

Political movements misusing and abusing religion: Academic

Adrian Lim

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While doing his research as a professor of security studies, Professor Rohan Gunaratna met and interviewed Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, head of the Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalist group Bodu Bala Sena, in early 2014.

Relating the encounter at a forum on religion, extremism and identity politics yesterday, Prof Gunaratna said that as a Buddhist, he paid his respects to the monk, although he was reluctant to do so due to the monk's anti-Muslim views.

But the academic took the opportunity to make his position clear. "I told the monk - if you continue to call the Muslims pariah - there will be a riot like in July 1983.

"And this monk told me, this is exactly what must happen," said Prof Gunaratna, who is from the Nanyang Technological University's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. In July 1983, dubbed "Black July", anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka resulted in hundreds of people from the ethnic minority group being killed.

When asked about his ideology, Mr Gnanasara told Prof Gunaratna that it was from Myanmar Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, Hindu right-wing group Shiv Sena, the British National Party, and French far-right leader Marine Le Pen - all of whom have made incendiary remarks on Islam and Muslims.

Prof Gunaratna said he told the monk then that these had nothing to do with religion.

He related this anecdote yesterday to around 200 academics, policymakers, security practitioners and religious leaders at a forum at Orchard Hotel, as an example of how political movements are "misusing and abusing religion" .

The mixing of religion and politics, along with the rise of identity politics and its implications to societal harmony, were discussed by experts at the event organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the Ministry of Home Affairs. Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam also said at the forum that the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act would be updated.

Professor Mark Juergensmeyer of the University of California, Santa Barbara, pointed out how in a globalised world - where issues surrounding identity, accountability and security are prevalent - religion fulfils a special role as it provides people with a "personal and spiritual identity".

At the same time, the return of religion to public life also has a sinister edge, seen in the global rise of religious nationalism, said the founding director of the university's Orfalea Centre for Global and International Studies.

Ms Farah Pandith, an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, highlighted that there are one billion Muslims under the age of 30 globally, many of whom may be questioning what it means to be a Muslim in the modern, post-9/11 era.

Ms Pandith said these youth can be preyed on by extremist groups, which have the "loudest voices" and can provide answers that resonate emotionally with the youth. It is therefore critical

to find ways to present alternative narratives to the ones put forward by extremists, which might make sense to them in a climate of prejudice. "Governments need to scale up and do that in a real way," she said.

In addressing fundamentalism, Professor Jonathan Fox, Yehuda Avner professor of religion and politics at Israel's Bar-Ilan University, said governments might choose to give members of fundamentalist or hardline groups a "form of limited cultural autonomy" over their dress, institutions and even isolation from society.

He noted that this is a serious concession, but the compromise in return would be for fundamentalists guaranteeing they will not infringe upon the religious freedoms of non-fundamentalists, he said.

"Fundamentalists tend to thrive better when they can depict themselves as being challenged... When they are not oppressed, a lot of their arguments tend to fall apart and become less popular.

"So, a free religious marketplace actually might be a more effective way to manage them and control the level of violence," he added.