause of democratic erosion. Pakistan's increasing support of the Taliban in Afghanistan is another notable area of concern and demonstrates its ongoing proximity to religious extremism within the region.

Although Sri Lanka has experienced democratic improvements since the 2015 election of Maithripala Sirisena, it has remained “partly free” due to the lack of reconciliation efforts with its minority Hindu Tamil population since the end of the civil war. The increasing power of the executive branch and the Rajapaksa family is another cited concern. Freedom House noted that since the 2019 and 2020 elections of the Rajapaksa brothers as prime minister and president, the state has rolled back accountability mechanisms, particularly of human rights violations that previously occurred under the Rajapaksa regime during the civil war. The 2021 report noted that members of the Buddhist clergy frequently pressure the government to pursue certain policies, particularly those that expand Buddhist influence in areas with higher concentrations of Hindus or Muslims. Although religious nationalism has an established history in Sri Lanka, it is becoming increasingly merged with the Rajapaksa political dynasty within the country.

The ongoing risks of violence due to religious nationalism must also be emphasized. When combined with ongoing democratic backsliding, violence provides the opportunity for the state to further restrict citizens' rights, particularly critics and minorities. Over the past decade, India has experienced escalating incidents of violence targeted at journalists, government critics, and religious minorities. In 2020, several states in India, including India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, passed laws preventing “forced religious conversions” aimed at preventing so-called love jihad, an alleged coerced marriage of a Muslim man to a Hindu woman (Malji and Raza 2021). These laws resulted in the arrest of several interreligious couples from 2020 onward (Malji and Raza 2021). The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) also noted that in 2021, India experienced a record year of violence targeting journalists. Four journalists were murdered for their work and seven were jailed (CPJ 2021).

In Pakistan, Islamist attacks have had a substantial impact on civilians, particularly religious minorities. According to the Global Terrorism Database, from 2005 to 2015, terrorist attacks increased dramatically, with a record 2,215 attacks in 2013. Attacks in Pakistan began to decline by 2016, but Pakistan still experienced 864 terrorist attacks that year, committed mostly by Islamist groups.¹ Many of these attacks targeted religious minorities. For example, a 2017 attack on the Lal Shahbaz Qalandar Sufi Shrine in Sindh Pakistan killed 90 people and injured 350 more and a November 2016 attack in Balochistan at the Sufi Shah Noorani shrine killed 52 people and injured more than 100. A year earlier, in January 2015, a suicide attack occurred at a Shia mosque in the province of Sindh, killing 61 people and injuring 46 others. In 2013, twin suicide bombings targeted at a church in Peshawar killed 127. While the state has at times attempted to promote counterterrorism efforts in areas of concern, it has repeatedly failed to protect its religious minorities and continues to provide logistical support to Islamic extremist groups, including the Afghan Taliban.

Most of Sri Lanka's postindependence era has been defined by ethnic violence. While much of this violence was spurred by the state-led exclusionary policies of Sinhalese Buddhists, the violent response by the Liberation Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE) helped empower Buddhist nationalists. Since the end of the civil war in 2009, new Buddhist nationalist organizations such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) have grown in strength and aimed incendiary speeches at Muslim and Hindu minorities that have led to communal riots, relocation of Hindu and Muslim holy sites, and resettlement of Buddhists in Hindu- and Muslim-majority areas (Devotta 2018). While violence in Sri Lanka has dramatically declined since 2009, the government's Buddhist nationalist policies threaten to rekindle communal violence.

Finally, COVID-19 has stressed the economic, social, and political systems of even the most developed countries. In South Asia, COVID policies and responses have divided along familiar communal lines. In India, at the start of the pandemic, the Muslim group Tablighi Jamaat was accused of bringing COVID into the country and spreading it as a bioweapon (Israelsen and Malji 2021). Journalists and critics of the government have also been

¹ The Global Terrorism Database data are available at start.umd.edu.

targeted. For example, one journalist who criticized the Gujarat government's coronavirus response was charged under the Sedition Law and the Disaster Management Act (CPJ 2021). In Pakistan, several prominent conservative imams told Muslims to ignore any pandemic-related restrictions and attend prayers, with many attacking police officers who attempted to enforce restrictions (Freedom House 2021b). In Sri Lanka, the government initially imposed mandatory cremations for victims of COVID-19, a practice that is explicitly forbidden in Islam (Malji and Amarasingam 2021). Despite reassurances by the World Health Organization that cremation was unnecessary, the government of Sri Lanka continued the policy for nearly nine months, further marginalizing and enraging much of the Muslim community.

What Is Covered in This Element?

Religious nationalism in Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam are analyzed in this Element and represent a broad cross-section of the diverse ways nationalism manifests in the region. Buddhist and Hindu nationalism share many similarities in the framing of their concerns about the Muslim minority population. Both fear a demographic shift that will potentially put them as the minority religion within the next generation or two. Hindu and Buddhist nationalists have also closely aligned with the ruling parties in India and Sri Lanka, so examining their roles vis-à-vis the state makes analytical sense. This fear has been increasingly manufactured through media and social media (particularly Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp) narratives emphasizing an immediate threat and challenging traditionally liberal/progressive culture (Udupa 2018).

Islamic nationalists in Pakistan do not have the same population dynamics as India and Sri Lanka. Muslims constitute 95–98 percent of Pakistan's population and 80–90 percent of Pakistan's Muslims are Sunni.² Sectarianism is thus the nature of nationalism in Pakistan, and the

² The exact percentages of Sunnis and Shias are not clear since Pakistan estimates do not distinguish between sects. While many estimates suggest Shias may constitute 10–15 percent of the population, a 2012 Pew Research Center survey found only 6 percent of Pakistani Muslims were Shia.

10–20 percent belonging to minority sects are the primary target of Muslim nationalists. However, non-Sunni Muslims are not generally framed as a demographic threat in Pakistan.³ Instead, Muslim minorities such as the Sufi, Shia, and Ahmadi are presented as blasphemous or, in the case of the Ahmadis, not even Muslim. Progressive and moderate Muslims, including within civilian leadership, have also been a frequent target.

Finally, although this Element is entitled *Religious Nationalism in South Asia*, not all South Asian countries are included in the analysis. India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan are the only three countries examined. These countries were selected for a few key reasons. First, as India and Pakistan are both nuclear powers, the impact of nationalism in those two countries is politically salient. The history of conflict and instability between the two threatens to escalate tensions to a high level, one with the potential for the use of nuclear weapons. Further, with the collapse of the US-backed Afghan government in August 2021 and the return of the Taliban, Pakistan's embrace of Islamic nationalism and Taliban-friendly policies may promote destabilization in the region and have a global impact. Finally, Sri Lanka provides the strongest example of Buddhist nationalism within the region. As the only Theravada Buddhist country in the region besides Bhutan, Sri Lanka allows the reader to see many of the parallels between Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka and Hindu nationalism in India. In fact, despite stark religious differences among the cases covered in this Element, there are key commonalities among their religious nationalisms.

There is widespread academic disagreement over what countries constitute South Asia. While India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka are almost always included in the region (see Figure 1), there is dispute about the inclusion of Afghanistan, Myanmar, and the Maldives. Afghanistan and Pakistan are often grouped with Central Asia or even the Middle East. Events in Afghanistan are intricately linked to developments in Pakistan

³ This is not to say non-Muslim minorities are not persecuted, as the blasphemy laws and targeting of the Christian, Hindu, and Sikh communities demonstrate. Instead, religious minorities are not framed as the same type of demographic threat they are portrayed as in India and Sri Lanka.



Figure 1 Map of South Asia

and vice versa. Myanmar, despite formerly being part of the British Raj, is popularly labeled as a Southeast Asian country and is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Countries (ASEAN). Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar has grown considerably in the past two decades and shares many similarities with the movement in Sri Lanka. The 2021 coup in Myanmar provides a concerning example of the potential of a military-backed junta that frequently aligns with religious extremist Buddhist organizations such as the Ma Ba Tha. Therefore, this Element provides only a brief insight into a much larger regional dynamic that should be explored further in expanded volumes.

Overview of the Element

The remainder of the Element proceeds to discuss, in brief, how religious nationalism has developed in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Section 1 provides a brief overview of the theoretical foundations of both nationalism and religious nationalism. Additionally, the section provides some essential background information to give the reader context before proceeding into the case studies. Section 2 explores the meteoric rise of Sikh nationalism in the late twentieth century. Although Sikh nationalism had a well-established history, it quickly escalated during the Green Revolution in the 1970s and reached its height in the mid-1980s. It mostly subsided by the 1990s following years of counterinsurgency operations by India alongside the death, moderation, or migration of many Sikh militants.

Section 3 explores the dynamic development of Hindu nationalism in India over the past one hundred years. Hindu nationalism went from the margins of Indian society during the colonial era to fully engrained in the ruling BJP's policies by the twenty-first century. Several events have shaped the development of Hindu nationalism in India, most specifically the 1947 partition, the associated communal violence, and its lasting legacy of unsettled borders, specifically in Kashmir. The 1970s' Emergency under Indira Gandhi and her party's targeting of critics, particularly the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), helped empower the group and its ideology. The 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, by Hindu nationalists served as a key milestone for the movement, representing a turning point by which Hindu nationalism had demonstrably merged into an increasingly powerful and mobilizing political ideology.

Section 4 traces the development of Islamic nationalism in Pakistan over time as the newly established country attempted to determine what role Islam would play in its identity and governance. Pakistan's early failure to establish a clear role for Islam within the state would haunt its legacy. Strong democratic institutions could never be effectively established, and this allowed the military to continue to erode civilian governance within the state. Over time, the military increased its power within the country and

developed close ties with Islamic extremists to help target India within Kashmir and Soviets in Afghanistan. As Pakistan continued to experience political instability, the military's close ties with conservative Islamic elements increasingly shaped Pakistan's political identity. By the 1980s, under Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan had increasingly Islamized its institutions and constitution specifically to define who is and is not a Muslim. Although Pakistan went through varying levels of democratic openness, the power of the military could not be suppressed. Despite Pakistan's alliance with the United States in the early twenty-first century in the global war on terror, Pakistan generally embraced Islamic nationalism as a policy. This was made even more clear under the administration of Imran Khan, who has praised the Taliban in Afghanistan and formally established state religious councils that increase Islamic education in public schools. The council also oversees whether blasphemy has been committed.

The final case study, in Section 5, explores the development and transformation of Buddhist nationalism within Sri Lanka. Nationalism in Sri Lanka began as a movement originally centered around language protection and later evolved to one that passed policies limiting citizenship and cultural rights of Tamils. These policies gave rise to the resistance movement led by the LTTE that escalated into a civil war that lasted from the 1970s until May 2009. Since then, the movement has evolved from one that primarily targeted Tamils to one that increasingly mobilizes against the Muslim minority. Buddhism and the Sinhala language took precedence since Sri Lanka's early independent formation and continue to hold the highest importance within the country. Despite initial democratic liberalization since the end of the civil war and promises of reconciliatory efforts, little progress has been made. Instead, communal violence and exclusionary measures by a government sympathetic to Buddhist nationalism predominate.

Section 6 concludes with an overview of all the cases explored in the Element. Section 6 helps the reader understand the key differences and similarities among the movements and how their continued trajectory may shape local, regional, and global politics. While South Asia and its experiences are unique, understanding how religious nationalism has manifested in the region provides a stronger and more nuanced understanding of a broader global phenomenon that is increasingly common.

1 Theoretical Approaches to Religious Nationalism

Nations and Nationalism

Religious nationalism cannot be understood without first examining the origins and concepts of nationalism, which has competing understandings and has been dynamic based on the historical period under examination. To discuss nationalism, it is first necessary to understand its various interpretations. In one of the most influential writings on nationalism, Benedict Anderson describes a nation as an “imagined political community that is both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 2006: 7). According to Anderson, members of a nation will not know or interact with most of their fellow members. However, through the bond of the nation, a member will feel connected to other members.

One of the key thinkers in nationalism studies is Anthony Smith, who described nationalism as originally conceived as an “inclusive and liberating force” that helped overthrow “foreign imperial and colonial administrations” and generally promoted popular democracy (Smith 1998: 1). However, this rather optimistic view, whereby nationalism was seen as a modern source that could transcend ethnic and religious divisions, was relatively short-lived. Instead, ethnic and religious divisions have come to define many states both within the West and in postcolonial states. Smith continues his definition by claiming that national identity is defined by sameness through shared ancestry, language, territory, religion, history, and a general “feeling” of belonging to the group (Smith 1998: 1).

Scholars such as Hroch (1985) discuss the origins of nationalism and contend that it is an extension of cultural elites seeking to define themselves through a common history, and once established, that identity is used to politicize cross-class groups. Other scholars argue that attributes such as language and religion are used to define national identity into either an ethnic or civic dimension (Jones and Smith 2001; Björklund 2006). Other scholars such as Diez-Medrano (2005) argue that national identity is constructed based on exclusionary categories, in other words, who does not belong to the in-group. Gellner (2008), another well-known scholar of nationalism, contends that it emerges as states industrialize and strive for a singular culture within the modern state. This is often achieved through