

# ROOTS OF HATE SSEA ASIA





**NOOR** is a new feminist and movement-driven think and do tank devoted to building the power of gender justice and progressive movements to obstruct far-right agendas and advance our transformative visions. We coordinate a transnational network, expose and oppose the resurgent right, and facilitate strategic alignment and strategy development. We organize to help bring systemic alternatives into reality.

**WEBSITE:** <https://wearenoor.org/>

# **ROOTS OF HATE: FASCIST AND FUNDAMENTALIST NARRATIVES AND ACTORS IN SOUTH ASIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA REGIONS.**

**SEPTEMBER 2024.**

<b>AUTHOR</b>	Subha Wijesiriwardena
<b>LEAD EDITORS</b>	Islam Al Khatib, Maie Panaga Babker
<b>EDITOR</b>	Naureen Shameem
<b>PEER REVIEW</b>	Suri Kempe, Tooba Syed, Sabika Abbas, Amna Nasir
<b>ADDITIONAL RESEARCH</b>	Anonymous contributor
<b>PROOFREADING</b>	Rochelle Jones
<b>DESIGN AND LAYOUT</b>	Aliaa Ali

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We would like to extend our deepest appreciation and gratitude to all the brilliant feminists who helped us shape this mapping with their generous inputs and wise guidance, including Suri Kempe, Tooba Syed, Sabika Abbas, Ana Inés Abelenda, Amna Nasir, and Noor's [Advisory Committee](#) members.

We also want to thank the amazing researchers for their dedication and passion throughout the process, including Nada Wahba and Subha Wijesiriwardena. Noor gratefully acknowledges the generous support of Foundation for a Just Society, Nebula Fund, Open Society Foundations, Oak Foundation, and Luminare. This publication may be redistributed non-commercially in any media, unchanged and in whole, with credit given to the Noor and the author.



Roots Of Hate: Fascist and fundamentalist narratives and actors in South and Southeast Asia regions  
© 2024 by [Noor](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS



# TOWARDS COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE: AN OVERVIEW

**BY : ISLAM AL KHATIB,  
MAIE PANAGA BABKER**

In recent years, we have witnessed and experienced the rise of fascist, anti-democratic discourses and strategies in different contexts across political, social, and human rights – online and offline. We observe several groups and actors actively working to form cooperative alliances. They also spread discourses across borders to attack human rights and progressive values.

In the face of this continuous threat to our rights and autonomy, Noor was founded in 2022 - to contribute to the organizing power of feminist and progressive movements to challenge these growing forces in the Global South and North, and to aspire to better futures for all. Noor's knowledge-building team believes that the power of knowledge, when effectively framed politically, can inform our resistance and help confront fascism and fundamentalism.

We are also dedicated to amplifying nuanced Global South realities and movement contributions in confronting authoritarianism, fascism, and fundamentalism. We see fascism and fundamentalism not as isolated or fringe ideologies but as comprehensive political projects that have their own economic, social, and geopolitical goals, agendas and structures. These projects infiltrate every fragment of society, reengineering the fabric of everyday life in ways that are both subtle and fundamental; they alter how we live, work, and interact, creating an environment where fear, division, surveillance, and control become normalized.

**FASCISMS AND FUNDAMENTALISMS ARE DESIGNED TO PERPETUATE THE ILLUSION THAT THEIR DOMINANCE IS INEVITABLE, THAT THE WORLD HAS ALWAYS BEEN THIS WAY, AND THAT RESISTANCE IS FUTILE.**

Yet, as alarming as these trends are, we also recognize that these actors, tactics and narratives do not emerge in a vacuum. They are connected to existing systems of oppression as they are rooted within the fertile

soil of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and colonialism. Fascisms and fundamentalisms are designed to perpetuate the illusion that their dominance is inevitable, that the world has always been this way, and that resistance is futile.

Recognizing the value of contemporary knowledge in building the antifascist mobilizing and organizing of our dreams, we had to start by understanding the evolution of the narratives, strategies and systems of different fascist movements and regimes in the context of the Global South, especially regions that are not deeply researched and studied in modern literature. To challenge our fixed ideas of deep-rooted and interconnected systems of oppression that contribute to creating a fertile environment accelerating the development of fascist and fundamentalist movements and discourses, we began in 2023 by mapping the Middle East, North Africa (SWANA) and South and Southeast Asia (SSEA Asia) regions.

**THIS MAPPING URGES US TO SCRUTINIZE WHAT MIGHT SEEM LIKE A 'NORMALIZED' REALITY AND RECOGNIZE IT THROUGH THE LENS OF FASCISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM. THIS MAPPING PROJECT IS A STARTING POINT FOR INTERVENTION. AFTER ALL, THE ONLY WAY TO COUNTER A POLITICAL PROJECT IS WITH A POLITICAL PROJECT OF OUR OWN.**

This mapping navigates the delicate balance between historicizing systems of oppression and understanding the emergence of new actors and narratives embedded within these fascist and fundamentalist political projects. At Noor, we understand that these forces are evolving in ways that demand strategic responses. This is what the mapping is here to accomplish. It serves as a compass, guiding us through the ways fascist and fundamentalist forces are tightening their grip, gaining control and access. It unpacks the elements propelling their political project forward and the narratives they wield to hold us back. By examining how these forces operate from the grassroots to the highest levels of power, this mapping urges us to scrutinize what might seem like a 'normalized' reality and recognize it through the lens of fascism and fundamentalism. This mapping project is a starting point for intervention. After all, the only way to counter a political project is with a political project of our own.

**A pressing question arises: why focus on fascist and fundamentalist political projects in these two specific regions now?**

Choosing to focus on SWANA and SSEA Asia is an intentional choice to challenge the invisibilization of fascist and fundamentalist actors that are often overlooked and mischaracterized, obscuring their true infrastructure and connections. While some regions are heavily scrutinized through narrow lenses that may fail to name these actors for what they are, others are significantly neglected in cross-regional spaces, obscuring important links to regional and global counterparts where these forces are gaining traction. It is important to acknowledge that movements, local activists, researchers, and academics have long provided critical analyses, mappings, and resistance to these movements. However, fragmented knowledge production across regions often distorts the recognition of this broader interconnected threat that transcends borders, limiting both understanding and resistance.

In this mapping, we see fascist and fundamentalist narratives act as iterations that harness economic crises, neoliberal policies and social fractures to cement their fascist and fundamentalist power. Militarism, as it manifests across both SWANA and SSE Asia, is not only the overt presence of armed forces but a pervasive ideology that infiltrates every facet of life, intertwining with national identity and economic survival. It transforms the state into a perpetual war machine, justifying its existence through the continuous production of enemies, both within and beyond its borders. This militarized logic and narrative extend into the civilian sphere, where the lines between governance and warfare blur, turning populations into both subjects of control and instruments of violence, all in service of maintaining a homogenized, compliant society. At the same time, in both contexts, we see digital fascism operating as the algorithmic extension of state power and the invisible hand that shapes state narratives, turning data into weapons of social control, and making the machinery of repression both flexible and invasive.

In both contexts, actors use narratives that weaponize misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia as deliberate strategies to enforce a rigid vision of 'purity' rooted in the protection of 'family values'. These ideologies do more than just marginalize; they are systematically deployed to fortify a societal hierarchy where gender and sexual conformity become symbols of national and cultural purity. In both contexts, we see how the calculated emphasis on purity serves to legitimize violence – both state-sanctioned and vigilante – against those who challenge these oppressive norms of gender and sexuality, further entrenching the power of fascist and fundamentalist projects.

These narratives, however, are not just rising. They do not only impact feminist and queer activists and organizers; ultimately, everyone is implicated and thus incriminated at any given moment.

Fascist and fundamentalist political projects in these regions operate as sophisticated machines, not just suppressing dissent but preemptively working to erase the very possibility of rebellion. The spread of ultra-nationalist discourse is part of a broader, interconnected phenomenon where old and new forms of racialization converge, intensifying processes of othering and dehumanization. These systems redefine the boundaries of the nation, dictating who truly belongs and who is to be excluded, reinforcing a hierarchy that justifies violence and discrimination against those seen as unworthy.

**EVERY NUMBER, POLITICAL SYSTEM,  
AND LAW SHOWN IN THESE MAPPINGS  
TELLS A STORY OF OPPRESSION,  
AFFECTING LIVES AND RESTRICTING  
BASIC ACCESS AND FREEDOMS ACROSS  
VARIOUS SEGMENTS OF SOCIETY.**

Everything you read here is not numbers or abstract systems, all of this is about real people – real lives. For most, fascisms and fundamentalisms are not a looming threat but rather the reality that people already endure. These forces, along with their narratives, define the reality for many othered and marginalized communities, movements, and individuals leading the resistance for their present and future. Every number, political system, and law shown in these mappings tells a story of oppression, affecting lives and restricting basic access and freedoms across various segments of society.

This mapping is designed to support movements in their political interventions. It is just the starting point. We hope these reports will be of help to movements that have been developing brave, solid and collective strategies that confront these threats head-on, offering us all a vision for collective liberation.

# **ROOTS OF HATE**

**FASCIST AND  
FUNDAMENTALIST  
NARRATIVES AND ACTORS  
IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST  
ASIA REGIONS**





# INTRODUCTION

“Today we watch with horror as wave upon wave of right-wing fanaticism, fundamentalism, bigotry and misogyny engulf South Asia, and chauvinist forces make deep inroads into politics.”<sup>1</sup>

It is sobering, though not surprising, to note that these words were written by South Asian feminists in 1995. They observed political and social phenomena very similar to what we see today across Asia and indeed the world, with anti-democratic forces now capturing mainstream political power.

They noted, then, that “...fundamentalist agendas are increasingly manipulating religious as well as ethnic and nationalist loyalties as a source of cultural legitimacy”,<sup>2</sup> marking the demolition of the historic mosque, Babri Masjid, in India in 1992 – with violence and mass killing spilling out across the region – as a catalytic, historic event that transformed South Asian society and politics.

Babri Masjid was demolished brick-by-brick by well-organized extremist, far-right Hindu supremacist (or “Hindutva<sup>3</sup>” - a political ideology characterized by the strategic deployment of Hinduism in the service of nationalism) groups, who used their bare hands, iron rods, hammers, and spades.<sup>4</sup> These groups were organized by Indian far-right political groups such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its other affiliates, such as the Vishva Hindu Parishadh.

In the communal violence that followed, around 2000 people were killed in India (mostly Muslim).<sup>5</sup> Across South Asia, religious extremist groups and their supporters carried out violence, using the events of December 6th, 1992 (the day of the demolition) in the north of India to catalyze their own communal violence: in Pakistan and Bangladesh, both Muslim-

---

1 Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis, “Introduction: Communalising Women’s Sexuality in South Asia,” in *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women’s Sexuality in South Asia*, ed. Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996).

2 Ibid.

3 Arvind Sharma, “On the Difference Between Hinduism and Hindutva,” Association for Asian Studies, 2020, <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/aaa/archives/on-the-difference-between-hinduism-and-hindutva/>

4 Krishna Pokharel and Paul Beckett, “Ayodhya, the Battle for India’s Soul: The Complete Story,” Wall Street Journal, 2012, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-IRTB-17391>

5 Al Jazeera, “Babri Mosque to Ram Temple: A Timeline from 1528 to 2024,” Al Jazeera, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/22/babri-mosque-to-ram-temple-a-timeline-from-1528-to-2024>

majority countries, over 30 Hindu temples were attacked,<sup>6</sup> Hindu homes and temples were attacked, and women raped, leaving around 10 people dead, respectively.<sup>7</sup>

**IT IS TRULY POIGNANT TO NOTE THAT AT THE TIME OF WRITING THIS REPORT, THE SO-CALLED “RAM MANDIR”, OR THE NEW HINDU TEMPLE AT AYODHYA, WAS INAUGURATED IN JANUARY 2024 ON THE GROUNDS WHERE BABRI MASJID ONCE STOOD. “RAM MANDIR” HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS “THE TOMBSTONE” OF SOUTH ASIAN SECULARISM.**

It is truly poignant to note that at the time of writing this report, the so-called “Ram Mandir”, or the new Hindu temple at Ayodhya, was inaugurated in January 2024 on the grounds where Babri Masjid once stood. “Ram Mandir” has been described as “the tombstone” of South Asian secularism.<sup>8</sup>

This paper is an overview of fascist and fundamentalist trends and actors in South Asia and Southeast Asia that are undermining human rights and social and gender justice, leading to the restriction of individual and collective freedoms and causing the contraction of safe space for people-led organizing.

## METHODOLOGY

Secondary sources were used with the hope that this overview acts as a springboard for further in-depth study of the regions. This included reviews of journalistic reports, human rights documentation, and regional and local activists and analysts’ perspectives. The paper’s substance mainly focuses on events and actors that are significant in a current sense, or at most, spanning the last 5 years, with reference to history

6 Reuters, “Pakistanis Attack 30 Hindu Temples,” New York Times Archives, 1992, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181225031309/https://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/08/world/pakistanis-attack-30-hindu-temples.html>

7 Minorities at Risk Project, “Chronology for Hindus in Bangladesh,” Minorities at Risk Project, University of Maryland, 2004, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/469f3869c.html>

8 Vats, V. (2024). “The Ram Mandir is the tombstone for India as South Asia’s great secular exception”. Himal Magazine.

where necessary.

The subregions examined here are highly complex, given they are home to numerous ethnically and linguistically diverse groups who, among them, have very diverse social, religious, and cultural practices. Although findings from South and Southeast Asia are presented together here for pragmatic reasons, this does not imply viewing them as one geographical or political entity but rather highlights underlying shared history and contemporary interlinkages. Both subregions are distinct, with considerable complexity within each.

While some similarities emerged in terms of trends and actors, which we have attempted to highlight, it is important to read the paper as an exploration of two distinct subregions using merely the same question: **what are some key trends, and who are significant actors when it comes to fascisms and fundamentalisms seen in these contexts?**

Both subregions have fraught political, social, and cultural histories and landscapes. Experiences of colonialism, for example, varied significantly across the countries examined. However, it is clear to see that the region as a whole was significantly impacted and shaped by many decades (in some cases, centuries) of European colonialism and imperialism, and many colonial legacies persist today.

**WE SELECTED SPECIFIC COUNTRIES FROM BOTH SUBREGIONS TO HIGHLIGHT A DIVERSE RANGE OF NATIONAL CONTEXTS, WHILE UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS NOT EXHAUSTIVE OR INCLUSIVE OF ALL THE SPECIFICITIES AND PARTICULARITIES OF BOTH SUBREGIONS.**

We selected specific countries from both subregions to highlight a diverse range of national contexts, while understanding that it is not exhaustive or inclusive of all the specificities and particularities of both subregions. These countries were selected by considering factors such as their economic standing within the global free-market paradigm (e.g., countries such as Thailand and Malaysia are ‘upper-middle-income’ countries, others such as Sri Lanka and India are ‘lower-middle-income’ countries, and countries such as Afghanistan are ‘low-income’, according

to the World Bank<sup>9</sup>).

Other dimensions of diversity that were prioritized when selecting countries for this overview included populations made up of diverse socio-cultural and religious groups. We also wanted to present national contexts where there are a range of governance models, ranging from 'constitutional monarchies' to 'democratic republics', to unpack differences in the interplay between religion and state.

Finally, we chose to look at countries they believe are ripe for investigation in terms of trends in fascisms and fundamentalisms, and that we believe deserve our urgent attention. This does not mean that other contexts in the region are not experiencing crises. The selection was made based on relevance and timeliness in activist and human rights reports and scholarly work.

Therefore, for this paper these countries were selected:

**South Asia:** Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

**Southeast Asia:** Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, with some reflections regarding Myanmar and Thailand.

---

9 World Bank Country and Lending Groups, 2024. <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups>



# DEFINING FASCISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM

In the following literature review, we present diverse feminist interpretations and analyses of fascism and fundamentalism from various parts of the global South – with a focus on Asia.

In this paper, we use the terms “fundamentalisms” and “fascisms” as plural terms because there are myriad manifestations of these concepts. While there are some shared characteristics that might be woven together, there is a need to show the distinct strategies and types of organizing that fundamentalist and fascist forces deploy in various contexts.

Southern feminists mounted some of the most important critiques of European and Western colonialism, which had profoundly shaped their regions, many becoming key figures in the world of ‘post-colonial’ criticism. However, they also had critiques of the anti-colonial nationalist projects from which many of their nation-states had been born. These nationalist movements were often presented as ‘revivalist’ projects centered around asserting hegemonic (or dominant) cultural identities and practices in defiance of Western colonialism, while these movements were themselves often exclusionary and often patriarchal.

These nuanced strands of criticism often form the backbone of Asian feminist thinking on fundamentalisms and fascisms.

Feminist organizing in Asia has given way to numerous ways of understanding ‘fundamentalism’; for example, the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) defines “fundamentalist” movements as distinct from others “in that the power they seek is absolute and in opposition to plurality, difference, debate or dissent.”<sup>10</sup>

Another APWLD report notes, “Fundamentalisms...refers to monolithic approaches adopted by movements in their quest for hegemony and political power, particularly through deployment of cultural, religious, ethnic, and nationalist discourses.”<sup>11</sup>

---

10 Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), “Our analysis on Patriarchy and G-F-M” <https://apwld.org/about-us/our-analysis-on-patriarchy-and-globalisation-fundamentalism-and-militarism/>

11 Mehra, M. (2008). FUNDAMENTALISMS IN ASIA-PACIFIC: TRENDS, IMPACT, CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES ASSERTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). [https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/fundamentalisms\\_final\\_pdf.pdf](https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/fundamentalisms_final_pdf.pdf)

**“ALTHOUGH SEEMINGLY REVIVALIST, CULTURAL IDENTITY PROJECTS THAT FUEL FUNDAMENTALISM ARE NOT AN ASSERTION OF TRADITION, RELIGION, OR CULTURE. RATHER, THESE ARE POLITICAL PROJECTS THAT USE ALL AVAILABLE MODERN RESOURCES (SUCH AS LAW AND MEDIA) WHILE USING THE LANGUAGE OF CULTURE OR RELIGION TO SERVE ITS HEGEMONIC GOALS.”**

This same report also remains critical of allegedly ‘revivalist’ projects, saying, “Although seemingly revivalist, cultural identity projects that fuel fundamentalism are not an assertion of tradition, religion, or culture. Rather, these are political projects that use all available modern resources (such as law and media) while using the language of culture or religion to serve its hegemonic goals.”<sup>12</sup>

Feminists in the region have also analyzed the specific impact of fundamentalisms on the bodily autonomy, sexuality, and reproductive rights of women, girls and gender-diverse persons. In the 1990s, Asian feminists understood “fundamentalism” to be an ideology that “naturalises and sacralises the family and sexuality and secludes women from the public sphere”.<sup>13</sup>

As for ‘fascism’, feminists have continuously tried to confront, in their work and scholarship, what ‘fascism’ is made of and how it impacts our movements.

Researcher Laila Kadiwal, who studied anti-fascist student movements led by Indian Muslim women, writes that many scholars of fascism have documented its shared central tenets. She writes, of these tenets, “there is a standard technique by which democracy is undermined and xenophobic discourse is advanced, in which hatred, apathy, and violence become normalised. It dehumanises particular social groups, leading to their brutal treatment, from the restraining of freedom and mass incarceration, to eviction. In extreme situations, it can lead to genocide.”<sup>14</sup> She further notes that fascism in the context of India “privileges the politics based on religious and caste-based supremacy over the constitutional ethics of equality and justice.”<sup>15</sup>

12 Ibid.

13 Jayawardena, K. & De Alwis, M. (1996). Op. cit.

14 Kadiwal L. “Feminists against Fascism: The Indian Female Muslim Protest in India”. Education Sciences. 2021; 11(12):793. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11120793>

15 Ibid.

From the network Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), we find an Algerian feminist describing the “ingredients” of fascism in her context while drawing parallels to Nazi Germany fascism:

In Hassi Messaoud, the assailants went to war against women shouting ‘Allah Houwa Akbar’ (God is the highest); they were also shouting slogans against the state (‘down with the hogra’ - ‘hogra’ being the term the Algerians have been using for decades to stigmatise the contempt and arrogance of governments vis a vis the people); they were also shouting against the women ‘foreigners’ who came to ‘steal the jobs’ of the local population. The blessing of God and religion (‘Gott mit uns’ i.e. ‘God is with us’ was engraved on the buckle of the SS belts), to the identification and demonisation of a ‘subhuman’ category of citizens that can and should be physically eliminated (the ‘untermensch’)... to the scapegoat ‘foreigner’ who is held responsible for social disarray. Fascism has always built on the legitimate protest of the dispossessed classes, backed by the middle class who fear that their share of the cake is not big enough or could be threatened. Fascism manipulates and subverts it and finally points at a scapegoat fragment of the population as THE cause of social disarray.<sup>16</sup>

Feminists have long scrutinized the patriarchal and gendered dimensions embedded in fascist and fundamentalist ideologies, particularly in how power and authority are framed as inherently masculine domains. Florencia Goldman notes that the “strong man” narrative is a recurrent tactic in these movements, exemplified by Bolsonaro, Modi and Duterte, who project a primitive, hyper-masculine image of dominance.<sup>17</sup>

**THESE LEADERS USE MISOGYNY AS A TOOL TO ASSERT THEIR DOMINANCE AND MARGINALIZE THOSE WHO CHALLENGE THEIR AUTHORITY.**

Modi and Duterte illustrate this phenomenon vividly. Modi’s derogatory remarks about female politicians and his patronizing comments about women in general serve to reinforce traditional gender roles, where

<sup>16</sup> Mahl. (pseudonym) (2000). “Algeria: Ordinary Fascism, Fundamentalism and Femicide”. P. 137, in Dossier 23/24. Published by Women Living Under Muslim Laws. <https://www.wluml.org/wp-content/uploads/2003/07/D23-24.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Goldsman, Florencia. (2021) A MINE-RIDDEN INTERNET AND SIX RULES FOR UNDERSTANDING ANTI-RIGHTS NARRATIVES. GenderIt, 23 September. <https://genderit.org/feminist-talk/mine-ridden-internet-and-six-rules-understanding-anti-rights-narratives>

women are only valued within patriarchal norms.<sup>18</sup> Duterte, with his crude and sexist remarks toward women in politics and the media, show how these leaders use misogyny as a tool to assert their dominance and marginalize those who challenge their authority. Both leaders use their public platforms to demean and undermine women, thereby legitimizing broader societal violence against what is perceived as the ‘feminine’ or feminist.<sup>19</sup>

In this context, misogyny is not only personal but is a strategic element of these leaders’ broader fascist agendas. The ‘feminine’ is weaponized – praised when it conforms to sexist expectations and vilified when it threatens the status quo.

---

18 Kaul, N. (2021). The misogyny of authoritarians in contemporary democracies. *International Studies Review*, 23(4), 1619–1638. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viab037>

19 Ibid.





# **SECTION 1:** **AUTHORITARIANISM, CRISIS AND DEBT: THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CRISES IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Neoliberal policies - often driven by corporate interests - demand a strong state to enforce market priorities while eroding democratic values. This is where authoritarianism and corporate dominance intersect. Authoritarian regimes manipulate legal systems to shield corporations from accountability and protect their profits, consolidating power and entrenching inequalities.

International systems that control resource-flow entrench unequal power systems, skewing decision-making making heavily to global North governments and private financial institutions, who work in collusion.

This leads to the suppression of dissent and the dismantling of civil liberties. In such contexts, debt often becomes a weapon in this arsenal, shackling nations to a system that prioritizes profit over people, control over democracy, and authoritarianism over freedom.<sup>20</sup>

**BY DROWNING GLOBAL SOUTH COUNTRIES IN DEBT, THESE POWERS FORCE GOVERNMENTS TO ADOPT HARSH AUSTERITY MEASURES, STRIPPING AWAY PUBLIC SERVICES AND SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS. THIS, IN TURN, DEEPENS INEQUALITIES AND CONSOLIDATES CORPORATE INFLUENCE, AS PUBLIC RESOURCES ARE PRIVATIZED AND CITIZENS ARE LEFT MORE VULNERABLE.**

By drowning Global South countries in debt, these powers force governments to adopt harsh austerity measures, stripping away public services and social protection systems. This, in turn, deepens inequalities and consolidates corporate influence, as public resources are privatized

20 Gallo, E. (2021). "Three varieties of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Rule by the experts, the people, the leader." *Labor History*, 26(5), 1619–1636. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10245294211038425>

and citizens are left more vulnerable. In this way, debt becomes a tool of coercion, intertwining corporate dominance with authoritarian rule, stripping away the very foundations of democracy and freedom.<sup>21</sup>

Feminists have also documented the impact of global inequality on communities in South and Southeast Asia – due to a system that relies on resource and labour extractivism in these parts of the world. For example, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, and Apple have market capitalisations ranging from USD 900 billion to USD 2 trillion.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, developing countries such as Nepal, Mongolia, and Cambodia for example, have gross domestic products (GDPs) of less than USD 40 billion”.<sup>23</sup> These examples show the deep inequality of our world, where a handful of private corporations that while corporations rely on underpaid labour in the Global South, many countries from where the labour is extracted do not enjoy the . Instead, these profits are monopolized this has had a serious impact on employment and labor politics in Southeast Asia. Feminist economists from the region note, “Women find jobs in precarious segments of the global value chains of manufacturing products such as electronics and garments where they experience flexible employment schemes with little to no health and social benefits, long hours of work, low wages, sexual harassment and discrimination”.<sup>24</sup>

Feminists in South Asia have expressed alarm at the severe impact of the economic crisis and government responses on the lives of marginalized communities, where universal welfare measures are being stripped in favor of “verifying measures” that require government selection of persons to receive welfare benefits. For example, feminists in Sri Lanka have warned against the lengthy, invasive and intimidating “verification” process that poor communities have had to undergo in seeking benefits, as it has led to many eligible individuals being excluded due to logistical issues and stringent criteria that do not accurately reflect the complex realities of poverty in Sri Lanka. The “targeted discourse” of social welfare required by the IMF and World Bank has perpetuated anti-poor discourse surrounding these measures.<sup>25</sup>

---

21 Gallo, 2021. Prev cit. (cit 21).

22 The Tech Giants, Compared to the World's Biggest Economies.” Visual Capitalist. Published July 7 2021. [https://www.visualcapitalist.com/the-tech-giants-worth-compared-economies-countries/#google\\_vignette](https://www.visualcapitalist.com/the-tech-giants-worth-compared-economies-countries/#google_vignette)

23 GDP by Country.” Worldometer. Accessed September, 2024. <https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/gdp-by-country/>

24 Ibid.

25 Feminist Collective for Economic Justice. (2023). World Bank and IMF's targeted discourse against working poor of Sri Lanka. Daily FT. <https://www.ft.lk/opinion/World-Bank-and-IMF-s-targeted-discourse-against-working-poor-of-Sri-Lanka/14-748032>

This is not dissimilar to the “Aadhar” biometric scheme in India, which was widely decried by activists and rights defenders as carrying huge risks for the marginalized<sup>26</sup> and the poor<sup>27</sup>. Aadhar is a unique identification system based on biometric and demographic data that was integrated with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The government mandated that wages under MGNREGA would only be paid to workers whose bank accounts are linked with their Aadhaar numbers. Warnings about mass surveillance<sup>28</sup> followed the introduction of Aadhar, but it has not slowed down the government’s policy. The Aadhar-based system facilitates racial profiling by disproportionately impacting communities that struggle with documentation, leading to their exclusion from welfare benefits.

## DEBTS AND GEOPOLITICAL MANEUVERING

Across South Asia, societies are falling into severe states of economic crisis, often combined with major political upheaval. In Pakistan,<sup>29</sup> Bangladesh<sup>30</sup> and Sri Lanka,<sup>31</sup> varying states of economic collapse have led to International Monetary Fund interventions, starting in about 2019.

Much has been written about exploitation, traps, and violence of debt deals. However, debt arrangements are not only tools of economic exploitation, they are strategic instruments that allow states to maneuver within the global power dynamics.<sup>32</sup> Several countries in the region find themselves in debt arrangements with China. Experts have pointed out that “China has adopted ‘debt trap diplomacy’ as part of an economic expansionist approach to expand its influence around the world in

26 rnarawala, T. (2024). How Aadhaar is strangling MGNREGA in a Maharashtra district and pushing workers to migrate. Scroll.in. <https://scroll.in/article/1062358/how-aadhaar-is-strangling-mgnrega-in-a-maharashtra-district-and-pushing-workers-to-migrate>

27 Yadav, A. (2016). Six months after Rajasthan introduced it, only 45% beneficiaries used Aadhaar at ration shops. Scroll.in. <https://scroll.in/article/809661/six-months-after-rajasthan-introduced-aadhaar-at-ration-shops-only-45-beneficiaries-accessed-food>

28 Basu, S. & Malik, R. (2017). India’s dodgy mass surveillance project should concern us all. Wired. <https://www.wired.com/story/india-aadhaar-biometrics-privacy/#:~:text=India%20is%20undertaking%20the%20world's,project%20will%20have%20catastrophic%20consequences>

29 Ahmed, M. (2024). Pakistan and IMF reach preliminary deal to release \$1.1 billion from bailout fund, IMF says. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-imf-preliminary-deal-bailout-fund-2160022481d933190a301582eb19f12a>

30 Ruma, P. (2023). IMF board clears first review of Bangladesh’s \$4.7 billion bailout. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/imf-board-clears-first-review-bangladeshs-47-billion-bailout-2023-12-12/>

31 Francis, K. (2023). Sri Lanka will get the second tranche of a much-needed bailout package from the IMF. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/sri-lanka-imf-economic-crisis-bailout-tranche-4ef85320ad1b900fb3e4bd21014bd3aa>

32 Sial, F., Jafri, J., & Khaliq, A. (2023). Pakistan, China and the structures of debt distress: Resisting Bretton Woods. Development and Change. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12798>

general and in South Asia in particular.”<sup>33</sup>

These debts often focus on and leverage large infrastructural loans, for example, the Deep-Sea Port and Industrial Park, which was agreed upon in 2015 as a \$10 billion investment, is part of China’s effort to secure a strategic foothold in Myanmar and improve access to the Indian Ocean.<sup>34</sup> These bilateral development agreements have often been made without consultations through democratic processes and often against the advice of local experts on social and environmental risk assessments.

**DECADES OF NEOLIBERAL POLICIES AND IMF STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENTS HAVE DRIVEN SOUTH ASIA INTO SEVERE ECONOMIC INSTABILITY, REVEALING THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS OF RECEDING WELFARE SYSTEMS, RISING IMPORT BILLS, AND UNPRODUCTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS RELIANT ON SPECULATIVE CAPITAL.**

Decades of neoliberal policies and IMF structural adjustments have driven South Asia into severe economic instability, revealing the devastating effects of receding welfare systems, rising import bills, and unproductive infrastructure investments reliant on speculative capital. The crisis, often framed within geopolitical competition, masks the deeper issues of a global economy increasingly dominated by authoritarian governance.<sup>35</sup> IMF-imposed austerity measures, such as those in Sri Lanka, exacerbate dependency on foreign loans, undermining social safety nets and pushing economies towards financial collapse. This cycle of dependency and austerity is central to the authoritarian debt trap.<sup>36</sup>

## **EROSION OF DEMOCRACY**

In addition to geopolitical interventionism, in many contexts across South Asia, the prevailing circumstances of economic collapse can be seen as the concrete result of political choices made by leading fascist and fundamentalist political actors over the last few years.

33 Sanyal, A. (2023). China’s Debt-Trap Diplomacy in South Asia. International Centre for Peace Studies. <https://www.icpsnet.org/comments/China-Debt-Trap-Diplomacy-in-South-Asia>

34 Ibid.

35 Gunawardena, D., Kadirgamar, N. & Kadirgamar, A. (2023). The IMF Trap. Phenomenal World. <https://www.phenomenalworld.org/analysis/the-imf-trap/>

36 Ibid.

For example, in Sri Lanka, in an unprecedented symbolic ruling, the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka found the Rajapakse brothers – the leadership of the right-wing, dictatorial ruling party for the last several years – to be responsible for Sri Lanka’s economic crisis.<sup>37</sup> This ruling provides unique jurisprudence that connects political corruption and authoritarianism to economic crises.

In Pakistan, the dominance of the military plays a critical anti-democratic role, intertwining political failure with economic instability. The military, wielding immense governmental and economic power, has historically overshadowed civil governance. Military expenditures consume a significant portion of the national budget – around 19 percent as of February 2023 – while the tax system remains severely underdeveloped.<sup>38</sup> This imbalance has intensified socio-political tensions, as the military, despite its vast influence, employs only a small fraction of the labor force, further entrenching authoritarian control over the state.<sup>39</sup>

**IN THE REGION, THE CONTEXTS OF ECONOMIC COLLAPSE AND POLITICAL UPHEAVAL ARE CLOSELY CONNECTED, ENTRENCHING AUTHORITARIAN POWER THROUGH VIOLENCE AND BY SUBVERTING DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES SUCH AS ELECTIONS.**

In the region, the contexts of economic collapse and political upheaval are closely connected, entrenching authoritarian power through violence and by subverting democratic processes such as elections. In Pakistan, the 2024 election was marked by significant military involvement and allegations of widespread rigging, while Imran Khan – former Prime Minister and leader of the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) party – has been incarcerated, with a military-favored candidate becoming Prime Minister. His removal, prompted by the United States (US) State Department pressure due to his stance on the Ukraine conflict, led to a military-favored candidate’s rise to power.<sup>40</sup> This shift was accompanied by violent crackdowns on PTI supporters and the passage of draconian

37 Al Jazeera. (2023). Sri Lanka top court finds Rajapaksa brothers guilty of economic crisis. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/15/sri-lanka-top-court-finds-rajapaksa-brothers-guilty-of-economic-crisis>

38 Saleemi. S. (2023). Why Pakistan’s economy is in deep crisis. D+C. <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/climate-change-and-other-global-developments-are-severely-exacerbating-pakistans-home-made>

39 FairPlanet. (n.d.). For its economy’s sake, Pakistan must cut military spending. Retrieved from <https://www.fairplanet.org/editors-pick/for-its-economys-sake-pakistan-must-cut-military-spending/>

40 The Intercept. (2023). Imran Khan, Pakistan, and the U.S. State Department: Secret cypher reveals push to remove prime minister over neutrality on Ukraine. 9 August. <https://theintercept.com/2023/08/09/imran-khan-pakistan-cypher-ukraine-russia/>

laws targeting dissidents and whistleblowers, further entrenching military dominance in both governance and economic control,<sup>41</sup> exacerbating the country's crisis.

In Sri Lanka, the current President Ranil Wickremesinghe – an ally of the dictatorial Rajapakse family, who have held power in Sri Lanka in some form or another since 2005 – has never yet been formally elected by the people, and has characterized his tenure with frequent attacks on protesters and critics, where law enforcement and the military have been deployed and have used tear gas, water cannons and live ammunition.<sup>42</sup>

**IN BANGLADESH, THE RECENT WAVE OF PROTESTS THAT TOPPLED SHEIKHA HASINA'S GOVERNMENT, WERE MET WITH SEVERE REPRESSION, REFLECTING A BROADER PATTERN OF AUTHORITARIANISM ENTRENCHED IN THE STATE'S RESPONSE TO DISSENT.**

In Bangladesh, the recent wave of protests that toppled Sheikh Hasina's government, were met with severe repression, reflecting a broader pattern of authoritarianism entrenched in the state's response to dissent. The Bangla-Blockade movement, sparked by demands for quota reforms, saw students and activists facing brutal crackdowns by both the police and members of the Bangladesh Chatra League (BCL), a pro-government militia. The police's unlawful use of force and the BCL's violent assaults have been documented extensively, with evidence showing that authorities systematically targeted peaceful protesters, resulting in multiple deaths and countless injuries.<sup>43</sup>

In Afghanistan, where over 90 percent of the population is food insecure at the present, the cut-off of international donor assistance and total Taliban takeover have plunged communities into both democratic and economic decline.<sup>44</sup> Human Rights Watch reports that "Taliban security forces throughout the year carried out arbitrary detentions, torture, and summary executions of former security officers and perceived enemies."<sup>45</sup>

41 Bano, S. (2024). Democracy is struggling in South Asia. The Interpreter. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/democracy-struggling-south-asia>

42 Amnesty International. (2022). Sri Lanka: Authorities' crackdown on protest rights must end. Amnesty International <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/sri-lanka-authorities-crackdown-on-protest-rights-must-end/>

43 Amnesty International. (2024, July). Bangladesh: Witness testimony, video, and photographic analysis confirm police used unlawful force against protesters. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/bangladesh-witness-testimony-video-and-photographic-analysis-confirm-police-used-unlawful-force-against-protesters/>

44 Human Rights Watch. (2023). World Report 2023: Afghanistan. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/afghanistan>

45 Ibid.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has reported: “Afghanistan’s economy has ‘basically collapsed.’<sup>46</sup>

Warnings have been raised about the severe consequences of prolonged militarization, warfare, and US military intervention in Afghanistan. The cumulative effect of decades of violence –both physical and economic – has significantly deepened social and economic inequalities. The return of the Taliban, the disintegration of the Afghan government, and the collapse of the economy are seen as the inevitable outcome of these long-standing issues, rather than isolated events.<sup>47</sup>

**AN ANALYSIS OF NEOLIBERAL ECONOMIC AND MILITARY INTERVENTIONS REVEALS THAT OVER 16 COUNTRIES CONTINUED TO SEND WEAPONS TO AFGHANISTAN FOR NEARLY TWO DECADES, AND 74 PERCENT OF THESE ARMS WERE SUPPLIED BY THE US.**

An analysis of neoliberal economic and military interventions reveals that over 16 countries continued to send weapons to Afghanistan for nearly two decades, and 74 percent of these arms were supplied by the US. This has led to “corruption, political instability and widening of social and economic gaps,”<sup>48</sup> and that “instead of prosperity, the neoliberal approach led to nurturing a protracted conflict within Afghan society, feeding off food insecurity, poverty, civilian casualties and harms, ultimately enabling the Taliban to take over control of the country.”<sup>49</sup>

In Southeast Asia, there is a trend of authoritarianism supplanting democratic processes, undermining the region’s political stability and the rule of law.<sup>50</sup>

In Cambodia, the 2023 elections saw the banning of the opposition, with Prime Minister Hun Sen consolidating power after years of gradually eliminating democratic competition. The major opposition parties have been systematically dissolved, with leaders either under house arrest or

46 United Nations. (2024). Afghanistan’s economy has ‘basically collapsed’, United Nations Development Programme. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147387#:~:text=Since%20the%20takeover%20by%20the%20population%20has%20access%20to%20electricity>

47 Yari, N. & Porobic, N. (2024). Reasoning with the Patriarchy: the Political, Economic, and Social Fallout From Talking with the Taliban. Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. <https://www.wilpf.org/reasoning-with-the-patriarchy-the-political-economic-and-social-fallout-from-talking-with-the-taliban/>

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Kurlantzick, J. (2023). The State of Democracy in Southeast Asia Is Bad and Getting Worse. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/article/state-democracy-southeast-asia-bad-and-getting-worse>

in exile.<sup>51</sup>

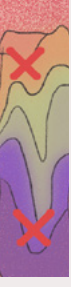
Similarly, in Thailand, the military-monarchy alliance has grown stronger, preventing the progressive party's leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, from becoming Prime Minister despite his party's electoral victory. Pita's resignation as party leader reflects the growing influence of conservative forces, while activists and protesters face increasing repression, including abductions and arrests.<sup>52</sup>

---

51 Council on Foreign Relations. (2023). Cambodia's elections: No surprises, uncertain leadership future. Council on Foreign Relations, 21 July. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/cambodias-elections-no-surprises-uncertain-leadership-future>

52 Al Jazeera. (2023). Thai court to decide on case seeking Pita's disqualification. Al Jazeera, 12 July. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/12/thai-court-to-decide-on-case-seeking-pitas-disqualification>





## **SECTION 2:**

# **ATTACKS ON GENDER AND SEXUALITY AS A STRATEGY**

**THE ASSAULT ON GENDER AND SEXUALITY IS A DELIBERATE STRATEGY BY FASCIST AND FUNDAMENTALIST MOVEMENTS TO REINFORCE PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES THAT NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM RELIES UPON TO SUSTAIN ITSELF.**

In the rising violence of fascist and fundamentalist forces across South Asia and Southeast Asia, attacks on feminists, women, girls, and gender-expansive communities are not incidental, they are central to the project of shoring up neoliberalism in the face of a deepening crisis of political legitimacy. The assault on gender and sexuality is a deliberate strategy by fascist and fundamentalist movements to reinforce patriarchal structures that neoliberal capitalism relies upon to sustain itself. Neoliberalism's alliance with far-right ideologies hinges on controlling bodies, labor, and social benefits, ensuring that the precariousness inflicted by capitalist exploitation remains unquestioned. Feminist and LGBTQI+ movements, by challenging these very structures – whether through advocating for bodily autonomy, contesting the unpaid labor economy, or resisting anti-immigrant legislation – strike at the heart of such projects.<sup>53</sup>

Attacks on rights related to gender and sexuality are not peripheral but are core strategies of fascist and fundamentalist movements aimed at entrenching their agendas. By targeting the autonomy of women, feminists, and LGBTQI+ communities, these forces seek to reassert patriarchal control, which serves as a foundation for their broader political and economic aims.<sup>54</sup>

The reality of heightened vulnerability and precarity faced by women and girls is seen across South and Southeast Asia. Pakistani feminist Shahnaz Rouse noted, in her critique of the specific ways in which the

53 International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies (IRGAC). (2023) <https://www.transcript-verlag.de/media/pdf/29/16/87/oa9783839462096h6y8fkpv6eGmu.pdf>

54 Kaul, N. (2021). The misogyny of authoritarians in contemporary democracies. *International Studies Review*, 23(4), 1619–1645. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viab028>

burden of the construction of national identity fell on women and other marginalized classes, “In this drive for hegemony, one can discern a whole range of disparate and mutually contradictory ideologies.”<sup>55</sup>

**GIRLS' EDUCATION HAS RECEIVED NUMEROUS CHALLENGES FROM FASCIST AND FUNDAMENTALIST REGIMES ACROSS THE REGION: FOR EXAMPLE, FOLLOWING THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER, EDUCATION FOR GIRLS IN AFGHANISTAN HAS BEEN PROHIBITED SINCE 2021.**

Girls' education has received numerous challenges from fascist and fundamentalist regimes across the region: for example, following the Taliban takeover, education for girls in Afghanistan has been prohibited since 2021.<sup>56</sup>

The debate about hijabs in schools,<sup>57</sup> from India to Sri Lanka, raised concerns about attempts to block Muslim girls and women from receiving an education. The ‘hijab controversy’ spread across India when, in February 2022, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in the state of Karnataka issued a ban on the hijab in schools and colleges (the ban now stands reversed, as of December 2023, after the BJP lost local elections). Hindutva groups used this as an entry point to push for a wider ban on the hijab following what was described as a “success” in Karnataka.<sup>58</sup>

It is suggested that the Hindutva state's actions were a direct response to the leadership and political agency that Muslim women and girls demonstrated across India during the powerful pro-democracy and anti-fascist protests that occurred before the pandemic. The state intentionally framed Muslim women and girls as facing an “impossible choice” between their right to education and their right to practice their religion.<sup>59</sup> The cumulative impact of recent incursions against Muslim women in India amounts to a relentless and intense assault on their

55 Rouse, S. (1996). Gender, Nationalism(s) and Cultural Identity: Discursive strategies and exclusivities. In K. Jayawardena & M. de Alwis (Ed.) *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

56 United Nations. (2024). Op. cit.

57 Rahman, A. F. (2024). Karnataka hijab ban row raises a question: Why is education not the priority for Muslim girls? *Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/karnataka-hijab-ban-row-raises-a-question-why-is-education-not-the-priority-for-muslim-girls-9114392/>

58 Al Jazeera. (2022). India's Hindu groups want wider ban on hijab after court verdict. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/16/india-hindu-groups-muslims-wider-ban-hijab-karnataka-court-verdict>

59 Hussain, S. (2024). “Feminist counter-authoritarian political agency: Muslim girls re-generating politics in India”. *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102850>

rights, effectively terrorizing them into a state of fear and hypervigilance. These assaults, though not exclusively aimed at Muslim women, have profoundly affected their voice and mobility. Every aspect of their lives – what they wear, who they love, what they eat, and the spaces they occupy – has come under intense scrutiny from the state, community, and even their own families, reversing hard-won rights and freedoms.<sup>60</sup>

**IN NORTHEAST SRI LANKA, WHERE HINDU SUPREMACY HAS SYSTEMATICALLY MARGINALIZED MUSLIMS, IN 2022 A SCHOOL TEACHER IN THE TOWN OF TRINCOMALEE WAS BARRED FROM ENTERING HER WORKPLACE (HINDU LADIES' COLLEGE) ON THE GROUNDS THAT SHE WORE A HIJAB.**

In Northeast Sri Lanka, where Hindu supremacy has systematically marginalized Muslims, in 2022 a school teacher in the town of Trincomalee was barred from entering her workplace (Hindu Ladies' College) on the grounds that she wore a hijab.<sup>61</sup> Local analysts pointed to the role of Hindutva fascist elements in the north and northeast of Sri Lanka.<sup>62</sup>

Additionally, a near-total burqa-ban – on the grounds of “national security” – was legalized by the Cabinet in Sri Lanka in 2021 in the wake of the April 2019 Easter bombings, where suicide bombers killed at least 253 people and injured some 500 at churches and top-end hotels across Sri Lanka.<sup>63</sup> The ban creates an atmosphere of uncertainty for some Muslim women in Sri Lanka, especially restricting their access to public space.<sup>64</sup> Before the 2019 bombings, there were already stereotypes surrounding the burqa and other Muslim symbolic clothing. Feminist and peace activist Shreen Abdul Saroor has pointed to incidents of Buddhist monks derogatorily referring to women wearing abayas as ‘goni bila’, a term meant to frighten children, painting Muslim women as those

60 Khan, Sabina Yasmin. “Virulent Hindutva, Vigilante State: Situating Backlash and its Implications for Women’s Rights in India.” IDS Bulletin, vol. 55, no. 1, 2024. [https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/articles/journal\\_contribution/Virulent\\_Hindutva\\_Vigilante\\_State\\_Situating\\_Backlash\\_and\\_its\\_Implications\\_for\\_Women\\_s\\_Rights\\_in\\_India/26433808?file=48183589](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/articles/journal_contribution/Virulent_Hindutva_Vigilante_State_Situating_Backlash_and_its_Implications_for_Women_s_Rights_in_India/26433808?file=48183589)

61 Farook, L. (2022). Sri Lanka: Has Hindutva Racism Entered Trinco Hindu College?. Sri Lanka Guardian. <http://www.srilankaguardian.org/2022/02/sri-lanka-has-hindutva-racism-entered.html>

62 Ibid.

63 BBC. (2019). Sri Lanka attacks: What we know about the Easter bombings. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48010697>

64 Al Jazeera. (2021). Sri Lanka cabinet approves proposed ban on burqas in public. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/28/sri-lanka-cabinet-approves-proposed-ban-on-burqas-in-public#:~:text=Sri%20Lanka's%20cabinet%20has%20approved,it%20would%20violate%20international%20law>

who kidnap naughty children.<sup>65</sup> Although the ban has not been fully implemented, it has become a tool of humiliation used against Muslim women.

## **RISING FUNDAMENTALISMS AND WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

**IN NORTHEAST SRI LANKA, WHERE HINDU SUPREMACY HAS SYSTEMATICALLY MARGINALIZED MUSLIMS, IN 2022 A SCHOOL TEACHER IN THE TOWN OF TRINCOMALEE WAS BARRED FROM ENTERING HER WORKPLACE (HINDU LADIES' COLLEGE) ON THE GROUNDS THAT SHE WORE A HIJAB.**

In South Asia and Southeast Asia, the intersection of militarization and state power has created a dangerous environment for women human rights defenders and activists. Governments in the region, often under the influence of fascist and fundamentalist ideologies, have increasingly used legal instruments to expand their surveillance and suppress dissent. In India, for example, the Modi government has weaponized sedition charges, filing over 800 cases against more than 13,000 people since 2010.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the Prevention of Terrorism Act remains a tool of state repression, leading to widespread torture and arbitrary detention. The expansion of state power under the guise of law and order has led to a climate of fear and intimidation, particularly for those who challenge the status quo.<sup>67</sup>

This context of violence and militarization has had devastating effects on the rights and freedoms of women human rights defenders. In countries like Thailand and Indonesia, the state's use of draconian laws to target activists has resulted in severe consequences, including death in custody, as seen in the case of the Thai anti-monarchy activist Bung.<sup>68</sup> In Indonesia, the sweeping amendments to the criminal code in 2022, which criminalize extramarital sex, cohabitation, and same-sex relationships,

65 Pundir, P. (2019). The Aftermath of the Sri Lanka Attacks Continues for South Asia's Young Minorities. VICE World News, 3 May. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dp7ga/sri-lanka-burqa-ban-women-muslim>

66 Article 14 Sedition Database: <https://sedition.article-14.com/>

67 Human Rights Watch. (2022). Sri Lanka: End Use of Terrorism Law Against Protesters. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/31/sri-lanka-end-use-terrorism-law-against-protesters>

68 Thai Lawyers for Human Rights. (2024). Pro-democracy activist "Bung" passed away while in the custody of the Department of Corrections. Thai Lawyers for Human Rights. <https://tlhr2014.com/en/archives/67007>

further entrench the state's control over individual freedoms, particularly affecting women and gender-diverse persons.<sup>69</sup> These legal frameworks not only stifle dissent but also exacerbate the oppression of marginalized communities, making it increasingly difficult for women and activists to advocate for their rights.

The militarization of state power extends beyond legal repression to include direct violence and intimidation. In Myanmar, the military junta's ongoing human rights abuses against the Rohingya and political prisoners illustrate the brutal lengths to which authoritarian regimes will go to maintain control.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the government's rhetoric equating drug use with terrorism in the "Yukhtiya" program has justified mass arrests and state violence, disproportionately targeting marginalized communities.<sup>71</sup> These actions underscore the entrenchment of militarized governance in the region, where state power is wielded not to protect citizens but to suppress opposition and maintain the status quo.

As these regimes continue to clamp down on dissent, the digital realm has also become a battleground. In Sri Lanka, the 2024 Online Safety Act<sup>72</sup> and Bangladesh's CyberSecurity Act<sup>73</sup> are examples of how governments leverage digital tools to silence critics and control narratives. These laws, framed as cybersecurity and national safety measures, allow for extensive censorship and warrantless arrests, further restricting the freedoms of those who dare to speak out.

In Thailand, the state's veneer of commitment to gender equality is shattered by the reality of digital violence wielded against women and LGBTQI+ activists. Under the guise of national security, the Thai government has enabled the use of invasive digital tools like Pegasus spyware to surveil and silence those who challenge the status quo. Women and LGBTQI+ activists, who have been at the forefront of peaceful protests and human rights advocacy, now find themselves targeted not only by state actors but also by coordinated online

---

69 Human Rights Watch. (2022). Indonesia: New criminal code is disastrous for rights. Human Rights Watch, 8 December. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/08/indonesia-new-criminal-code-disastrous-rights>

70 Myanmar Now. (2023, September 26). Authorities retaliate against political prisoners after Monywa prison strike. Myanmar Now. <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/authorities-retaliate-against-political-prisoners-after-monywa-prison-strike/>

71 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2024). UN experts call on Sri Lanka to immediately suspend and review Yukhtiya anti-drug operation. OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/01/un-experts-call-sri-lanka-immediately-suspend-and-review-yukhtiya-anti-drug>

72 Access Now. (n.d.). Sri Lanka must withdraw the Online Safety Bill. Access Now. <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/sri-lanka-must-withdraw-the-online-safety-bill/>

73 Amnesty International. (2023). Bangladesh: Government must remove draconian provisions from the Draft Cyber Security Act. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/08/bangladesh-government-must-remove-draconian-provisions-from-the-draft-cyber-security-act/>

harassment campaigns. These campaigns, laced with misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic rhetoric, aim to degrade, discredit, and ultimately silence these activists, driving many to self-censor or withdraw from their work.<sup>74</sup>

In this climate of repression, women human rights defenders are particularly vulnerable, facing a convergence of legal, physical, and digital threats that severely limit their ability to do their work.

**THE CRIMINALIZATION OF  
ACTIVISM IS PERVASIVE, WITH  
NEARLY ONE IN FOUR ACTIVISTS  
HAVING RECEIVED DEATH THREATS  
AND THIRTY-SEVEN SURVIVING  
ACTUAL MURDER ATTEMPTS.**

In Southeast Asia, the criminalization of activism is pervasive, with nearly one in four activists having received death threats and thirty-seven surviving actual murder attempts. In South Asia, the situation is even more dire, with 30 percent of activists facing murder attempts. Additionally, activism has put families at risk, with one in three respondents across the region reporting threats or harassment against their families.<sup>75</sup>

In Afghanistan, the harsh restrictions imposed by the Taliban on women and girls has been extensively documented, highlighting that those who resist these constraints or advocate for their rights face severe repercussions, including harassment, violence, imprisonment, and even death.<sup>76</sup>

Despite their initial promises to uphold women's and girls' rights, or at least to rule 'moderately', the Taliban have severely restricted their education, work and movements. Feminists have sounded the alarm over the Taliban's decision to bar female students from Afghanistan's university entrance exam. Activist Shaharзад Akbar and others have

74 Amnesty International. Thailand: State-Backed Digital Violence Used to Silence Women and LGBTI Activists. Amnesty International, 23 May 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/05/thailand-state-backed-digital-violence-silence-women-lgbti-activists/>

75 The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. The State of Women Human Rights Defenders 2023. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, November 2023, <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-The-state-of-women-human-rights-defenders-2023.pdf>

76 Abrar, S. (2024). Don't look away: The Taliban's mistreatment of women has global ramifications. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/inside-the-talibans-gender-apartheid/dont-look-away-the-talibans-mistreatment-of-women-has-global-ramifications/>

condemned this as “gender apartheid,” a deliberate act that threatens to paralyze Afghanistan’s societal progress for generations.<sup>77</sup>

The Taliban have barred women from most jobs across Afghanistan, allowing only those in specific sectors to work, such as health. In the private sector, the policy has been to replace women with men wherever possible.<sup>78</sup> Women who protested this systemic discrimination faced harassment, beatings and electric shocks, along with assassinations – they were also forced to sign agreements to stop protesting and remain silent about their detention experiences, in an attempt to build a new, modern image of the Taliban.<sup>79</sup>

In March 2024, Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada announced the return of public flogging and stoning of women for adultery. Describing the reinstatement as a struggle against Western influences, in his announcement he said: “The Taliban’s work did not end with the takeover of Kabul, it has only just begun.”<sup>80</sup>

Several calls have been made for the international community to delegitimize the Taliban regime, emphasizing that to truly protect and promote women’s rights, it is essential for global actors to refrain from any engagement with the Taliban that contradicts their commitments and obligations under international law.<sup>81</sup>

---

77 Rukhshana Media. Human Rights Observers Call Out Taliban’s Ongoing Ban of Girls from Tertiary Entrance Exam. Rukhshana Media, 2023. <https://rukshana.com/en/human-rights-observers-call-out-talibans-ongoing-ban-of-girls-from-tertiary-entrance-exam>

78 Amnesty International. Women and Girls Under Taliban Rule in Afghanistan. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2022/07/women-and-girls-under-taliban-rule-afghanistan/>

79 Ibid.

80 The Guardian. Taliban Edict to Resume Stoning Women to Death Met with Horror. The Guardian. Accessed March 28, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/mar/28/taliban-edict-to-resume-stoning-women-to-death-met-with-horror>

81 ZANTV. “To effectively protect and promote women’s rights, it is imperative that members of the international community first agree to refrain from any form of engagement with the Taliban that contradicts their commitments and obligations under international law.” X (formerly Twitter), 18 Aug. 2024, <https://x.com/ZANTV/status/1821128859405701156>

## SAFFRON RAINBOW

**THE MODI GOVERNMENT USES 'PINKWASHING' – A GOVERNMENT PROPAGANDA STRATEGY THAT CYNICALLY EXPLOITS LGBTQI+ RIGHTS TO PROJECT A PROGRESSIVE IMAGE WHILE CONCEALING ONGOING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS – BY EXPRESSING ALLEGED SUPPORT AND CONCERN FOR TRANS COMMUNITIES.**

In India, the Hindu supremacist BJP regime has made several moves to present themselves as an 'ally' of LGBTQI+ communities, in an attempt to boost its reputation. The Modi government uses 'pinkwashing' – a government propaganda strategy that cynically exploits LGBTQI+ rights to project a progressive image while concealing ongoing human rights violations – by expressing alleged support and concern for trans communities.<sup>82</sup>

The response of certain LGBTQI+ groups to the government's revocation of Article 370, which granted special autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir, is one way to understand the BJP's homonationalism. Following this decision, some queer organizations, like the Queer Hindu Alliance, supported the move by claiming it would bring "gay liberation" to Kashmir, due to the extension of the Supreme Court's 2018 ruling that decriminalized same-sex relations. However, Kashmiri queer activists denounced this as "pinkwashing," pointing out that such a narrative overlooks the complex realities of living under occupation, where queer identities are intertwined with broader struggles against state violence.<sup>83</sup>

The BJP-promoted bill of 2019, promoted as protecting the rights of transgender persons, is just one example of how the ruling party and its allies attempt to distract or divert attention away from the ongoing abuse and discrimination faced by trans people in India, particularly those from marginalized communities.<sup>84</sup> This legislation has in fact been criticized by trans activists and their allies since its introduction in 2016, and its passing in 2019, who claim that the legislation does not honor

82 Stand With Kashmir. Pinkwashing and Pride: The Case of Kashmir. <https://standwithkashmir.org/pinkwashing-and-pride-kashmir/>

83 The Wire. (2020, February 18). Homonationalism in India: How the LGBTQIA+ Community Is Being Co-opted by the Right Wing. The Wire. <https://thewire.in/lgbtqia/homonationalism-india-sedition>

84 Mugloo, S. & Rafiq, S. (2023). 'They thought I was a curse': The struggles of India's trans community. openDemocracy. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/india-transgender-discrimination-health-gender-affirmation-surgery/>



trans persons' right to bodily autonomy or recognize their agency.<sup>85</sup> The legislation mandates a long and arduous process for legal gender recognition, with a high degree of control and power given to a single government agency.<sup>86</sup>

In response to guidelines set in 2017, the Indian government also moved in 2023 to exclude sexual and gender-diverse persons and sex workers from donating their blood, citing “scientific evidence”.<sup>87</sup> Activists note that this is a violation of India’s anti-discrimination laws.<sup>88</sup>

This means, that despite all of this, there have been no structural gains for queer rights sponsored by the BJP government. The alignment of certain segments of the LGBTQI+ community with the BJP’s nationalist agenda, including support for a uniform civil code that undermines Muslim Family Law, has influenced the approach to LGBTQI+ rights in India. In 2020’s Pride marches, some organizers even collaborated with the police to identify protesters who were speaking out against the anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act.<sup>89</sup>

## **STRUGGLE FOR LGBTQI+ RIGHTS**

In Pakistan, celebrated 2018 legislation dedicated to the protection of trans and gender-diverse persons, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, was read as “incompatible with Islamic principles” by a federal religious court in 2023. Accordingly, the court struck down numerous sections of the law.<sup>90</sup> The ruling has intensified existing concerns about the high levels of transphobic violence in Pakistan, where 90 percent of transgender people reportedly face physical assaults.<sup>91</sup>

The removal of key provisions from the act has led to the denial of gender self-identification, legal protection, inheritance rights, healthcare access, education, employment, housing, and social welfare for transgender

---

85 Knight, K. (2019). India’s Transgender Rights Law Isn’t Worth Celebrating. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/05/indias-transgender-rights-law-isnt-worth-celebrating>

86 Ibid.

87 Dasgupta, S. (2023). India’s government opposes blood donations by LGBT+ community by citing ‘scientific evidence’. Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/india/india-transgender-lgbt-blood-donation-b2301274.html>

88 Raj, T. K. (2021). We don’t want your blood’ exclusion of Sexual Minorities from Blood Donation. Centre for Law and Policy Research. <https://clpr.org.in/our-work/transgender-rights/>

89 Queerbeat. “In Modi’s India, No Structural Gains for Queer Rights, Only Symbolic Victories.” <https://www.queerbeat.org/stories/in-modis-india-no-structural-gains-for-queer-rights-only-symbolic-victories>

90 Amnesty International. (2023). Pakistan: Revocation of rights of transgender and gender-diverse people must be stopped. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/pakistan-revocation-of-rights-of-transgender-and-gender-diverse-people-must-be-stopped/>

91 Riaz, M. M. A. & Awan, M. M. (2023). “Transgender rights in Pakistan: implications of Federal Shariat Court ruling”. The Lancet Psychiatry. Vol 10, No. 8, E20. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(23\)00191-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(23)00191-8)

people. The 2023 ‘Intersex or Khunsa (Protection of Rights) Act,’ intended by the Pakistani Senate to address the shortcomings of the 2018 legislation, highlights lawmakers’ limited understanding of both intersex and trans issues. The new law criminalizes all gender-affirming care for transgender and intersex individuals, as well as gender variance and transgender identities, while also denying protections for those experiencing gender dysphoria.<sup>92</sup>

In Sri Lanka, recent attempts to decriminalize same-sex sexual conduct have been met with societal backlash, with arguments made to “protect children” from LGBTQI+ and in service of “culture” through a petition submitted by citizens in April 2022.<sup>93</sup> This rhetoric of “protecting children” is a thinly veiled weapon in homophobic and transphobic discourses, used to justify discrimination, with the aim of perpetuating fear and division by reinforcing harmful stereotypes that LGBTQI+ individuals are a threat to societal norms and the innocence of youth.

**IN INDONESIA, 2016, PROVINCIAL AUTHORITIES INSTITUTED TRAINING PROGRAMMES FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES TO EQUIP THEM TO FIGHT THE PROXY WARS AND OTHER PERCEIVED SOCIAL THREATS THAT THE NATION IS FACING, INCLUDING “COMMUNISM, DRUGS AND HOMOSEXUALITY”.**

In Indonesia, 2016, provincial authorities instituted training programmes for law enforcement agencies to equip them to fight the proxy wars and other perceived social threats that the nation is facing, including “communism, drugs and homosexuality”.<sup>94</sup> The Southeast Asian LGBTQI+ human rights activist network, ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, has called out Indonesia’s recent Broadcasting bill as a threat to freedom of the press, expression, and the rights of sexual and gender diverse persons.<sup>95</sup> The Broadcasting Bill seeks to define and enforce moral norms. Specifically, the bill includes provisions that prohibit broadcasting

92 Ibid.

93 Arachchi, K. S. (2023). Will Sri Lanka Decriminalize Same-Sex Relations? Groundviews. <https://groundviews.org/2023/05/05/will-sri-lanka-decriminalize-same-sex-relations/>

94 Human Rights Watch. (2016). These political games ruin our lives”: Indonesia’s LGBT community under threat. Human Rights Watch, 11 August. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/08/11/these-political-games-ruin-our-lives/indonesia-lgbt-community-under-threat>

95 ASEAN SOGIE Caucus. (2024). The Indonesia Broadcasting Bill: A threat to Freedom of Press and Expression <https://aseansogiecaucus.org/statements/asc-statements/216-the-indonesia-broadcasting-bill-a-threat-to-freedom-of-press-and-expression>

content related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, including the use of LGBTQI+ models in advertisements. Articles such as 28A, Paragraph 1(d), 46A, Paragraph 2(h), and 50B, Paragraph 2(g) explicitly ban the display of LGBTQI+ behavior in media, effectively legitimizing state-sponsored discrimination. This comes on the heels of Indonesia's disastrous, sweeping penal code amendments in 2022, widely decried by activists and experts across sectors and movements as having potential to produce large-scale rights violations.<sup>96</sup>

In Malaysia, 2023, directives were issued by the Ministry of Education to promote corporal punishment through conversion programmes as a pre-emptive measure. These measures targeted students engaging in same-sex relationships or exhibiting divergent gender identities and expressions, particularly trans women, who were subjected to fear-inducing videos depicting death.<sup>97</sup> LGBTQI+ activists' dreams of reform have experienced a setback recently by a notable uptick in violence and anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric targeting sexual and gender diverse persons.<sup>98</sup> Malaysian analysts and activists say that the current Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim – who communities had envisioned as a progressive reformer – and his government are imposing harsh rules and spreading anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric to gain favor with supporters of the popular fundamentalist, ultra-conservative opposition bloc, which includes Malaysian Islamic Party, known as the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS).<sup>99</sup>

**IN FEBRUARY 2024, THE THAI PARLIAMENT REJECTED THE DRAFT BILL FOR LEGAL GENDER RECOGNITION, TITLE, AND PROTECTION OF GENDER-DIVERSE PEOPLE. A NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT (MPS) WERE OPPOSED TO THE BILL, WITH ONE MP ARGUING THAT THE LAW COULD CONTRIBUTE TO AN INCREASE IN CRIMES LIKE SEXUAL ASSAULT.**

While Thailand just recently – in June 2024 – became the third Asian country to legalize same-sex marriage,<sup>100</sup> along with Nepal and Taiwan,

96 Human Rights Watch. (2022). Indonesia: New Criminal Code Disastrous for Rights. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/08/indonesia-new-criminal-code-disastrous-rights>

97 Asia Pacific Transgender Network (APTN). (2020). Conversion Therapy Practices: Malaysia Country Profile. [https://weareaptn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Conversion-Therapy-2020-Malaysia\\_29Dec.pdf](https://weareaptn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Conversion-Therapy-2020-Malaysia_29Dec.pdf)

98 Latiff, R. & Ananthalakshmi, A. (2023). LGBTQ fears grow in Malaysia as Islamists shatter reform hopes. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/lgbtq-fears-grow-malaysia-islamists-shatter-reform-hopes-2023-08-21/>

99 Ibid.

100 Al Jazeera. (2024). Thailand becomes first Southeast Asian country to allow same-sex marriage. Al Jazeera.

Thai trans and gender-diverse activists are struggling to gain legal recognition as they still cannot change gender markers on national ID documents. In February 2024, the Thai Parliament rejected the draft bill for legal gender recognition, title, and protection of gender-diverse people. A number of members of parliament (MPs) were opposed to the bill, with one MP arguing that the law could contribute to an increase in crimes like sexual assault.<sup>101</sup> As such, Thai trans and gender-diverse persons continue to face numerous challenges to their ability to access health services and employment, and exercise their rights.<sup>102</sup> .<sup>103</sup>

---

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/18/thailand-passes-landmark-bill-to-legalise-same-sex-marriage#:~:text=Thai%20parliament%20passes%20same%2Dsex%20marriage%20bill&text=It%20will%20come%20into%20force,groups%20welcomed%20the%20bill's%20passage>

101 The Nation Thailand. (2024). House speaker discusses ongoing negotiations on formation of new government. The Nation, 7 August. <https://www.nationthailand.com/thailand/politics/40035780>

102 Human Rights Watch. (2021). "People Can't Be Fit into Boxes". Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/12/15/people-cant-be-fit-boxes/thailands-need-legal-gender-recognition>

103 The Nation. (2024). MPs say 'no' to gender recognition bill. The Nation. <https://www.nationthailand.com/thailand/politics/40035780>



## **SECTION 3:** **ECOFASCISM**

The current social, political, and economic landscapes in South and Southeast Asia are shaped by an insidious alliance between fascist and fundamentalist forces and corporate powerhouses. This nexus of authoritarianism and corporate greed drives the relentless capture of land, fueling the climate crisis and intensifying the already brutal conditions faced by millions.

The ongoing economic crises mentioned in Section 1 did not merely exacerbate existing inequalities, but they also offered an opportunity for fascist and fundamentalist ideologies to gain traction by exploiting the frustrations and fears of people. In South Asia and Southeast Asia, where a significant portion of the population remains entrenched in informal economies, the far right's narrative diverged from the West's promise of returning to a past of world-dominance. Instead, it capitalized on aspirations for future prosperity, often intertwined with neoliberal ideals of entrepreneurship. This potent mix of individualized neoliberalism and authoritarianism has fueled the fascist rise in emerging economies, leading to a dangerous confluence of environmental degradation and social oppression.<sup>104</sup>

**WHILE LIVING IN RESOURCE-RICH GEOGRAPHIES, BOTH SOUTH ASIAN AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN POPULATIONS DO NOT OFTEN BENEFIT FROM THEIR NATURAL RESOURCES DUE TO PRIVATIZATION.**

While living in resource-rich geographies, both South Asian and Southeast Asian populations do not often benefit from their natural resources due to privatization. Government mismanagement of responses to climate catastrophes, neglect and inaction, and corruption – with prioritization of private business interests over public welfare<sup>105</sup> – have led to various negative outcomes, such as people living in densely

104 Pinheiro-Machado, Rosana. (2023). The Rise of the Radical Right in the Global South.

105 U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre. (n.d.). Corruption and water governance in the Mekong River Basin. <https://www.u4.no/publications/corruption-and-water-governance-in-the-mekong-river-basin>

populated areas, poverty and land capture.<sup>106</sup> Journalists and activists have, for some time, been ringing the alarm on the privatization of water resources, forest-land, and natural gas reserves.<sup>107</sup> This is deeply intertwined with the rise of far-right ideologies that seek to consolidate power through control of these vital resources.

In the last few years, incidents arising from climate change include the 2022 floods in Pakistan (where the impact is ongoing<sup>108</sup>); cyclones; coastal erosion and flooding in Sri Lanka;<sup>109</sup> the 2022 floods in the northeast of India, such as in the state of Assam, which led to flash-floods in Bangladesh in 2022;<sup>110</sup> and the recent extreme heatwave in several countries in Southeast Asia. These incidents have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable communities (e.g., people with disabilities, older persons<sup>111</sup>). In Afghanistan, total political and economic collapse are exacerbated by the ongoing severe effects of climate change, resulting in droughts and other disasters,<sup>112</sup> where around 60 percent of the population relies on rain-fed agriculture.<sup>113</sup>

## THE RISE OF ECOFASCISM IN MODI'S INDIA

Once shunned for his role in the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, Modi has now rebranded himself as a “green” leader, paradoxically earning accolades like the United Nations “Champion of the Earth.” Yet, behind this lies a different reality: Modi’s government continues to suppress environmental activists, violently displace Indigenous communities, and host international summits in militarized zones like Kashmir – all under the guise of environmentalism. This is ecofascism – where environmental rhetoric is weaponized to advance supremacist and genocidal agendas, echoing fascist practices of the past.<sup>114</sup>

106 Ibid.

107 The Economic Times. (2010). Natural resources are not private property. The Economic Times, 10 May. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/et-editorial/natural-resources-not-private-property/articleshow/5905471.cms?from=mdr>

108 Akbar, M. (2023). Over a year after Pakistan floods, survivors battle climate anxiety. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2023/10/24/photos-over-a-year-after-pakistan-floods-survivors-battle-climate-anxiety>

109 Al Jazeera. (2023). Sri Lankan fishers suffer as coastal erosion destroys homes. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2023/6/27/sri-lankan-fishers-suffer-as-coastal-erosion-destroys-homes>

110 Gupta, S. & Mogul, R. (2022). Millions affected after deadly floods hit India and Bangladesh. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/22/india/bangladesh-india-floods-death-toll-intl-hnk/index.html>

111 Human Rights Watch. (2023). Bangladesh: Protect People Most At Risk During Monsoon Season. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/19/bangladesh-protect-people-most-risk-during-monsoon-season>

112 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2023). Afghanistan: The alarming effects of climate change. UNOCHA. <https://www.unocha.org/news/afghanistan-alarming-effects-climate-change>

113 Ibid.

114 Truthout. “Ecofascism Is a Rising Threat. We Should Take Modi’s Ascendance as a Warning.” Truthout, <https://>

While India is the world's third largest greenhouse gas emitter,<sup>115</sup> there is a significant co-optation of the climate agenda by the ruling BJP, where the government's 'sustainability' propaganda is contradicted by ongoing attacks on climate activists – India recorded the highest number of violent attacks against climate activists in 2022<sup>116</sup> – and mass displacement of Adivasi (Indigenous) communities.<sup>117</sup>

**THE RISE OF HINDUTVA POLITICS OVER THE PAST DECADE HAS CREATED FERTILE GROUND FOR ECOFASCIST IDEAS TO FLOURISH. MODI GOVERNMENT'S MOVES TO WEAKEN ENVIRONMENTAL SAFEGUARDS, COUPLED WITH ITS BROADER NATIONALIST AGENDA, EXEMPLIFY HOW ECOFASCISM CAN MASQUERADE AS ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN WHILE ADVANCING DEEPLY EXCLUSIONARY AND OPPRESSIVE POLICIES.**

The rise of Hindutva politics over the past decade has created fertile ground for ecofascist ideas to flourish. Modi government's moves to weaken environmental safeguards, coupled with its broader nationalist agenda, exemplify how ecofascism can masquerade as environmental concern while advancing deeply exclusionary and oppressive policies.<sup>118</sup>

Prime Minister Modi's global reputation as a 'green leader' continues to rise, with a consistent 'greenwashing' agenda put forward by the Hindu nationalist government. For example, India hosted G20 in 2023, in the illegally annexed Kashmir,<sup>119</sup> where the topics of discussion were climate change and tourism, and delegates discussed 'ecotourism' in the world's most militarized region.<sup>120</sup> This is not the first time that the Indian government has used a pretense to expand its annexation project in Kashmir. In August 2019, India deployed tens of thousands of troops to Kashmir, enforced a communication blackout, and severed transport links

---

[truthout.org/articles/ecofascism-is-a-rising-threat-we-should-take-modis-ascendance-as-a-warning/](https://www.truthout.org/articles/ecofascism-is-a-rising-threat-we-should-take-modis-ascendance-as-a-warning/)

115 <https://www.statista.com/topics/8881/emissions-in-india/#topicOverview>

116 Hicks, R. (2023). Environmental activists under attack: India records highest incidences in Asia. Eco-Business. <https://www.eco-business.com/news/environmental-activists-under-attack-india-records-highest-incidences-in-asia/>

117 Kanji, A. (2023). Ecofascism Is a Rising Threat. We Should Take Modi's Ascendance as a Warning. Truth Out. <https://truthout.org/articles/ecofascism-is-a-rising-threat-we-should-take-modis-ascendance-as-a-warning/>

118 The Wire Science. (2022). "What Is Ecofascism?" The Wire Science, 27 August. <https://science.thewire.in/politics/government/what-is-ecofascism/>

119 International Commission of Jurists. 2019. India: Ending autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir fans flames of existing human rights crisis. International Commission of Jurists. <https://www.icj.org/india-ending-autonomy-of-jammu-and-kashmir-fans-flames-of-existing-human-rights-crisis/>

120 Hussain, A. (2023). G20 delegates begin meeting in disputed Kashmir, with the region's intense security largely out of view. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/g20-kashmir-india-pakistan-srinagar-1f47b6edd85e21bddb1949dd87c-fee4f>

as Modi's government revoked Jammu and Kashmir's semi-autonomous status. The Indian government claimed this would bring economic and social development to the Valley.<sup>121</sup>

Also in India, the Forest Conservation (Amendment) Bill was introduced in 2023, which amends the 1980 Forest Conservation Act (FCA), with experts noting that the Bill is “shot through with broad exemptions, lack of definitions and a centralizing tendency,” leaving the government with plenty of access to national forests and the ability to hand them over to private contractors, or use them for “national security” purposes.<sup>122</sup> The amendment excludes gram sabhas – elected village councils – and Indigenous people from forest clearance processes, despite them safeguarding and protecting these regions for generations.<sup>123</sup>

## EXTRACTIVISM AND PRIVATIZATION

**IN THE PHILIPPINES, APPROXIMATELY 3.1 MILLION HECTARES OF LAND HAVE BEEN TARGETED BY MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS AND FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS.**

The World Economic Forum reports that “Nineteen of the 25 cities most exposed to a one-metre sea-level rise are in Asia, seven in the Philippines alone”.<sup>124</sup> This is the heavy cost of large scale land-grabbing through corporate investments and trade policies. In the Philippines, approximately 3.1 million hectares of land have been targeted by multinational corporations and foreign governments.<sup>125</sup>

In Indonesia, agrarian conflicts increased under current President Jokowi, where private investors were heavily prioritized over local communities and ecological protection.<sup>126</sup> In West Papua, deforestation acts as the

121 Scroll.in. (2020, August 5). What exactly did the August 5 decisions achieve in Jammu and Kashmir? <https://scroll.in/article/969452/what-exactly-did-the-august-5-decisions-achieve-in-jammu-and-kashmir>

122 Hasan, Z. (2023). The amended green law is full of red flags: Forests (Amendment) Act 2023.” Supreme Court Observer. <https://www.scoobserver.in/journal/the-amended-green-law-is-full-of-red-flags-forests-amendment-act-2023/>

123 Ibid.

124 Hicks, R. (2021). Southeast Asia to bear the brunt of worsening global climate, IPCC warns. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/08/southeast-asi-weather-extremes-global-warming-2030-ipcc-report/>

125 Spheres of Influence. (n.d.). The Struggle Over Territorial Sovereignty: Land Grabbing in the Philippines. <https://spheresofinfluence.ca/the-struggle-over-territorial-sovereignty-land-grabbing-in-the-philippines/>

126 ng, H. N. (2024). Jokowi's land reform agenda stalls as conflicts nearly double, report shows. Mongabay. <https://news.mongabay.com/2024/01/jokowis-land-reform-agenda-stalls-as-conflicts-nearly-double-report-shows/>



cornerstone of Indonesia's colonial policy, systematically stripping the land of its resources. Laws like the Omnibus Law drive this environmental degradation forward under the guise of development.<sup>127</sup>

A new report from the Consortium for Agrarian Reform (KPA) identifies that most of these conflicts are related to plantation companies and palm growers, which have been associated for a long time with land-grabbing and vast deforestation agendas in the country. In 2023, 91 people were subjected to physical violence, including being shot at, with nearly all of them being Indigenous people, farmers and activists.<sup>128</sup>

The privatization and liberalization of land, water, energy, and mineral deposits and the liberalization of mining, energy, and agriculture in Asia commodify natural resources to attract investments. These globalization policies have resulted in corporate ownership and control of these supposed public commons.<sup>129</sup> In 2016, the Asian Development Bank highlighted that Southeast Asia is expected to experience more significant economic losses from climate change compared to many other regions globally.<sup>130</sup>

**LAND DEALS ARE OFTEN JUSTIFIED AND LEGITIMIZED BY STATE ACTORS IN THE NAME OF POVERTY ALLEVIATION, JOB CREATION, MORE EFFICIENT AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES TO ADDRESS FOOD INSECURITY AND OTHER GOALS AROUND ENERGY AND CLIMATE.**

Land deals are often justified and legitimized by state actors in the name of poverty alleviation, job creation, more efficient agricultural practices to address food insecurity and other goals around energy and climate.<sup>131</sup> In Myanmar, the previous regime outlined in its Master Plan for the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation that the government is seeking to attract foreign investors to convert 10 million acres of land occupied by smallholder farms into 'productive' and 'efficient' land "through

127 Klas Lundstrom. "In West Papua, the Birth of a Lost Generation." The Diplomat. Published April 4, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/in-west-papua-the-birth-of-a-lost-generation/>

128 Ibid.

129 Bautista, C. & Yang-ed P. C. (2018). Op. cit. (Part 2 of 2).

130 Asian Development Bank. (2016). Southeast Asia and the Economics of Global Climate Stabilization. Asian Development Bank. <https://www.adb.org/publications/southeast-asia-economics-global-climate-stabilization#:~:text=South-east%20Asia%20is%20likely%20to,be%20larger%20than%20previously%20estimated>

131 "Brot für die Welt. (n.d.). Land Policy Study. [https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/fileadmin/mediapool/2\\_Downloads/Fachinformationen/Analyse/Analysis\\_60\\_Land-Policy-Study.pdf](https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/fileadmin/mediapool/2_Downloads/Fachinformationen/Analyse/Analysis_60_Land-Policy-Study.pdf)"

commercial agricultural and industrial production, such as textile factories and palm oil, rubber, and cassava plantations”.<sup>132</sup>

## **VIOLENCE AGAINST LAND RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

Southeast Asian environmental defenders document the crises caused by extractivism in their region – but rapacious international development agendas and government corruption often go hand-in-hand in the subregion to produce excessive rights violations and ecological harm. Southeast Asian experts documented in 2018, “The region is... one of the top destinations for extractive industries such as mining and logging. In Southeast Asia alone, a total \$53 billion worth of major minerals was produced in 2012.”<sup>133</sup>

**ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS PROTEST THE HEAVY MILITARY INVOLVEMENT IN LAND GRABS IN THE PHILIPPINES, OFTEN FACING GRAVE VIOLATIONS SUCH AS KILLINGS AND ABDUCTIONS BY THE ARMED FORCES.**

The Global Witness report of 2023 identified the Philippines as “the most dangerous country in Asia” for environmental rights activists.<sup>134</sup> Environmental defenders protest the heavy military involvement in land grabs in the Philippines, often facing grave violations such as killings and abductions by the armed forces.<sup>135</sup>

Across South Asia and Southeast Asia, such as in Bangladesh,<sup>136</sup> India,<sup>137</sup>

132 Samranjit, R. (n.d.). Land Grabbing and Impacts to Small Scale Farmers in Southeast Asia Sub-Region. International Institute of Social Studies. [https://www.iss.nl/sites/corporate/files/CMCP\\_60-Samranjit.pdf](https://www.iss.nl/sites/corporate/files/CMCP_60-Samranjit.pdf)

133 Bautista, C. & Yang-ed P. C. (2018). In peril: Southeast Asia’s environment and its defenders (Part 1 of 2). Bulatlat. <https://www.bulatlat.com/2018/07/10/peril-southeast-asias-environment-defenders-part-1-2/>

134 Zhang, S. (2023). The Philippines is the most dangerous country in Asia to defend the environment, Global Witness report says. ABC. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-27/philippines-most-dangerous-in-asia-for-environmental-activists/102891938>

135 Ibid.

136 Faiaz, Z. (2021). Attacks, land grabs leave Bangladesh’s Indigenous groups on edge. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/30/bangladesh-indigenous-groups-chakma-khasi-santal-land-grab>

137 Fayaz, A. & Firdous, M. (2024). India’s massive farmer protests spark police brutality claims. Nikkei Asia. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/India-s-massive-farmer-protests-spark-police-brutality-claims>

Indonesia,<sup>138</sup> Thailand,<sup>139</sup> Malaysia,<sup>140</sup> the Philippines,<sup>141</sup> and Sri Lanka,<sup>142</sup> land rights activists including farmers and Indigenous communities face brutal, often militarized land-grabs and harmful legislation.<sup>143</sup>

**IN BANGLADESH'S CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS, INDIGENOUS WOMEN ACTIVISTS AND LAND DEFENDERS HAVE BEEN FACING VIOLENT MILITARIZED LAND-GRABS FOR DECADES. INDIGENOUS PEOPLE ARE ASSAULTED, SURVEILLED AND KILLED WITH IMPUNITY, AND THERE ARE HIGH INCIDENCES OF RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT AGAINST INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS.**

Generally, land defenders are facing unprecedented levels of violence. In Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill tracts, Indigenous women activists and land defenders have been facing violent militarized land-grabs for decades. Indigenous people are assaulted, surveilled and killed with impunity, and there are high incidences of rape and sexual assault against Indigenous women and girls.<sup>144</sup>

Land rights activists are punished by laws that are sustained through narratives portraying them as an obstacle to the national development of the economy through the privatization of land. In India, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) is frequently used to label land rights activists as terrorists, leading to prolonged detention without trial, effectively stifling dissent and resistance against corporate land grabs.<sup>145</sup> Similarly, in the Philippines, the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 has been criticized for its broad and vague definitions, which are used to target

138 Indigenous Women Fighting to Save Land and Livelihoods in Indonesia. (n.d.). CMI Consortium. <https://cmiconsortium.org/indigenous-women-fighting-to-save-land-and-livelihoods-in-indonesia/>

139 People's Dispatch. (2022). Land Rights Activists in Thailand Face Prosecution for Sit-In Protest in Bangkok. People's Dispatch, 16 February. <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2022/02/16/land-rights-activists-in-thailand-face-prosecution-for-sit-in-protest-in-bangkok/>

140 Benar News. (2017). Malaysia's Orang Asli Protest Against Land Seizures. <https://www.benarnewst.org/english/news/malaysian/malaysia-natives-09012017182358.html>

141 Human Rights Watch (2023). Philippines: Officials 'Red-Tagging' Indigenous Leaders, Activists, Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/26/philippines-officials-red-tagging-indigenous-leaders-activists>

142 Human Rights Watch. (2023). If We Raise Our Voice They Arrest Us: Sri Lanka's Proposed Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/09/18/if-we-raise-our-voice-they-arrest-us/sri-lankas-proposed-truth-and-reconciliation>

143 Dalpino, C. (2023). The Police Are Watching: In Mekong Countries, Eco-Defenders Face Rising Risks. Mongabay. <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/12/the-police-are-watching-in-mekong-countries-eco-defenders-face-rising-riskshttps://news.mongabay.com/2023/12/the-police-are-watching-in-mekong-countries-eco-defenders->

144 Asia Indigenous People's Pact. (2021). Fact Sheet: Violence Against Indigenous Women and Girls in Bangladesh. <https://aippnet.org/fact-sheet-violence-against-indigenous-women-girls-bangladesh/>

145 The Wire. (2022). 97% of UAPA Cases Between 2016 and 2020 Are Still Pending Trial, Says Home Ministry in Rajya Sabha, The Wire, 20 July. <https://thewire.in/government/uapa-case-data-process-punishment-home-ministry-rajya-sabha>

Indigenous and environmental defenders, branding them as terrorists and subjecting them to arrests and human rights abuses.<sup>146</sup> “Sedition” charges are used against anti-mining activists in Myanmar, who are sentenced to incarceration and heavy labor,<sup>147</sup> and Indonesian courts use obscure, draconian laws to prosecute environmental advocates, with hundreds of activists charged.<sup>148</sup>

Kalikasan People’s Network for the Environment documented in 2018 that “There has been a total of at least 132 cases of killings in 7 countries in Southeast Asia since 2011 up to 2017; the Philippines accounts for 83 percent of the cases.”<sup>149</sup>

Indonesia stands at the forefront of the escalating violence against land rights defenders in Southeast Asia. While state actors play their role in this violence, including law enforcement and military, it’s important to note the role of violence by transnational corporations. In Indonesia, the Sinar Mas Group (SMG), owner of Asia Pulp and Paper, is widely reported by local and international media and civil rights organizations to have one of the worst records for human rights abuses and environmental destruction, including land grabbing, intimidation, criminalization, and violence.<sup>150</sup> In Indonesia, the alignment of corporate interests with state power has resulted in a dangerous environment for those who dare to defend their land and communities.

---


146 Human Rights Watch. (2020). Philippines: New Anti-Terrorism Act Endangers Rights. Human Rights Watch, 5 June. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/05/philippines-new-anti-terrorism-act-endangers-rights>

147 Bautista, C. & Yang-ed P. C. (2018). Op. cit.

148 Ibid.

149 Bautista, C. & Yang-ed P. C. (2018). In peril: Southeast Asia’s environment and its defenders (Part 2 of 2). Bulatlat. <https://www.bulatlat.com/2018/07/26/peril-southeast-asias-environment-defenders-part-2-2/>

150 Rainforest Action Network. (n.d.). Destroying Lives and Stealing Land. <https://www.ran.org/the-understory/destroying-lives-and-stealing-land/>



# **SECTION 5:** **POLITICAL** **FUNDAMENTALIST AND** **FASCIST ACTORS**

Many political fundamentalist and fascist actors and groups are linked to the long-lasting impact of colonialism in the region. The end of colonial rule came after decades of intense, often violent, anti-colonial struggles across different contexts. Following this period, many anti-colonial movements embarked on their own exclusionary, patriarchal and nationalist agendas, with members of socially dominant groups and political and social elites in society often taking the reins of political leadership and governance for themselves.

**MANY INFLUENTIAL, FUNDAMENTALIST POLITICAL ACTORS ALSO EMERGED DURING THIS TIME, CLAIMING 'ANTI-IMPERIAL' IDENTITY AND EXPLOITING RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COMMUNITIES.**

In later decades, a series of geopolitical power plays and imperialist military interventions around the world and around the region impacted South and Southeast Asia profoundly. Many influential, fundamentalist political actors also emerged during this time, claiming 'anti-imperial' identity and exploiting religious differences between communities.

## **PAKISTAN**

Aurat March (AM) and Aurat Azadi (AAM) are annual socio-political demonstrations organized by feminist groups in various Pakistani cities on International Women's Day. The AM is organized in Lahore, Karachi, and Multan, while the AAM takes place in Islamabad and Hyderabad.<sup>151</sup> Since their inception, the marches, participants, and organizers have faced significant backlash manifested through various tactics, including media smear campaigns, legal challenges, death and rape threats,

151 suPWR. (2022). Aurat March and Aurat Azadi March <https://supwr.org/struggles/aurat-march/>

doxxing, cyber harassment, and physical violence.

In March 2019, Aamir Liaquat, a Member of the National Assembly from the then-ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) party, called for an investigation into the funding of the Aurat March. He accused the event and its organizers of trying to portray a negative image of Pakistan.<sup>152</sup> Students from the Lal-Masjid-affiliated Jamia Hafsa madrassa and the banned Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat group both claimed responsibility for defacing a mural painted in support of the Aurat Azadi March in Islamabad. Subsequently, members of Jamia Hafsa attacked the march.<sup>153</sup>

**VIDEOS AND PHOTOS OF THE MARCH BANNERS AND SLOGANS WERE MANIPULATED TO “PROVE” THAT THE PARTICIPANTS RAISED BLASPHEMOUS SLOGANS. MANY RIGHT-WING PERSONALITIES IMPLIED THE ACCUSATIONS THROUGH YOUTUBE CHANNELS AND FACEBOOK .**

The backlash escalated in 2020, when the Aurat Azadi March in Islamabad was violently attacked by affiliates of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Pakistan (JUI), a fundamentalist party, and Lal Masjid, who hurled rocks, shoes, bottles, and chili powder at the demonstrators.<sup>154</sup> In 2021, the Aurat march faced an online disinformation<sup>155</sup> campaign with several x (previously known as Twitter) hashtags accusing the organisers of receiving foreign funds to promote “Western agendas” and that the marches were anti-Islamic. Videos and photos of the march banners and slogans were manipulated to “prove” that the participants raised blasphemous slogans. Many right-wing personalities implied the accusations through YouTube channels and Facebook. Following these accusations, a statement of intimidation was issued by Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP) – the Pakistani Taliban – saying, “Fix your ways, there are still many young Muslims here who know how to protect Islam and the boundaries set by Allah.”<sup>156</sup>

152 Dawn. (2021). Aurat March organisers reject ‘baseless allegations’ about ‘obscenity’, foreign funding. Dawn, 20 March. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1613626>

153 Dawn. (2020). Students from Jamia Hafsa deface Aurat Azadi March mural in Islamabad. Dawn, 9 March. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1538478>

154 Daily Times. (2020). When you have to stone us into submission. Daily Times, 11 March. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/576223/when-you-have-to-stone-us-into-submission/>

155 suPWR. (2021). Online disinformation: a weapon to silence feminists <https://supwr.org/2021/10/11/online-disinformation-a-weapon-to-silence-feminists/>

156 The Express Tribune. (2021) Fix your ways: Taliban threaten organisers of Aurat march. The Express Tribune, 13 March. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2289084/fix-your-ways-taliban-threaten-organisers-of-aurat-march>

In 2021, the federal Minister for Religious Affairs, Pir Noorul Haq Qadri, announced a legal inquiry into allegedly ‘blasphemous’ slogans<sup>157</sup> raised at the Aurat March, while dozens of people from various groups blocked major roads in Islamabad protesting against the event. Separate protests were staged by the Sunni Rabta Council, State Youth Parliament, Muslim Talba Mahaz, and Muttahida Talba Mahaz at Aabpara Chowk.<sup>158</sup> Protestors demonstrated against the Aurat March, accusing them of ‘blasphemy, obscenity and vulgarity’. The protests were led by traders’ body president Zahir Shah and Jamaat-e-Islami’s Ibrahim Biland, who blocked the road in Mardan in an attempt to besiege protesters at Aurat March.<sup>159</sup>

In 2022, Ulema-e-Islam JUI-F Sindh Chapter General Secretary Maulana Rashid Mehmood warned that JUI-F would stop marchers by force, suggesting it promoted ‘obscenity’ under the guise of women’s rights.<sup>160</sup> This came after the Minister of Religious Affairs wrote to the Prime Minister – then Imran Khan – pushing for a ban of the March, arguing that ‘anti-Islamic slogans’ should not be raised on International Women’s Day. Leaders from JUI-F and ultra-conservative muftis like Muneeb-ur-Rehman, expressed their disapproval, arguing that the march promotes Western values contrary to Islamic teachings. Additionally, Maulana Rashid Mehmood Soomro of JUI-F threatened to stop the March by force if it displayed what they deemed as unethical or anti-Islamic messages.<sup>161</sup>

The ongoing backlash against the Aurat March highlights the complex web of actors involved, illustrating how state entities (parties and the police), social and fundamentalist groups and schools, militant groups, and even traders collaborated in attempts to suppress the movement. The role of the media in enabling hate campaigns against the Aurat March is significant, often discrediting the march and its organizers. Male reporters from traditional outlets have been reported to heckle and provoke women protesters, further fueling negative perceptions. Fariha Anwar, a Senior Manager at an education-focused NGO, notes that media coverage tends to confirm pre-existing biases and sensationalize

---

157      Blasphemy is criminalized in Pakistan and is frequently used to target minorities and suppress dissent. Originating from colonial-era laws, these were significantly expanded under General Zia in the 1980s and further broadened in 2023. <https://theconversation.com/the-politics-of-blasphemy-why-pakistan-and-some-other-muslim-countries-are-passing-new-blasphemy-laws-19864>

158      Dawn. (2021). Protests staged against Aurat March. Dawn, 14 March. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1612190>

159      Dawn. (2021). Protests held against Aurat March in Islamabad. Dawn. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1611108>

160      Khan, Z. A. (2022). March in defiance. Tribune, 8 March. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220314095350/https://tribune.com.pk/story/2347667/march-in-defiance-1>

161      Ibid.

the march as a threat to cultural and religious values rather than recognizing it as a legitimate human rights movement. While social media allows supporters to share their perspectives, it also exposes them to intense trolling and threats, overshadowing their voices.<sup>162</sup>

Subsequently, in 2021, there was a surge in right-wing discourse against transgender rights in Pakistan, led by Senator Mushtaq Ahmed of the Jamaat-e-Islami party. His campaign targeted the Transgender Rights Act 2018 mentioned above, which at the time allowed citizens to be recognized according to their self-perceived gender identity. Despite being seen as an attempt to revive his political career, Ahmed quickly gained support from prominent figures like fashion designer Maria B, philanthropist Aliya Sarim Burney, and YouTube podcaster Raja Zia ul Haq, leading to increased online threats against visibly trans activists.<sup>163</sup>

This backlash was also orchestrated by social media-savvy parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami and ultra-right Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP).<sup>164</sup> Hashtags against the Transgender Act 2018, initially promoted by Jamaat-e-Islami's social media teams, were later amplified by activists from TLP and PTI, with planning occurring on platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram and executed on X (formerly Twitter), often featuring disinformation. In August 2021, the transphobic backlash targeted the local music duo 'Mystical Shayari' after a queer-coded photoshoot went viral on Twitter, leading to outrage and death threats. Influential right-wing journalist Ansar Abbasi even called for their arrest for "spreading obscenity." YouTube's de-platforming of podcaster Raja Zia ul Haq, who posted numerous anti-transgender videos, was a positive step, although his organization's channel still remains active. This anti-trans campaign, led by figures like Haq and Maria B, culminated in the Federal Shariat Court ruling mentioned above stating that key sections of the Transgender Act 2018 do not conform with their interpretation of Islamic principles.<sup>165</sup>

---

162 Media Diversity Institute. Aurat March: Hateful coverage marks Pakistan's International Women's Day march. <https://www.media-diversity.org/aurat-march-hateful-coverage-marks-pakistans-international-womens-day-march/>

163 No-Niin. (2023). Digital hate and the othering of Pakistan's transgender community. <https://no-niin.com/issue-20/digital-hate-and-the-othering-of-pakistans-transgender-community/index.html>

164 In April 2021, the federal government formally banned the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) after its supporters staged violent protests following the arrest of their leader, Saad Rizvi, who had called for the expulsion of the French ambassador. The ban was enacted under Section 11B(1) of the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, officially listing TLP as a proscribed organization. In November 2021, the Ministry of Interior lifted the ban on TLP, citing the "larger national interest" and assurances from the party that it would refrain from future violent activities. Dawn, (2021). Government bans TLP under anti-terrorism law. Dawn, 15 April. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1618391>; Al Jazeera (2021). Pakistan lifts ban on far-right TLP behind anti-France protests. Al Jazeera, 8 November. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/8/pakistan-lifts-tlp-ban-france-blasphemy>

165 No-Niin. (2023). Digital hate and the othering of Pakistan's transgender community. <https://no-niin.com/issue-20/digital-hate-and-the-othering-of-pakistans-transgender-community/index.html>



## INDIA

Since Modi's rise to power in 2014, India has witnessed a significant increase in violence and brutality over the last decade. The BJP, underpinned by Hindutva ideology, has promoted a vision of Hindu supremacy that is built on hate and exclusion and is often perpetuated by different means.<sup>166</sup> This ideology is not only propagated by the BJP but is also echoed by a network of fascist Hindu nationalist groups, including, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)<sup>167</sup> and Vishwa Hindu Parishad and their various local branches.<sup>168</sup>

By 2023, these Hindutva forces have embedded themselves in India's public discourse, not only through the institutionalization and mainstreaming of their ideology. This shift began in post-2017, as once marginal or militant groups transitioned into more prominent roles within the dominant political landscape, fully forming the Hindu national ethno-state project.<sup>169</sup> This institutional support amplified Hindutva groups ability to spread hate through different means, including conspiracy theories, content creation and campaigning, among others.

In 2017, the BJP implemented a strategy that consisted of recruiting citizens to become 'entrepreneurs of hate' across the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), with the aim of capturing the attention of smartphone users from Lucknow to rural Manikpur. These entrepreneurs were organized within 'Information Technology (IT) cells'. With an estimated 530 million Indian users on Whatsapp, 448 million on Youtube, 410 million on Facebook, 210 million on Instagram, and 175 million on X, India has become the largest market for Meta and its affiliated companies. This digital landscape made it easier for the BJP to establish the IT cells, first informally to promote their narrative and now formally as they are recognized as a department within the BJP that manages social media campaigns for the party and its members.

This IT wing, in both its formal and informal factions, exists to serve

---

166 Dasgupta, Jashodhara; Singh, Satish Kumar; Contractor, Sana Qais; Das, Abhijit; Mukhopadhyay, Maitrayee (2024). "Disrupting Anxious Masculinity: Fraternity as Resistance". the Institute of Development Studies and partner organisations. Journal contribution. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12413/18248>

167 Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Accessed September, 2024. <https://www.rss.org/>

168 Chakraborty, Angana. "The Rise of Hindu Nationalism and Its Regional and Global Ramifications." Education About Asia, Volume 23, No. 1 (Spring 2018) <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/the-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-and-its-regional-and-global-ramifications/>

169 The Sakal Hindu Samaj in Maharashtra exemplifies this trend, being a coalition of groups like Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, and others. The SHS organized 38 mass rallies in 2023. India Hate Lab. (2024). India Hate Lab Report. <https://indiahatelab.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/India-Hate-Lab-Report-Final-12.pdf>

the party and attack whoever opposes it. It amplifies the BJP narrative through repeated messaging and silences opposition by falsifying images and videos and deploying abuse and hate to create an environment of intimidation.

Rathore, the head of the UP-BJP's IT Cell, emphasized the goal of embedding the party's message in voter's minds through 'spamming', i.e., relentless messaging. Rathore justified the tactic by saying that: "It's difficult to embed an idea into someone's conscious mind. It is easier to feed agendas into an unconscious one."<sup>170</sup>

The campaign's strategy tailored messages to resonate with local dialects and cultural and social linguistic nuances. IT cells combine online and offline techniques for data collection, led by key figures like Sunil Bansal, an Indian politician from Rajasthan who was the General Secretary in Uttar Pradesh and has been in charge of the mega-outreach campaign celebrating Modi's nine years of power.<sup>171</sup>

A key element of the Hindutva propaganda machine, alongside its IT cells, is its ability to create near-mythical online figures who spread hate in service of the BJP, like the 'Astra' persona. Astra is an online anonymous account-turned-network that became prominent and slowly developed into a large BJP propaganda vehicle. Astra translates to weapon, and by 2023, Astra had become highly influential in Karnataka and beyond, contributing to the lead-up to the 2023 state elections. The page spread divisive and polarizing content and relied on inflammatory rhetoric through WhatsApp groups and networks. Astra incited such intense influence that BJP leaders feared being accused by him of being too moderate towards Muslims.<sup>172</sup>

The influential narrative of 'love jihad', first coined by the militant Hindu nationalist group Hindu Janagaruti Samiti (HJS) in 2007, emerged as they began policing interfaith couples in Kerala and Karnataka. It is a debunked conspiracy theory – claiming that Muslim men are persuading Hindu women into marriage as part of an effort to forcibly convert them – that Hindu nationalist groups and BJP leaders have weaponized

---

<sup>170</sup> Newslaundry. (2017). How BJP's IT cell waged war and won in UP. <https://www.newslaundry.com/2017/03/17/how-bjps-it-cell-waged-war-and-won-in-up>

<sup>171</sup> ThePrint. (2023). Ahead of 2024 LS Polls, Why BJP Has Picked Sunil Bansal to Be Its Point Person in UP Once Again. ThePrint, 22 May. <https://theprint.in/politics/ahead-of-2024-ls-polls-why-bjp-has-picked-sunil-bansal-to-be-its-point-person-in-up-once-again/1597507/>

<sup>172</sup> The Washington Post. (2023). How Hindu Nationalists Are Weaponizing Social Media to Spread Hate. The Washington Post, 26 September. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/26/hindu-nationalist-social-media-hate-campaign/>

extensively in recent years to incite violence against Muslim communities, as the theory has been increasingly brought into the mainstream.<sup>173</sup> Building on this discourse, BJP-governed states like Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Madhya Pradesh have enacted anti-conversion laws targeting interfaith marriages, invalidating them and imposing severe penalties. By January 2023, 11 Indian states had such laws. Between November 2020 and August 2021, Uttar Pradesh police arrested 208 Muslims under these laws. This campaign of fear and hate led to the brutal murder of 24-year-old Arbaz Mullah by the extremist Hindu Shri Ram Sena Hindustan for his relationship with a Hindu woman.<sup>174</sup> Several BJP-governed states have enacted anti-conversion laws targeting interfaith marriages. By January 2023, 11 out of 28 states, including Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Madhya Pradesh, had such laws, potentially nullifying marriages allegedly for conversion and imposing penalties of 5-10 years in prison.<sup>175</sup>

**BETWEEN MARCH 31ST AND APRIL 6TH, 2020, THERE WERE OVER 293,000 CONVERSATIONS FEATURING THE HASHTAG #CORONAJIHAD ON TWITTER, REACHING UP TO 165 MILLION PEOPLE. ONE TWEET, REMOVED ONLY AFTER 2,000 RETWEETS, DEPICTED A CARICATURED MUSLIM LABELED “CORONA JIHAD” PUSHING A HINDU OFF A CLIFF.**

Further, a ‘jihad master narrative’ has since expanded to include other stigmatizing conspiracy theories, such as Corona Jihad in 2020, where Muslims were accused of spreading COVID-19 to Hindus as part of a Muslim takeover master scheme. According to the South Asian Dalit human rights organization Equality Labs,<sup>176</sup> between March 31st and April 6th, 2020, there were over 293,000 conversations featuring the hashtag #Coronajihad on Twitter, reaching up to 165 million people. One tweet, removed only after 2,000 retweets, depicted a caricatured Muslim labeled “Corona Jihad” pushing a Hindu off a cliff. Equality Labs director

173 Outlook India. (2023). The roots and evolution of the myth of love jihad in Kerala. <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/the-roots-and-evolution-of-the-myth-of-love-jihad-in-kerala-news-277712>

174 Georgetown University. (n.d.). Factsheet: Love Jihad conspiracy theory. Bridge Initiative. <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-love-jihad-conspiracy-theory/>

175 Ibid.

176 Equality Labs. (2020). Coronajihad: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Unleashed Anti-Muslim Bigotry in India. Equality Labs, 2020, [https://equalitylabs.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CORONAJIHAD\\_EqualityLabs\\_Report2020.pdf](https://equalitylabs.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CORONAJIHAD_EqualityLabs_Report2020.pdf)

Thenmozhi Soundarajan noted that the hashtag suggests Muslims are weaponizing COVID-19 against Hindus. Despite some tweets being removed, similar content remained online long-term.

In 2022, the app Bulli Bai – a sexist slur used against Muslim women – on Github fake ‘auctioned’ Indian Muslim women with the phrase “Your Bulli Bai of the day is...”, it posted images of Muslim women without their permission, who were then doxxed and ‘offered’ for auction.<sup>177</sup> Prior to 2022, there was a similar app, Sulli Deals – another pejorative term for Muslim women – also hosted on Github – that listed women with edited photos.<sup>178</sup> These apps were meant to humiliate, abuse and harass Muslim women.

Bulli Bai app’s creator, Neeraj Bishnoi, along with three other perpetrators – Shweta Singh, Mayank Rawal, and Vishal Kumar Jha – are believed to have been influenced by Hindu nationalist ideology. During this period, all of them were between the ages of 18 and 25.<sup>179</sup> The creators used app names related to the Sikh community to make it appear as though these Twitter handles were created by members of that religious community, the police statement issued in the evening said. The Twitter handle of the app claimed its creator was “KSF Khalsa Sikh Force.”<sup>180</sup>

In the UK, Hindutva actors have been able to transform the Hindutva ideological project into a transnational one, through embedding themselves within both governmental and societal structures. The transnational spread of Hindutva ideology has been evident since 2007,<sup>181</sup> when the Hindu Forum of Britain (HFB) alleged that ‘hundreds’ of Hindu and Sikh girls were being forcibly converted by Muslim extremists at British universities, reviving the myth of ‘love jihad.’ Leaders like Satish Sharma, the Chair of The National Council of Hindu Temples (NCHT), who attended a House of Commons session on Caste Law, capitalized on these events to promote narratives that align ‘law-abiding’ Hindus with ‘British values’ while depicting Muslims as threats.<sup>182,183</sup>

---

177 The Wire. (2022). Indian Muslim women targeted in ‘Bulli Bai’ app auction. <https://thewire.in/communalism/indian-muslim-woman-auction-bulli-bai>

178 The Wire. (2022) ‘Sulli Deals’ and the elaborate ploy to blame Muslim youth for the derogatory app.

<https://thewire.in/communalism/sulli-deals-and-the-elaborate-ploy-to-blame-muslim-youth-for-the-derogatory-app>

179 DW. (2022). India: Auction of Muslim women on apps reveals widespread online abuse. <https://www.dw.com/en/india-auction-of-muslim-women-on-apps-reveals-widespread-online-abuse/a-60379358>

180 Rediff. (2022). ‘Bulli Bai’ accused used Sikh names to mislead: Mumbai Police. <https://www.rediff.com/news/report/bulli-bai-accused-used-sikh-names-to-mislead-mumbai-police/20220105.htm>

181 Awaaz Magazine. (n.d.). From Nagpur to Nairobi to Neasden: Tracing global Hindutva. <https://www.awaazmagazine.com/volume-17/issue-2-volume-17/cover-story-issue-2-volume-17/from-nagpur-to-nairobi-to-neasden-tracing-global-hindutva>

182 International Socialism. (2023). Sangh Parivar in Britain. Retrieved from <https://isj.org.uk/sangh-parivar-in-britain/>

183 The Guardian. (2022). Britain must open its eyes to the influence of India’s BJP on British Hindus and Muslims. The

The Leicester sectarian confrontation in September 2022 further exemplified the transnational reach of Hindutva ideology, featuring Hindu nationalist slogans and violence against Muslim communities. During this time, a mix of hate speech and fake news flooded social media, with pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim posts often using the hashtag #HindusUnderAttack. Analysis revealed that over half of the 200,000 tweets about Leicester originated from India, particularly anti-Muslim website called Opindia, Despite being far from the scene, Opindia’s editor-in-chief, Nupur Sharma has perpetuated hate speech and propaganda against Muslims in not only Leicester in 2022 but also extended to Udaipur, Bangladesh, and Kashmir.

## SRI LANKA

Religious fundamentalist actors, such as the Bodhu Bala Sena (BBS)<sup>184</sup> and similar Buddhist monk-led groups, are a significant political force and a source of anti-minority violence in Sri Lanka, often given tacit or explicit support, protection and impunity by the Rajapakses and other allied ruling elite.<sup>185</sup>

**IN MARCH 2013, FAR-RIGHT BUDDHIST FACTIONS PROTESTED AGAINST FAMILY PLANNING, CITING THEIR CONCERNS ABOUT THE ‘DIMINISHING SINHALA RACE.’**

In March 2013, far-right Buddhist factions protested against family planning, citing their concerns about the ‘diminishing Sinhala race.’ In response, the Ministry of Health issued a directive banning all irreversible birth control methods in government hospitals and private institutions and prohibiting NGOs from providing sterilization services.<sup>186</sup> A preoccupation with restricting reproductive rights is one of the main concerns of these groups. For example, in 2017, when the then-government proposed reforms to Sri Lanka’s highly restrictive abortion

Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/oct/11/britain-india-hindus-muslims-leicester-bjp>  
184 Keenan, A. (2021). “One Country, One Law”: The Sri Lankan State’s Hostility toward Muslims Grows Deeper. International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/%E2%80%9Cone-country-one-law%E2%80%9D-sri-lankan-states-hostility-toward-muslims-grows-deeper>

185 Haniffa, F. (2021). What is behind the anti-Muslim measures in Sri Lanka? Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/4/12/what-is-behind-the-anti-muslim-measures-in-sri-lanka>

186 Groundviews. (2014). Good Women and Bad Women of the Post-War Nation. <https://groundviews.org/2014/05/22/good-women-and-bad-women-of-the-post-war-nation/>

law, Buddhist clergy joined other religious institutional leaders,<sup>187</sup> such as Venerable Bellanwila Wimalarathana Thero and Cardinal Malcolm Ranjithin, in an all-male meeting to express their opposition to abortion.<sup>188</sup>

**THE 2018 ANTI-MUSLIM RIOTS IN SRI LANKA WERE FUELED BY BBS USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO SPREAD ANTI-MUSLIM RHETORIC AND MISINFORMATION. ONE SOCIAL MEDIA POST DECLARED, “KILL ALL MUSLIMS, DON’T EVEN SAVE AN INFANT.”**

Among these far-right factions is the aforementioned BBS, which is an ultranationalist Sinhalese Buddhist organization. The 2018 anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka were fueled by BBS using social media to spread anti-Muslim rhetoric and misinformation. One social media post declared, “Kill all Muslims, don’t even save an infant.” Another extremist urged his followers to descend on the city of Kandy to “reap without leaving an iota behind.”<sup>189</sup> As a result of this, Buddhist militants in Ampara attacked a mosque and Muslim-owned shops over social media disinformation about Muslims adding sterilizing pills to food. These riots resulted in a series of violent attacks on Muslims, their places of worship, businesses and homes, exacerbating ethnic and religious violence.<sup>190</sup>

A probe commissioned by Facebook revealed that anti-Muslim content on the platform in Sri Lanka has contributed to violence against Muslims (Facebook subsequently acknowledged and apologized for the human rights impacts, stating their platform was misused). The report noted Facebook’s “limited resources” to monitor Sinhala content, despite having 4.4 million daily users in Sri Lanka.<sup>191</sup>

In 2022, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa appointed militant Buddhist monk Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, head of BBS, to lead a presidential task force on legal reforms. This move shocked many due to Gnanasara’s

187 UCANews. Sri Lankan Bishops Condemn Govt’s Decision to Legalize Abortion. UCANews, 23 July 2017, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/sri-lankan-bishops-condemn-govts-decision-to-legalize-abortion/80148>

188 Union of Catholic Asian News. (2017). Buddhist, Muslim and Christian leaders oppose abortion. Union of Catholic Asian News. [https://www.ucanews.com/news/buddhist-muslim-and-christian-leaders-oppose-abortion/80326#google\\_vignette](https://www.ucanews.com/news/buddhist-muslim-and-christian-leaders-oppose-abortion/80326#google_vignette)

189 Taub, A., & Fisher, M. (2018). Where Countries Are Tinderboxes and Facebook Is a Match. The New York Times, 2 April. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/21/world/asia/facebook-sri-lanka-riots.html>

190 Ibid.

191 Al Jazeera. (2020). Sri Lanka: Facebook apologises for role in 2018 anti-Muslim riots. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/13/sri-lanka-facebook-apologises-for-role-in-2018-anti-muslim-riots>

history of inciting inter-communal violence, including the deadly anti-Muslim pogrom in 2018 mentioned above and previously in 2014. Gnanasara also rejected the Dalai Lama as a global spiritual leader, criticizing him for being influenced by “Islamic extremists.” The Sri Lankan government has repeatedly denied him a visa due to Chinese pressure.

Within months of taking office, Rajapaksa intensified state hostility towards Muslim communities, using Covid-19 lockdowns and village quarantines to harass them. In 2020, the government exacerbated tensions by banning Muslims from burying anyone suspected of dying from the disease and enforced cremation.<sup>192</sup>

The last few years in Sri Lanka have been marked by unprecedented popular uprisings against authoritarian Rajapakse rule – a political family that emerged in the early 2000s and led the Sri Lankan armed forces to a so-called “military victory” against Tamil separatists in 2009 – and the status quo, in opposition to the economic crisis, political corruption, nepotism and the culture of impunity. Many see the economic crisis as being directly related to the Rajapakses and their political allies, due to the years of flagrant corruption and extortion by the family.<sup>193</sup> These movements reached a climactic victory in 2022, when they successfully ousted Rajapakse from the Presidency.<sup>194</sup> However, they were then met with brutal and violent state crackdown with the involvement of the military.<sup>195</sup>

The increasing military involvement in government operations, such as in state repression of protests or in carrying out the government’s so-called ‘anti-drug program’,<sup>196</sup> shows a tacit return to power for the military, and acts as a mark of continuing Rajapakse family rule via a proxy.

The proxy of the Rajapakses is the current president, Ranil Wickramasinghe and his government cohorts have emerged as important fascist and fundamentalist political actors in the Sri Lankan landscape.

---

192 UN News. (2022). Hate speech, misinformation and violence in focus for Sri Lanka’s online users. Global Issues. <https://www.globalissues.org/news/2022/01/25/29895>

193 Senanayake, D. (2023). Where Does Sri Lanka’s Protest Movement Go From Here? The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/where-does-sri-lankas-protest-movement-go-from-here/>

194 BBC. (2022). Sri Lanka political dynasty ends as Rajapaksa quits. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62160227>

195 International Federation for Human Rights. (2023). Anatomy of a crackdown - The repression of Sri Lanka’s aragayala protest movement. International Federation for Human Rights. [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/sri\\_lanka802aweb.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/sri_lanka802aweb.pdf)

196 Financial Times. (2024). UN experts call on SL Govt. to immediately suspend and review ‘Yukthiya’ anti-drug operation. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.lk/front-page/UN-experts-call-on-SL-Govt-to-immediately-suspend-and-review-Yukthiya-anti-drug-operation/44-757676>

Long since seen as the ‘liberal’ in the political spectrum, Wickramasinghe has emerged as an anti-democratic, authoritarian leader in the last two years since he first took office. As President, he has now turned in full towards the military to help him secure further power in the country and suppress peoples’ movements.<sup>197</sup>

**IN 2024, A BUDDHIST MONK WELL KNOWN FOR ANTI-MINORITY RHETORIC CHIMED IN PUBLICLY ON SRI LANKA’S EFFORTS TO DECRIMINALIZE SAME-SEX SEXUAL CONDUCT BY ISSUING FALSE STATEMENTS THAT THE SRI LANKA PARLIAMENT WERE TRYING TO “LEGALIZE SAME-SEX MARRIAGE” AND THAT THEY SHOULD RESIST “WESTERN PRESSURE”.**

Far right Buddhist clergy’s continuing political influence was exemplified when, in 2024, a Buddhist monk well known for anti-minority rhetoric chimed in publicly on Sri Lanka’s efforts to decriminalize same-sex sexual conduct by issuing false statements that the Sri Lanka parliament were trying to “legalize same-sex marriage” and that they should resist “Western pressure”.<sup>198</sup>

Trends of ultranationalist Buddhist monk-led anti-minority violence in Sri Lanka and the explicit support of Buddhist clerical leadership’s support for the military and various government anti-minority policies and brutality are noted in Myanmar. Buddhist fundamentalist clergy there have explicitly supported the military junta regime<sup>199</sup> and have been at the forefront of anti-Muslim violence, in particular inciting violence against the Rohingya community.<sup>200</sup>

## AFGHANISTAN

Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, neo-colonialism paved the way for fundamentalists to seize control. This has legitimized a fundamentalist group as a state government through aid and arms flows,

197 Nandakumar, V. (2022). Op. cit.

198 Tamil Guardian. (2024). Sinhala Buddhist monk denounces same-sex marriage and dismisses ‘Western pressure’. Tamil Guardian. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sinhala-buddhist-monk-denounces-same-sex-marriage-and-dismisses-western-pressure#:~:text=Sinhala%20Buddhist%20Monk%20Bengamuwe%20Nalaka,against%20the%20%E2%80%9CBuddhist%20values%E2%80%9D>

199 Aung, T. T. & McPherson, P. (2022). Insight: Monk militia: The Buddhist clergy backing Myanmar’s junta. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/monk-militia-buddhist-clergy-backing-myanmars-junta-2022-12-08/>

200 Gunasingham, A. L. (2021). Myanmar’s extreme Buddhist nationalists. The Interpreter. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-s-extreme-buddhist-nationalists>



positioning the Taliban as a key geopolitical player.

In 2024, two-thirds of Afghanistan's population are facing crisis levels of hunger. With the economy in shambles, minimal support comes from United Nations aid via the Afghanistan Resilience Trust Fund.<sup>201</sup> Over the past several decades, Afghanistan's society has endured prolonged violence, from the Soviet occupation to the US occupation in the guise of the 'War on Terror.'<sup>202</sup> This continuous state of war on Afghanistan has led to a collapsed economic and social system, poor governance, and an influx of weapons that have further destabilized the country.

**IN 2020, AID CONSTITUTED 43 PERCENT OF AFGHANISTAN'S GDP, FINANCED 50 PERCENT OF THE BUDGET, AND COVERED 75 PERCENT OF PUBLIC AND 90 PERCENT OF SECURITY EXPENDITURES.**

For nearly two decades, sixteen states, including the US, Russia, and Brazil, have supplied weapons and equipment to Afghanistan. The US alone has provided 74 percent of these arms, spending \$83 billion on training and arming the Afghan National Security Forces (ANDSF). This overwhelming international flow of arms took place with the agreement of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies.<sup>203</sup> Instead of delivering stability and prosperity, two decades of foreign intervention fostered corruption, political instability, and deepening social and economic disparities, and in 2020, aid constituted 43 percent of Afghanistan's GDP, financed 50 percent of the budget, and covered 75 percent of public and 90 percent of security expenditures.<sup>204</sup>

In 2021, the international community cut all aid, roughly \$8 billion USD annually.<sup>205</sup> Facing this crisis, the Taliban have set up mechanisms to leverage aid through 'exemptions'. For example, the Taliban's December

201 World Bank. (2023). Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey. The World Bank. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/975d25c52634db31c504a2c6bee44d22-0310012023/original/Afghanistan-Welfare-Monitoring-Survey-3.pdf>

202 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. (2024). Reasoning with the Patriarchy: The Political, Economic, and Social Fallout from Talking with the Taliban. WILPF. <https://www.wilpf.org/reasoning-with-the-patriarchy-the-political-economic-and-social-fallout-from-talking-with-the-taliban/>

203 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. (2021) Militarisation in Afghanistan. <https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Militarisation-in-Afghanistan.pdf>

204 World Bank. (2022) 'Through the Looking Glass': Lessons from the World Bank Afghanistan Portfolio for FCV Engagement. The World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099915101032321436/pdf/P17861103275970d50957302bfb0c71a607.pdf>

205 Ibid.

2022 ban on women working with domestic or international NGOs and the United Nations, except in health, nutrition, and education, strategically leaves some women in key positions to ensure aid money continues to flow. This selective allowance serves to legitimize the regime while depriving the majority of women of their livelihoods, and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis by making it harder to deliver and monitor aid effectively.<sup>206</sup> In the same year, feminist activists protesting were seized by the Taliban. In an interview with Amnesty, a protester who was detained for several days described the Taliban's treatment, recounting severe beatings:

[The Taliban guards] kept coming to my room and showing me pictures of my family. They kept repeating... 'We can kill them, all of them, and you won't be able to do anything... Don't cry, don't make a scene. After protesting, you should have expected days like this'...they locked the door. They started screaming at me... [One Taliban member] said, 'You nasty woman... America is not giving us the money because of you bitches'... then he kicked me. <sup>207</sup>

In 2023, Taliban security forces again attacked women protesting against their policies, detaining many, including activists Neda Parwani and Zholia Parsi, and subjecting them to torture.<sup>208</sup> In April 2023, Taliban authorities expanded the ban on women working outside the home to include United Nations jobs, exacerbating humanitarian aid delivery challenges. Restrictions also barred women from public sector roles, except in limited fields, and mandated male chaperones for travel. Under this ban, women were prohibited from registering their own organizations.<sup>209</sup> Forced closures of beauty salons affected 60,000 women-owned businesses. Additionally, ethnic minorities like the Hazara have faced increased marginalization, forced evictions, and violence.

A number of minority ethnic and religious communities are facing displacement and violence under the Taliban. In addition to the Hazara, Uzbek, Turkmen, and Tajik groups have experienced growing

206 Reuters. (2022) Taliban Orders NGOs to Ban Female Employees from Coming to Work. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-orders-ngos-ban-female-employees-coming-work-2022-12-24/>

207 Amnesty International. (2022). Afghanistan: Taliban's Suffocating Crackdown Destroying Lives of Women and Girls – New Report. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/07/afghanistan-talibans-suffocating-crackdown-destroying-lives-of-women-and-girls-new-report/>

208 Human Rights Watch. (2023). World Report 2023: Afghanistan. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/afghanistan-0>

209 Amnesty International. (2023). Report: Afghanistan, 2023. Amnesty International <https://www.amnesty.org/en/loc-ation/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/afghanistan/report-afghanistan/>

marginalization and forced evictions from their homes and land in recent years. The Baloch community has seen members detained and forcibly disappeared. In 2023, there were instances of Kuchi communities attacking Hazara residents; between June and August, six Hazara men were killed in the Khas Urozgan district, amid ongoing impunity for these crimes. In October, two Hazaras were killed at the border between Lal wa Srajangal and Dawlat Yar districts of Ghor province. Several killings of Hazara men, including religious leaders, were also reported in Herat province in November and December.<sup>210</sup>

The Taliban have also imposed restrictions on Shia – the minority in majority Sunni Afghanistan – at religious events, such as the Ashura commemoration, citing security reasons. On July 28 2023, in Ghazni province, Taliban forces killed four Shia Hazaras and wounded six others while dispersing Ashura commemorations. The Taliban have also excluded Shia jurisprudence from the education system, enforcing Sunni-only religious teachings.<sup>211</sup>

## THE PHILIPPINES

In the Philippines, the Catholic Church has historically held a strong following amongst the country's population, with more than 78.8 percent of citizens identifying as Catholic today.<sup>212</sup> The Catholic Church wields significant social, ideological, and political power, reinforced by its vast network of institutions and properties, including schools, hospitals, orphanages, banks, land, and churches.<sup>213</sup> The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) is the group of bishops (Episcopal Conference) that leads the Catholic Church in the Philippines in its pastoral and evangelizing work.

**ANTI-ABORTION CATHOLIC TEACHINGS ON THE 'PROTECTION OF LIFE' FROM CONCEPTION ONWARD ARE ENSHRINED IN THE 1987 CONSTITUTION, INFLUENCING PUBLIC HEALTH AND REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE POLICIES, DESPITE THE PHILIPPINES' STATUS AS A SECULAR STATE.**

210 Ibid.

211 Ibid.

212 "Catholics Make Up Nearly 79% of Philippine Population." BusinessWorld, February 22, 2023. <https://www.bworldonline.com/the-nation/2023/02/22/506351/catholics-make-up-nearly-79-of-philippine-population/>

213 Library of Congress. (2016). Philippines: Legal Provisions on Emergency Contraception. <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/gdc/gdcovop/2017343079/2017343079.pdf>

Anti-abortion Catholic teachings on the ‘protection of life’ from conception onward are enshrined in the 1987 Constitution, influencing public health and reproductive justice policies, despite the Philippines’ status as a secular state. CBCP has strongly opposed women’s bodily rights and autonomy, including the right to divorce and access to contraceptive and abortion services.<sup>214</sup> CBCP remained a vocal opponent of the Reproductive Health Law even after its passage in 2012 due to its provisions around access to contraceptives for family planning.<sup>215</sup> Such pressure to undermine reproductive justice also comes from other actors. In 2023, for example, the Congress of the Philippines threatened to defund the national Human Rights Commission, and pressured it to weaken its support for abortion rights. During November 2023 budget deliberations, one senator Jinggoy Ejercito Estrada also proposed a ‘zero’ budget unless the Human Rights Commission opposed abortion.<sup>216</sup>

When speaking of political actors in the Philippines in the context of fascism and fundamentalism, it is crucial to examine the role of Duterte. Rodrigo Duterte’s ‘penal populism’, was rooted in penal policies and nationalist defiance. His approach, rooted in the idea of bringing people together as a means to combat crime, has resulted in widespread violence and countless deaths, all under the guise of “protection.” This was the essence of his populism: united people fighting ‘crime’. Duterte’s rule introduced a new strand of fascism characterized by criminalizing others and macho-fascism.<sup>217</sup>

**IN 2021, THE GOVERNMENT ADMITTED TO OVER 6,000 KILLINGS DURING POLICE OPERATIONS, THOUGH ESTIMATES SUGGEST THE TRUE TOLL IS AT LEAST 7,742 CIVILIANS.**

Duterte’s authoritarian rule lasted from 2016 until 2022, when his administration started immediately with a brutal war on drugs, marked

214 Likhaan Centre for Women’s Health and ARROW. (2016). Understanding Catholic Fundamentalism in the Philippines: How conservative religious teachings on women, family and contraception are wielded to impede the Reproductive Health Law and other reproductive health policies. <http://arrow.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/7.-Philippines-with-extra-pages-added.pdf>

215 Ibid.

216 Human Rights Watch. (2023). Philippines: Lawmakers Threaten Rights Body on Abortion. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/21/philippines-lawmakers-threaten-rights-body-abortion>

217 European Center for Populism Studies. (2023). Mapping Global Populism Panel 2: Populism, Macho-Fascism, and Varieties of Illiberalism in the Philippines. <https://www.populismstudies.org/mapping-global-populism-panel-2-populism-macho-fascism-and-varieties-of-illiberalism-in-the-philippines-3/>

by extrajudicial killings and rampant human rights abuses.<sup>218</sup> Despite claiming to be a progressive leader, even a socialist, Duterte directly demanded anti-drug vigilantes to act on his orders to fight crime, thus perpetuating state-sanctioned violence, leading to the deaths of thousands of civilians. In 2021, the government admitted to over 6,000 killings during police operations, though estimates suggest the true toll is at least 7,742 civilians.<sup>219</sup> This led the International Criminal Court (ICC) to authorize an investigation into these alleged crimes, highlighting the severe human cost of Duterte's rule.<sup>220</sup> On March 14, 2018, Duterte announced the Philippines' withdrawal from the ICC, revoking the country's ratification of the Rome Statute, an international treaty designed to address serious crimes such as genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and crimes of aggression.<sup>221</sup>

Duterte's violent and inflammatory rhetoric and policies explicitly encouraged extrajudicial killings, with vigilantes often acting in collusion with state security forces. By 2021, state forces were directly responsible for 80 percent of civilian deaths in the 'drug war', which was a war on poor people, with at least 122 children and minors killed.<sup>222</sup> The killings were widespread, occurring openly across the country, often in public and in broad daylight, specifically targeting slums and impoverished neighborhoods.<sup>223</sup> This deadly campaign, driven by Duterte's counter-revolutionary approach, devastated countless lives while being portrayed as a necessary measure for public safety.<sup>224</sup>

Duterte positioned himself against colonial subjugation saying, "I am the president of a sovereign state... I do not have any master, but the Filipino people." Duterte's misogynistic remarks further underscored his macho-fascist leadership style. In 2016, he joked about wishing he could have raped an Australian missionary killed in a 1989 prison riot. In 2018, he instructed soldiers to shoot female New People's Army rebels in the vagina, saying, "We will not kill you. We will just shoot you in the vagina,"

---

218 Human Rights Watch. (n.d.) Philippines' War on Drugs. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/tag/philippines-war-drugs>

219 Amnesty International. (2020). Philippines: President Duterte's War on Drugs – Thousands Killed. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/philippines-president-duterte-war-on-drugs-thousands-killed>

220 Ibid.

221 Karapatan. (2023). Rodrigo Duterte And His Crass Legacy Of Mass Murder And State Terror. Karapatan Alliance Philippines. <https://www.karapatan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Duterte-Term-Ender-and-Marcos-Jr-6mos.pdf>

222 Karapatan. (2023). Rodrigo Duterte And His Crass Legacy Of Mass Murder And State Terror. Karapatan Alliance Philippines. <https://www.karapatan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Duterte-Term-Ender-and-Marcos-Jr-6mos.pdf>

223 Ibid.

224 ABS-CBN News. (2021). As COVID Restrictions Ease, Drug-Related Killings on the Rise Anew. <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/07/16/21/as-covid-restrictions-ease-drug-related-killings-on-the-rise-anew>

implying women would be “useless” without their vaginas.<sup>225</sup> These comments, along with his vulgar demeanor and public threats, reinforced his image as a leader who disregards human dignity and rights.

**DESPITE PROMISES OF ECONOMIC REFORM, DUTERTE’S ADMINISTRATION DID LITTLE TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY. HIS ‘WAR ON DRUGS’ DEFLECTED FROM THE TRUE CAUSES OF POVERTY AND DEVELOPMENT ISSUES. HIS BRUTE-FORCE GOVERNANCE, ESPECIALLY DURING THE PANDEMIC, FURTHER UNDERMINED ACCOUNTABILITY IN AN ALREADY WEAK STATE.**

Despite promises of economic reform, Duterte’s administration did little to alleviate poverty. His ‘war on drugs’ deflected from the true causes of poverty and development issues. His brute-force governance, especially during the pandemic, further undermined accountability in an already weak state.<sup>226</sup> Marcos Jr. now continues the fascist and dynastic tendencies after his election in 2022, following Duterte’s presidency, where he now combines his father’s (Marcos) legacy and Duterte’s counter-insurgency model at the same time. Duterte’s daughter, Sara, accepted a secondary role in the administration, positioning herself for a potential future presidency.<sup>227</sup>

The brutal legacy of extrajudicial killings, a hallmark of Duterte’s ‘war on drugs’, has persisted under Marcos Jr. Despite his public declarations that the focus would shift toward treatment, rehabilitation and integration, the reality tells a far more violent story. According to data gathered by Dahas, a university-based research group, at least 329 people lost their lives in 2023 alone, as victims of police-led anti-drug operations or ‘mysterious assailants’.<sup>228</sup>

225 The Philippine Star. (2018) HRW: Duterte’s ‘Shoot Them in the Vagina’ Remark Encourages Sexual Violence. <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/02/12/1787123/hrw-dutertes-shoot-them-vagina-remark-encourages-sexual-violence>

226 UPLB Perspective. (2020). Dysfunctional Authority: Macho-Fascist Guide to Impunity. <https://uplbperspective.wordpress.com/2020/06/14/dysfunctional-authority-macho-fascist-guide-to-impunity/>

227 “Sara Duterte: Daughter of Philippines Leader Runs for Vice-President.” BBC News, November 19, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-59274204>

228 Amnesty International. (2023). Philippines 2023. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/philippines/report-philippines/>

## MALAYSIA

Malaysia's population of 32 million is predominantly Muslim Malays and Indigenous groups (60%), with ethnic Chinese (25%) and ethnic Indians (6.5%).<sup>229</sup> The Barisan Nasional formula reflects Malaysia's population, as it is a political coalition that has been established since independence with the aim of holding multi-ethnic representation within government. However, the government's struggle to maintain multi-ethnic representation and address East-West Malaysian dynamics, including central-periphery relations and cultural differences, has created division.

Far-right actors, such as the Perikatan Coalition (PN coalition), which is a political coalition formed by Malay nationalists and Islamist parties, have exploited this turmoil in the 2022-2023 elections to push for authoritarian Malay-Muslim majority, sidelining multicultural representation.<sup>230</sup>

In recent years, it has also been documented using social media platforms – such as a right-wing Islamist-linked Facebook page, “Voter Awareness Movement” (Gerakan Pengundi Sedar, or GPS)<sup>231</sup> – to promote voting exclusively for Muslim candidates, and campaigning to dislodge non-Muslim candidates from Muslim-majority constituencies. GPS has transformed into a relentless force on Facebook, posting daily in a way that stokes fear of ‘threats’ to Islam. One of their tactics is to focus on specific events or moments, like the 2019 Women’s Day March in Kuala Lumpur, where the presence of rainbow flags was spun into a narrative of the dangers of LGBTQI+ groups’ visibility and demanding governmental intervention.<sup>232</sup>

In the 2022 election, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), a fundamentalist party advocating for theocratic Islamic rule, won 49 out of 222 parliamentary seats, becoming the largest single party in the government. Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim’s Pakatan Harapan (PK) alliance won 82 seats but fell short of the majority needed to form a government.<sup>233</sup> The Perikatan Nasional alliance, including PAS, secured 73 seats, while the

229 Initiate.my. (2022). Social Media and the Far Right in Malaysia: Oxygen to Fire for a Conspiratorial Worldview. Initiate.my. <https://initiate.my/social-media-and-the-far-right-in-malaysia-oxygen-to-fire-for-a-conspiratorial-worldview/>

230 Vice. (2022). Malaysia's Far Right Islamists Thrive in Hung Parliament. Vice. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/93ampv/malaysia-far-right-islamists-hung-parliament>

231 Mohamad, M. (2020). Manufacturing Malay unity and the downfall of Pakatan Harapan. New Mandala, 28 February. <https://www.newmandala.org/manufacturing-malay-unity-and-the-downfall-of-pakatan-harapan/>

232 Free Malaysia Today. (2022). ‘Mat Kilau’ Inaccurate, Says Academic Who Wants ‘Honest Narrative.’ August 2. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2022/08/02/mat-kilau-inaccurate-says-academic-who-wants-honest-narrative/>

233 The Edge, Malaysia. (2023). Cover Story: Addressing Malaysia's Shift to the Far Right. <https://theedgemaalaysia.com/node/679650>

incumbent Barisan Nasional managed only 30 seats. The “Malay Green Wave”<sup>234</sup> marks a shift among young Malay voters who have decided to rally behind the PN Coalition, particularly drawn to the hardline stance of PAS, where voters have prioritized leaders who position themselves as defenders of Islam more so than focusing on any other issue.<sup>235</sup> This led to PAS’s influence soaring, doubling its parliamentary seats and causing stocks in gaming and alcohol to slump due to their advocacy for their interpretation of ‘sharia law’ and push for the coerced conversion of minors to Islam.<sup>236</sup>

**A KEY ACTOR IN THIS EFFORT WAS BERSATU.TV, A SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT THAT CLAIMED TO BE THE OFFICIAL MEDIA PLATFORM OF BERSATU (A PARTY WITHIN THE PN COALITION). THE ACCOUNT SPREAD FALSE INFORMATION, SUCH AS THE IDEA THAT THE ROHINGYA ARE CALLING FOR EQUALITY WITH MALAY CITIZENS.**

Simultaneously, in 2020, the PN, led by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, played a central role in driving the surge of xenophobia against refugees, particularly the Rohingya. During COVID-19, PN capitalized on the crisis by focusing on anti-Rohingya narratives through coordinated online campaigns. A key actor in this effort was Bersatu.tv, a social media account that claimed to be the official media platform of BERSATU (a party within the PN coalition). The account spread false information, such as the idea that the Rohingya are calling for equality with Malay citizens. On April 30, 2020, Home Minister Hamzah Zainuddin declared that the Malaysian government does not recognize the refugee status of any group, including the Rohingyas. Social media accounts such as Malaysians Against Illegal Immigrants fabricated and manipulated videos to portray the Rohingyas as a threat to Malaysia’s stability.<sup>237</sup>

234 This refers to the PAS flag, which is green. Green has been associated with different Islamist parties.

235 Kok, Yewfai. (2024). The Malay Green Tsunami: Young Malay Voters and the Perikatan Nasional Coalition. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/TRS12\\_24.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/TRS12_24.pdf)

236 Focus Malaysia (2022). Federal Constitution’s English Translation Dismays Hadi. Focus Malaysia. <https://focusmalaysia.my/hadi-dismayed-by-federal-constitutions-english-translation/>

237 Ong, Jules Rahman. (2020). Campaign of Hate? Fake News and Anti-Refugee Rhetoric in Malaysia. New Naratif. 20 June. <https://newnaratif.com/campaign-of-hate-fake-news-and-anti-refugee-rhetoric-in-malaysia/>



## INDONESIA

On January 2, 2023, then-President Jokowi signed a new criminal code (The New Criminal Code) replacing the century-old Indonesian Criminal Code (ICC) into law, set to take effect in January 2026.<sup>238</sup> The code includes provisions that threaten freedom of speech, belief, and association and undermine the rights of women, religious minorities, and LGBTQI+ people. This law severely limits freedom of speech, restricts democratic processes, and attacks rights related to gender and sexuality.

For example, the law includes regulations that do not allow people to discuss alternatives like communism, and prohibit criticism of any leader, as mentioned in Article 433 of the new Code, which explicitly prohibits ‘attacking the honor’ of any good person. Article 256 of the new Criminal Code undermines this by requiring protesters to notify authorities or face conviction, a practice that impacts citizens’ rights to assembly and expression. The new code criminalizes consensual sex outside of marriage, and cohabitation. It also legitimizes many discriminatory regulations ostensibly based on ‘sharia law’. The Criminal Code was criticized by different human rights groups. In late 2022, the government pressured the United Nations to remove a critical statement from its Indonesia website.<sup>239</sup>

**IN 2022, INDONESIAN AUTHORITIES IN CIAMIS, WEST JAVA PROSECUTED SEVERAL INDIVIDUALS UNDER ‘BLASPHEMY’ LAWS, INCLUDING MUHAMMAD KACE, A FORMER MUSLIM CLERIC WHO CONVERTED TO CHRISTIANITY. KACE WAS SENTENCED TO TEN YEARS IN PRISON FOR HIS YOUTUBE VIDEOS CRITICIZING ISLAM.**

In 2022, Indonesian authorities in Ciamis, West Java prosecuted several individuals under ‘blasphemy’ laws, including Muhammad Kace, a former Muslim cleric who converted to Christianity. Kace was sentenced to ten years in prison for his YouTube videos criticizing Islam.<sup>240</sup> Ferdinand

238 Janti, Nur (2023). Criminal Code’s Opponents Turn to Weakened Constitutional Court. The Jakarta Post. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2023/01/11/criminal-codes-opponents-turn-to-weakened-constitutional-court.html>

239 Ibid.

240 Human Rights Watch. (2023). World Report 2023: Indonesia.” Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/indonesia>

Hutahaeen, a Christian who converted to Islam, was sentenced to five months in prison in Jakarta for tweeting “Your Allah is weak.”<sup>241</sup> In 2023, TikTok star Lina Mukherjee was arrested under the blasphemy law for posting a video of herself eating pork after an Islamic prayer. In September, she was sentenced to two years in prison by the Palembang district court.<sup>242</sup>

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) – one of the world’s largest Islamic organizations, and prominent in Indonesia, with over 95 million members in 2021 – championed “Islam Nusantara,” a brand of ‘moderate’ Islam.<sup>243</sup> Since 2014, the NU’s Bayt Ar-Rahmah based in the US and LibForAll, a nonprofit organization co-founded by long-time Indonesian resident C. Holland Taylor, who serves as a Special Advisor for International Affairs to the Chairman of NU,<sup>244</sup> have promoted this vision. The youth wing of NU, GP Ansor, has advanced the idea of “Humanitarian Islam” since 2017, opposing the Caliphate and promoting ‘moderate values’.<sup>245</sup>

This vision of ‘moderate Islam’ has garnered unexpected backing from far-right figures like India’s Ram Madhav and Hungary’s President Viktor Orbán,<sup>246</sup> who are both repurposing the concept to serve their own anti-Muslim political agendas under the guise of anti-radical Islam.

Ram Madhav is an Indian politician, writer, and former National General Secretary of the BJP. Madhav has been instrumental in shaping the BJP’s policies and strategies and is known for his efforts to promote Hindu nationalist ideologies. Madhav has built strong ties with NU leaders, especially Yahya Cholil Staquf, through his connections with the National Awakening Party (PKB), which is described as a nationalist Muslim party that promotes nationalist principles. These ties have solidified his support for the G20 Religious Forum (R20), a three day event held in Java, where the NU was initially founded. In February 2022, Madhav wrote an article defending a hijab ban in Karnataka, advocating for Indian Muslims to emulate Indonesian Islam.<sup>247</sup>

241 Republika. (2022). Ferdinand Hutahaeen Diganjar Hukuman Lima Bulan Penjara. Republika. <https://news.republika.co.id/berita/rakxj1377/ferdinand-hutahaeen-diganjar-hukuman-lima-bulan-penjara>

242 The Sydney Morning Herald. (2023). I Did Not Expect It: TikTok Influencer Jailed for Saying Prayer Before Eating Pork. The Sydney Morning Herald. <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/i-did-not-expect-it-tiktok-influencer-jailed-for-saying-prayer-before-eating-pork-20230921-p5e6h5.html>

243 Fealy, Greg. Islam Nusantara: A Local Islam with Global Ambitions. Indonesia at Melbourne, 2022. <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/islam-nusantara-a-local-islam-with-global-ambitions/>

244 Bayt ar-Rahmah. C. Holland Taylor Biography. <https://baytarrahmah.org/c-holland-taylor-biography/>

245 Gerakan Pemuda Ansor. (2017). Declaration on Humanitarian Islam. Bayt ar-Rahmah. [https://www.baytarrahmah.org/media/2017/Gerakan-Pemuda-Ansor\\_Declaration-on-Humanitarian-Islam.pdf](https://www.baytarrahmah.org/media/2017/Gerakan-Pemuda-Ansor_Declaration-on-Humanitarian-Islam.pdf)

246 Strange Bedfellows: Why Do Far-Right Leaders Support Indonesia’s Promotion of Moderate Islam? Indonesia at Melbourne, 2022.

247 Joseph, Shubhangi. (2022). You Know G20, Now There’s R20 — a Push for Moderate Islam with Links to RSS’s

Since 2009, Prabowo Subianto has become a fixture in Indonesia's electoral landscape, doggedly participating in every general election cycle: 2009, 2014, 2019, and finally, in 2024, claiming victory at last. Over these years, Prabowo's political identity has undergone a remarkable transformation, a chameleon-like adaptability that speaks to populist politics. Subianto, an ex-military chief who has been accused of human rights abuses during the Suharto regime, refined his approach, dramatically shifting his image and strategy to finally secure the presidency. His alliance with Jokowi's son, Gibran Rakabuming, as his vice-presidential candidate was a move that not only secured Jokowi's crucial support but also signaled a break from his past confrontational stance.<sup>248</sup> The Constitutional Court made a highly controversial amendment to electoral rules, allowing Raka to run as Prabowo's vice-presidential candidate. Subianto moved from his former ultra-nationalist or Islamist populist language of previous campaigns towards a more technocratic, even amiable figure, which signifies a new shift in the Indonesian political landscape that requires new strategic alignments with 'hidden' agendas.<sup>249</sup>

---

Ram Madhav. The Print. <https://theprint.in/world/you-know-g20-now-theres-r20-a-push-for-moderate-islam-with-links-to-rsss-ram-madhav/1099400/>

248 Populism Studies. (2024). The changing populist performances of Prabowo Subianto: Indonesia's incoming president. Populism Studies. <https://www.populismstudies.org/the-changing-populist-performances-of-prabowo-subianto-indonesias-incoming-president/>

249 BBC News. (2024). Indonesia's Prabowo wins presidency amid controversy. BBC. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-68237141>



## **SECTION 6:** **CONCLUSION**

This final section summarizes briefly the facts that have been examined in the paper. We are not seeking to be ‘conclusive’ on any of the trends and actors discussed, so we leave the reader with some points which require further inquiry.

When considering the severe state of the economic crisis in most countries studied for this paper and the widespread economic inequality facing most communities in those countries at present, the criminalization of poverty has clearly become an important tool in the playbook of contemporary fascists and fundamentalists in the subregions examined.

Furthermore, both the South and Southeast Asia subregions have witnessed a significant increase in military control and normalization in governance and civic life – as well as military expansion – which could be contextualized further by understanding historical geopolitical events that have shaped and impacted these regions. For example, factors such as military relations between some of the nation-states explored in this paper and powerful global North nation-states – such as the US who ultimately benefit from the global sale and trading of arms as well as from more generally militarized countries in the global South over which they can exert greater control – cannot be overlooked in our analysis.

These interconnected patterns become obvious in the context of Afghanistan. Madeleine Rees, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) Secretary General, says of Afghanistan: “Peace cannot be realised through 20 years of violent intervention, investment in an extreme version of militarised security, and economic sub-contracting to private interests. Investments in people and their economic and social rights have been rendered insignificant by the budget for security.”<sup>250</sup>

Why is such a 360-degree analysis of the context important? Because there is, at times, a tendency within some Asian feminist analysis and scholarship to identify contemporary fascist and fundamentalist forces, trends, and actors as “simply the way things have always been.”

---

250 Rees, M. (n.d.) Finding Truth, Elevating Perspective: Changing the Narrative on Afghanistan. Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). <https://www.wilpf.org/focus-countries/afghanistan/afghanistan-changing-narrative/>

However, as we've seen throughout this paper, while it's helpful to draw upon historical context to understand contemporary trends more deeply, it also helps feminist movements to name some of the more distinct characteristics of this present moment. One example is the recent phenomenon of widespread attacks on trans and gender-diverse communities coming not just from religious fundamentalist actors, but from highly coordinated secular actors who work in the service of 'women's rights.' This type of rhetoric has found landfall and is being repurposed globally.

Another important facet is the increasing irrelevance of the 'state'/'non-state' binary. When examining the actors involved in the recent widespread attempts at establishing fascist or fundamentalist influence in South and Southeast Asia, we can see clearly that such a binary would no longer be useful for our analysis. Growing political alliances between mainstream political fascists and various fundamentalist actors are extremely important to examine closely, as they have an enormous impact on economic, social, and political realities.

Throughout the many examples presented in the report, we can see how those who wield political influence and power over institutions, social norms, and practices are no longer always tied to state institutions. For example, we have shown how the military, unelected business leaders, and/or unelected religious leaders wield great power over law, policy and state decision-making, even going so far as to influence the judiciary at times.

The extraordinary power assumed to be associated traditionally with the 'state' actor therefore must be challenged as an analytical framework in this present moment, as we see the emergence of powerful actors who are not explicitly in political power. What we see as an emerging trend are how 'state' actors build close alliances with influential and provocative 'non-state' leaders and shield them from accountability, as well as benefiting from their rhetoric.

A third important facet that invites further investigation, is the characteristic of coordination between fascist and fundamentalist actors. We have demonstrated different forms of coordination throughout the course of this paper. We see at times that such coordination is intentional and at other times less intentional (this second category could be described as being in the realm of 'influence').

For example, in 2014 we saw an unprecedented example of such

coordination when the fundamentalist Buddhist monk in Myanmar known as Wirathu, visited fundamentalist Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka.<sup>251</sup> This meeting was explicit in its intent to coordinate across borders and organize anti-Muslim violence.

This type of intentional coordination is also mirrored by the ongoing growth of Indian Hindutva influence in Sri Lanka,<sup>252</sup> impacting social, cultural and political life. This relationship is particularly noteworthy given similar tactics used by Prime Minister Modi of India and President Ranil Wickremesinghe of Sri Lanka to suppress movements, as well as their recent moves to seemingly ‘normalize’ ties with Israel. Modi’s support for Israel has signaled a departure from the decades-long state position held by India,<sup>253</sup> and Wickremesinghe’s stance of constant equivocation is new for Sri Lanka as well. Wickremesinghe’s choice to meet an Israeli minister amidst the genocide in Gaza in early 2024 also spoke volumes.<sup>254</sup> The strengthened ties between these two leaders also signal strong coordination as well as influence over one another.<sup>255</sup>

Once you place these developments against the backdrop of increasing anti-Muslim violence and rhetoric in both India and Sri Lanka, a troubling picture emerges. Malji Andrea, in her research work on the South Asian region, points to the gendered nature of Islamophobia in India and Sri Lanka,<sup>256</sup> seeking to highlight common tactics used by fundamentalist and fascist Hindutva and Buddhist extremist actors in both contexts. For example, the use of the narratives of “sterility” and “virility” to incite violence against Muslim communities and propel men of the dominant group into such violence is a commonly seen tactic across Sri Lanka and India.

Finally, we see the global context of historic, unprecedented levels of economic inequality. This reality must also be examined, when considering the current moment, as a factor which sets the contemporary landscape apart from other historical trends to the right. Fascisms and

---

251 Srilal, R. (2014). Radical Myanmar monk joins hands with Sri Lankan Buddhists. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0HO0GD/>

252 Borham, M. (2024). Rising Hindutva Influence: Social Media Divide in Sri Lanka’s North and East. Hashtag Generation. <https://hashtaggeneration.org/rising-hindutva-influence-social-media-divide-in-sri-lankas-north-and-east/>

253 Ellis-Petersen, H. (2023). India takes strong pro-Israel stance under Modi in a departure from the past. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/31/india-pro-israel-narendra-modi-bjp-government>

254 Economy Next. (2024). Sri Lanka president meets Israeli minister. Economy Next. <https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-president-meets-israeli-minister-151190/>

255 Pathi, K. & Mallawarach, B. (2023). Sri Lankan president’s visit to India signals growing economic and energy ties. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/india-sri-lanka-modi-ranil-energy-trade-5ee8d15248dc25f496aa75069f3d0c37>

256 Malji, Andrea. (2020). “Gendered Islamophobia: The Overlapping Parallels of Hindu and Buddhist Nationalism in South Asia.” APSA Preprints. doi: 10.33774/apsa-2020-9c500

fundamentalisms, as we have seen, thrive in contexts of economic inequality and today's actors are able to cause and sustain it, benefit from it, and weaponize it.

And so, the idea that fascisms and fundamentalisms in the region are “simply the way things have always been” prevents us from making important observations that could aid the feminist movement's action.

Not only that, it reinforces geopolitically biased, colonial ideas about where ‘democracy’ is ‘natural’ and where it is not. These ideas often favor the global North or the ‘West’, and so it is important for feminist movements to point to the troubled history of democratic efforts at governance across the world, where attempts at ‘democracy’ have always faced challenges from fascist, fundamentalist and authoritarian actors who rely on military interventions. This is compounded by the reality that fascist and authoritarian elements have also, at times, historically been embedded in ‘good’ governments, even during periods of progress and within progressive, broadly democratic bodies.

Cross-regional feminist coordination, therefore, is urgently needed. Many feminist actors in the region are already urgently engaging with these intersecting crises, as we have illustrated throughout this paper. It would also be helpful for Asian feminist movements to continue to engage in coordination with other feminist movements across the globe. For example, increasing their engagement with and contributions to other global majority feminist analysis and scholarship, such as working with the framework of ‘anti-gender and anti-democracy’ actors, largely introduced into discourse by Latin American feminists. Such frameworks, which help connect the dots between our crises and our regions, could help pragmatically and politically unite feminist actors and actions.

This becomes ever more urgent, as growing numbers of influential actors who identify as ‘feminists’ join the ranks of far-right, fascist and fundamentalist movements.<sup>257</sup> Such trends have forged a critical conversation within feminist movements about ‘fascist feminism,’ examining how feminist agendas can be appropriated or adapted towards fascist and anti-democratic agendas. Many feminist scholars and researchers have already shown how fascist feminisms existed long before the current trends towards the far-right.<sup>258</sup> The rise of fascist

---

257 Provost, C. & Whyte, L. (2018). Why are women joining far-right movements, and why are we so surprised?. Open-Democracy. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/women-far-right-movements-why-are-we-surprised/>

258 Wolf, N. (2014). Fascism with a Feminist Face. Project Syndicate. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/naomi-wolf-examines-the-rise-of-women-to-leadership-positions-in-major-far-right-european-political-parties>

women leaders (at times, with fundamentalist agendas) across the world, including in Asia (for example, Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh), only serves to further elucidate this as a serious concern to feminists.

Feminists on the side of justice, rights and accountability should remain steadfast in their position from the frontlines of our time's most urgent and critical struggles: to maintain control of our land and resources; to redirect humankind towards ecological and economic justice, equality and universal care, food security and health; to bring greater commitments to infrastructure – both tangible and intangible – that serves more, not just a few. To serve these goals, we should be looking to each other not just for solidarity, but for long-term partnership.





# **AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author would like to thank the knowledge-building team at Noor for their thoughtful coordination of this research project and for the support provided, including providing additional research, writing and editing input. Noor's advisors from the region also acted as reviewers, for which the author is very grateful. Their insight and incisive comments really drove the report in the right direction.

The author would like to thank the Noor team more generally for commissioning this important work, for being patient with the complexities of carrying it out, and for trusting me. The author also wishes to thank other researchers for all additional research carried out.

Finally, the author remains eternally indebted to the work of feminist activists, journalists, scholars, and human rights defenders of and from the regions - past and present - whose tireless work, documentation and analyses form the backbone of this paper.







