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# Pax Lumina



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A Quest for Peace and Reconciliation

## POLARISATION

### Violence and Peace



# Pax Lumina

A Quest for Peace and Reconciliation

**Hatred, anger, and violence can destroy us:  
the politics of polarization is dangerous.**

- Rahul Gandhi



# Pax Lumina

A Quest for Peace and Reconciliation

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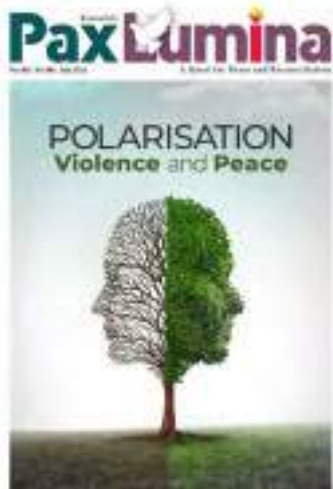


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## Causes and Consequences of Polarisation

### Editorial

*Human beings throughout history have shown a tendency to cluster together, forming groups. This behaviour, in fact, is shared by other living beings as well. Even atoms and molecules exhibit similar collective behaviour under certain circumstances.*

*One reason for forming groups is the advantage of scale. What a single person cannot achieve alone, a group often can. Thus, the story of individuals, both human and non-human, on this planet becomes one of triumphs and failures of collective behaviour or group action, although feats of exceptional men and women have punctuated the planet's history for good and bad.*

*When individuals coalesce into groups, many things happen, some quite unexpected and some that may have a detrimental effect on the rest of society, the environment, and even the planet itself.*

*In this issue of Pax Lumina, we examine some instances of group behaviour that are antithetical to the flourishing of life on this planet – essentially, anything that hinders peace on Earth.*

*Our friends and collaborators from different regions of the globe – Africa, the Americas, Europe, Asia, and elsewhere – have contributed stories of organised human behaviour that have led to conflict and violence. They all ask the same question: how can this collective madness be replaced by a path to peace?*

*One important and dangerous phenomenon that all our writers have identified, spreading across cultures and regions and leading to the germination of violence and destruction is polarisation.*

*A group of human beings can become polarised concerning religion, culture, ethnicity, or any of the numerous other identity markers that can intellectually and emotionally move a person. Polarisation submerges an individual's individuality and free will in the collective identity of the group or tribe.*

*Human rationality gets drowned by the collective passion of the tribe. This passion is rarely aimed at achieving a higher or transcendent goal. It is often a mere ploy to bind the group together, frequently in opposition to others. This also enables the group to consider itself unique and superior. Myth-making of this sort is what most organisations and their leaders resort to.*





*In short, the more polarised a group becomes, the more destructive it will be to the rest of society. History is a graveyard of such polarised organisations and their megalomaniacal leaders.*

*If polarisation inevitably leads to conflict, violence, and destruction, why do rational and otherwise well-meaning human beings become part of this polarisation process? This is a deep existential question about human nature and goodness, and the answer is not easy.*

*In this issue of Pax Lumina, alongside the stories of polarisation and violence, there are also instances of enduring human kindness and goodwill, from various parts of the globe. This should give us hope for continuing on the path of peace.*

*Human beings tend to congregate into groups and tribes. These groups, in turn, tend to become polarised concerning different intellectual and emotional identifiers. Here, a crucial question arises: should an individual risk losing one's rationality and sense of right and wrong for the convenience and comfort of belonging to a group? Each one of us will have to grapple with this question, and try to find an honest answer. That, probably, is the only way to peace.*

*Jacob Thomas*

Editor



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# ENGAGING WITH **POLARISATION**



**P**olarisation comes in different forms. An important distinction can be made between ideological and affective polarisation. **Ideological (or issue-based) polarisation refers to the sharpening of opinions, positions or beliefs on a specific issue within a group of like-minded people**



**E**U Member States are increasingly concerned over polarisation tearing their societies apart. The many discussions on the topic within policymaking institutions and in the media reflect these concerns.

In the debates, however, polarisation often remains undefined and is viewed through a one-sided negative frame. Polarisation is thus at risk of becoming a catch-all term that lumps together all kinds of disagreements, tensions and conflicts.

When we take a look at the growing body of research on polarisation, a more nuanced perspective emerges. For policymakers and practitioners who want to develop effective strategies to deal with polarisation, it is useful to take on board the insights from this literature.

### **Polarisation – A Multifaceted Phenomenon**

Polarisation comes in different forms. An important distinction can be made between ideological and affective polarisation. Ideological (or issue-based) polarisation refers to the sharpening of opinions, positions or beliefs on a specific issue within a group of like-minded people.



The group then moves from moderate towards more extreme views on the topic. This can increase the ideological distance with groups that adopt opposing views. Classic examples are differences of opinions between left and right or between progressives and conservatives, but ideological polarisation can also take place with regard to issues such as vaccination against COVID-19 or climate change-related policies.

Affective polarisation, on the other hand, refers to a growing social-emotional distance between groups. Mutual distrust increases and the groups start to show a growing aversion or hostility towards one another. Social identities and in- and out-group dynamics play an important role in affective polarisation.

For instance, the members of a group that advocates for or against climate action may start sharing broader social identities and world views. The original ideological polarisation with opposing groups thus may grow into 'us-vs-them' thinking, increasing distrust and sometimes even hostility.

A common misconception in public discourse sees polarisation as equal to conflict. Because they might require different approaches, for policymakers and practitioners, it is useful to



make a distinction between the two – closely, but different – phenomena. Polarisation is about increasing distance and alienation, whereas conflict refers to clashes and confrontation.

### **The Ambivalent Dynamics of Polarisation**

Polarisation and group identification are not necessarily negative. They are part of an open, pluralistic society and may enrich the democratic debate. The sharpening of opinions and the binding of groups based on shared social identities can be the means to mobilise political ideas and activism. Thus, polarisation can be important to bring about social change or the emancipation of minorities.

At the same time, there are serious risks associated with polarisation: an impoverishment of the public debate, the escalation of tensions, or too great a distance between social groups. Affective polarisation can bring about increasing aversion, hate and enmity. This can be toxic and harmful to societal relations and may lead to ruptures and crises in democracy.

**P**olarisation and group identification are not necessarily negative. They are part of an open, pluralistic society and may enrich the democratic debate. **The sharpening of opinions and the binding of groups based on shared social identities can be the means to mobilise political ideas and activism.**





## How to Engage with Polarisation?

How can practitioners and policymakers navigate their way in the arena of polarisation? When to intervene – and how? An important first step involves identifying whether a particular situation of polarisation involves ‘democratic’ or ‘toxic’ and ‘harmful’ polarisation.

This judgement will greatly depend on how and in which context polarisation manifests itself, for instance, the individuals or groups involved, the specific setting or place (e.g., social media, the classroom, a neighbourhood...), and the intensity of the polarisation.

Decisions on when and how to intervene, we argue, can be usefully informed by a democratic and peace-oriented framework that leaves as much space as possible for the freedom of expression, a plurality of different voices and disagreement, even if this entails conflicts and tensions. However, when (affective) polarisation becomes toxic and hostile, it will be necessary to monitor certain boundaries.

On the one hand, these boundaries are determined by the legal framework. Violence (such as hate crimes or terrorism), the incitement to hatred and various forms of discrimination are proscribed in most Member States.

On the other hand, polarisation is also delimited by ‘border areas’ constituted by the values and norms of democracy and non-violence. When verbal violence and increasing intergroup hostility

take the upper hand and polarisations become toxic and harmful, interventions to de-escalate the tensions will be necessary.

And when polarisation results in forms of extremism that denounce democracy and tend towards violence, policymakers and practitioners will also need to take (preventive) action.

The question of how to practically intervene in cases of harmful polarisation is beyond the scope of this article. For this text, it suffices to refer to the many models and techniques that were developed in recent years, inspired by approaches such as polarisation management, mediation and conflict transformation. Determining which technique is useful in a given situation will strongly depend on the particularities of the case, the context and the groups involved.

A more extended version of this article will appear shortly on the website of the Flemish Peace Institute (<https://vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/en/>).

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■





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# ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDES CATALYSTS FOR SOCIETAL POLARISATION





**E**thnic divides can significantly contribute to societal polarisation, often with tragic outcomes, as exemplified by the Holocaust. Defeated and economically devastated, Germany after World War I provided a fertile ground for Adolf Hitler's rise to power.



## **T**he Double-edged Sword

Diversity in ethnicity, religion, and ideologies fosters a rich mosaic of cultures, beliefs, and faiths, marking a vibrant and dynamic society. However, this diversity can become a double-edged sword. When manipulated to script an 'us vs. them' narrative, these differences can assume the form of societal polarisation. It is a situation where people's views on various issues become

increasingly extreme. Throughout history, we find cautionary tales of societal polarisation fuelled by multiple factors, with ethnic, religious and ideological divides being significant ones among them.

### **Ethnic Divide and Polarisation**

A society enriched by different ethnicities fosters tolerance, understanding, creativity, and innovation while celebrating a kaleidoscope of traditions, cuisines, artistic expressions, and perceptions. This rich blend weakens prejudice, strengthens social cohesion, and broadens worldviews. Embracing diverse perspectives, education advocates a scientific approach and critical thinking in all aspects of life while promoting cultural competency and variations. Such an environment fuels economic growth by fostering cooperative innovation, entrepreneurial spirit, and global competitiveness. At the same time, it encourages inclusive policies, and active civic engagement, and creates a more equitable and cohesive society for all.

Ethnic divides can significantly contribute to societal polarisation, often with tragic outcomes, as exemplified by the Holocaust. Defeated and economically devastated, Germany after World War I provided a fertile ground for Adolf Hitler's



rise to power. He exploited the Germans' deep scars of defeat and national humiliation to script a dark narrative of Anti-Semitism and Aryan superiority. Diverting the nation's attention from real problems, he blamed minorities, particularly Jewish people, for all the woes of Germany. This relentless propaganda deepened the ethnic divides within German society. Silencing dissent and controlling information, Hitler transformed Germany into an echo chamber that circulated only his ideology, ultimately leading to the atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust.

The Rwandan genocide in 1994 serves as another chilling example. The Hutu majority government exploited long-standing tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups, resulting in the horrific mass killing of over 800,000 Tutsis. Similarly, Yugoslavia, a socialist federation rich in ethnic and religious diversity, fractured due to a surge in nationalism and the manipulation of 'us vs. them' narratives. The resulting bloody conflicts between Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, and Albanians during the 1990s ultimately led to the breakup of the country. These examples and numerous others serve as stark reminders of the devastating consequences of ethnic polarisation.

## Religious Divides and Polarisation

Religion, as a search for the larger significance of life and existence, should serve as a moral compass in society, guiding individuals toward

this greater goal by advocating ethical behaviour through its cherished faiths and values.

It should promote tolerance and understanding, bridging divides and fostering societal harmony. Additionally, it should champion social justice and the common good, contributing to collective well-being and progress. When focused on these ideals, religion becomes a powerful cohesive force enriching both individuals and society. Religious communities, in turn, embody these great ideals by providing a sense of belonging, offering social support, and acting as safety nets for those in need.

However, religious divides, akin to ethnic ones, can be a potent source of societal polarisation. The Great Schism of 1054 (the break between the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches) is a powerful reminder of how deeply entrenched religious differences can polarise and fracture societies and institutions. Disputes over religious authority, spiritual practices, and interpretations of the scripture polarised the Church by splitting it into the Western Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. This was not the end of religious polarisation and divisions within Christianity, however. The Protestant Reformation, in the 16th century, created a profound rift with the Catholic Church. Increasingly extreme views between Catholics and Protestants ignited religious wars across Europe, leading to violence, social unrest, and a reshaping of the continent's religious and political landscape.

Northern Ireland, with its deeply religious and ethnic divisions between Protestant Ulster Scots and Catholic Irish communities, offers a tragic example. Extremists on both sides exploited these differences, deepening the divide and fuelling the 'Troubles'. This was a brutal conflict that scarred the region from 1968 to 1998. Similarly, the 1947 partition of India, driven by religious identities (Hindu and Muslim), resulted in mass displacement and horrific violence.

The ongoing tensions in West Asia, driven by religious differences like those between Sunni and Shia Muslims, further illustrate how religion can contribute to instability. The persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar



**U**nderstanding different ideologies is of great importance for the shape of the societies we live in. It influences how we interpret current events, and forms the foundation of political debates. **By grappling with these different belief systems, we can form our informed opinions, engage in constructive conversations, and become more active and informed citizens.**



by the Buddhist majority government serves as another unsettling reminder of the dangers that arise when ethnicity and religion are manipulated for political gain.

## **Ideological Divides and Polarisation**

An ideology is a compass for navigating the social and political world. As a comprehensive set of theories and beliefs about government structures, economic systems, and the distribution of resources, it defines the basis on which a society should function. Beyond its theoretical outline, an ideology serves as a framework for action, guiding people in making decisions and taking steps to create a world that reflects their values. Understanding different ideologies is of great importance for the shape of the societies we live in. It influences how we interpret current events, and forms the foundation of political debates. By grappling with these different belief

systems, we can form our informed opinions, engage in constructive conversations, and become more active and informed citizens.

Ideological divides, alongside ethnic and religious ones, can be a powerful source of societal polarisation, as exemplified by the moral and economic disagreements over slavery between the northern and southern states of America. This became a deeply entrenched ideological divide that polarised and fractured American society. The increasingly divergent views ultimately resulted in the Civil War of the 19th century, a brutal conflict that fundamentally reshaped the United States.

The Cold War was the greatest instance of ideological polarisation in the 20th century. The unambiguous ideological rivalry between the capitalist West and the communist East exacerbated an arms race, proxy wars, and heightened global tensions. This stand-off demonstrated how opposing views on democracy, economics, and social organisation can divide not just nations but the world.

Hindutva, a Hindu nationalist ideology, has emerged as a powerful and polarising force in contemporary India. Its proponents envision an Indian identity firmly rooted in Hindu religion and historical achievements, advocating for the supremacy of Hindu culture and values. However, this often comes at the expense of minority communities, particularly Muslims.



This ideology employs revisionist historical narratives that emphasise Hindu contributions while downplaying or demonising those of other faiths. While it fosters a sense of grievance and victimhood among Hindus, potentially leading to resentment towards minorities, it also creates a climate of anxiety and fear among minority groups who feel increasingly marginalised and threatened. This deliberate reshaping of history not only widens the existing social polarisation but also perpetuates a cycle of mistrust and antagonism.

Advocates of Hindutva often resort to portraying Muslims and Christians as ‘outsiders’ or even ‘invaders,’ fostering a dangerous sense of ‘otherness.’ This depiction ignites prejudice and discrimination against these communities, potentially escalating into violence. The constant portrayal of minorities as threats to the Hindu way of life exacerbates social tensions and undermines any efforts towards achieving communal harmony.

## Media and Polarisation

The role of media is to present issues as objectively and meticulously as possible, making the public aware of these issues from their divergent angles to foster reflection and critical thinking.

While achieving perfect objectivity may be ideal, prioritising these goals can significantly elevate

the role of the media in public discourse. By doing so, the media should become a champion for informed decisionmaking, fostering a more engaged and empowered citizenry.

Media outlets, however, can become powerful agents of polarisation, shaping public opinion through calculated story selection and biased presentation. Every media outlet often leans towards a particular ideological viewpoint. This bias influences their prioritisation of stories that align with their stance while downplaying or neglecting those that challenge it. They achieve this by carefully crafting narratives using the most suitable language, emphasising certain details, and strategically omitting certain other details. This prioritisation and partisan presentation which amounts to manipulation, shapes public perception, steering viewers towards a predetermined understanding of events that aligns with the outlet’s biases. The result is a skewed and potentially misleading perspective on reality.

While this journalistic approach can shape public opinion to align with the stance of the media outlet, it limits the public’s exposure to diverse viewpoints, resulting in a narrow understanding of issues and fostering a sense of confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is a cognitive tendency where individuals seek out, interpret, and remember information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs while giving less consideration to alternative possibilities. This bias leads people to give more weight to evidence that supports their existing views and to dismiss or undervalue evidence that contradicts them.

The interplay between media bias and confirmation bias significantly impacts society by narrowing the range of information and perspectives that individuals are exposed to. This creates a more polarised environment where civil discourse is challenging, common ground is harder to find, and democratic processes are undermined. Addressing these biases requires critical media consumption, diverse information sources, and a commitment to understanding multiple perspectives.



**The insidious grip of polarisation creates chasms that swallow the social cohesion that once bound us together. It poisons the well of community relations, replacing the bonds of trust with a suffocating fog of suspicion. Even minor disagreements morph into tinderboxes, sparking conflicts that engulf individuals and communities.**



## **Impact of Polarisation**

Healthy debate is the lifeblood of a vibrant democracy. However, when differences morph into unyielding abysses, we suffer the evil of polarisation. Beyond mere disagreement, polarisation acts like a seismic tremor that fractures the bedrock of our society.

The insidious grip of polarisation creates chasms that swallow the social cohesion that once bound us together. It poisons the well of community relations, replacing the bonds of trust with a suffocating fog of suspicion. Even minor disagreements morph into tinderboxes, sparking conflicts that engulf individuals and communities. This, in turn, stifles cooperation, the engine of progress.

Meanwhile, the political arena descends into a spectacle resembling gladiatorial contests. Partisan battles fuelled by relentless animosity and fiery rhetoric become the order of the day, with unwavering loyalty to party lines prevailing. Governance bears the brunt. Critical issues languish, left to fester as lawmakers focus more on scoring political points than crafting

meaningful solutions. The losers in this toxic game are the citizens they are sworn to represent, whose needs and well-being are sacrificed at the altar of ideological purity.

Perhaps the most alarming consequence of polarisation is the erosion of democratic values. Deep divisions breed cynicism, causing faith in democratic processes to crumble. Disillusioned with the system, citizens find authoritarian solutions deceptively appealing. This descent can lead to democratic backsliding. This is a chilling scenario where the institutions designed to represent the people are systematically weakened or dismantled altogether.

## **Conclusion**

Far from being a societal ill, diversity, when effectively managed, can be a powerful engine for cohesion, understanding, cooperation, and progress. Unintegrated diversity can indeed breed mistrust, fear, friction, and polarisation. However, by embracing and nurturing the infinite possibilities of diversity, society can harness the richness that diverse ethnic, religious, and ideological backgrounds offer for its greater good.

A society thrives when it celebrates differences and cherishes inclusivity, mutual respect, and open dialogue. This fertile ground cultivates a wellspring of diverse viewpoints, fostering healthy discussions, meaningful collaboration, and creative problem-solving. This dynamic exchange ignites a spark of innovation across various fields.

Though the challenges of managing diversity are undeniable, the potential rewards are immense. By fostering inclusive environments, we unleash the transformative power of diversity. It fuels dialogue, understanding, empathy, cooperation, and innovation. This paves the way for a more prosperous and harmonious future for all.

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# SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE EASTERN REGION OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO



**G**iven that survivors of sexual violence are often stigmatised by their communities and abandoned by their husbands, **the JRS not only helps these women acquire financial autonomy through agricultural projects, but also by offering psychosocial support for better social reintegration.**



**I**n January 2008, the International Rescue Committee reported that approximately 5.4 million people died in the war-torn eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) from 1998 to 2007. As the conflict worsens, the death toll is heavier today. The Congo war has lasted for approximately three decades.

The most recent report from Human Rights Watch indicates a deterioration of human rights in the DRC, marked by repression of journalists and political activists, corruption, and impunity.

This article will mainly focus on sexual violence linked to the armed conflict in the Eastern region.

Sexual violence linked to armed conflict refers to, according to the United Nations (UN), “any sexual abuse (rape, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, and forced abortion) perpetrated against a human being (man, woman, child), and having a direct or indirect relationship with an armed conflict.”

State agents and rebel groups commit these abuses. These are used as a weapon of war to humiliate individuals and divide communities. As the UN put it: ‘Wartime sexual violence is a military tactic, serving as a combat tool to humiliate and demoralise individuals, to tear apart families, and to devastate communities.’

### **Individual and Collective Efforts Against Sexual Violence**

It is encouraging to notice that individual and collective efforts are being undertaken to tackle sexual violence in the eastern region. Among





**The State must strengthen the capacities of the army and the police, and restore its authority over the regions occupied by rebel groups. The State must also guarantee its sovereignty over the entire national territory to ensure the population's security.**



these personal efforts are the exceptional actions of Doctor Denis Mukwege.

In his capacity as a gynaecologist and human rights activist, Dr Mukwege is committed to providing medical support to women victims of sexual violence. This is why he contributed to the foundation of Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, the capital of the Sud-Kivu province in 1999.

The hospital can accommodate approximately 400 survivors of sexual violence. Then, he created the Panzi Foundation to provide victims of sexual violence not only with healthcare but also with psychological and legal assistance.

In 2018, Dr Mukwege received the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts against sexual violence.

Furthermore, two charitable organisations of the Catholic Church work alongside the most disadvantaged and fight against sexual violence. These are Caritas Congo and the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS).

Caritas Congo is a network of 10,000 volunteers who work in all the Dioceses of the DRC. Thousands of Congolese benefit each year from the programmes of Caritas in several areas, such as healthcare, food aid, and literacy.

On the other hand, the JRS is committed to strengthening the livelihood capacities of survivors of sexual violence. This Jesuit agency also organises programmes to help prevent sexual violence. Given that survivors of sexual violence are often stigmatised by their communities and abandoned by their husbands, the JRS not only helps these women acquire financial autonomy through agricultural projects, but also by offering psychosocial support for better social reintegration.

Furthermore, international organizations such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Health Organization (WHO) as well as ENABEL (Belgian Technical Cooperation) participate in the prevention and fight against sexual violence.

Through its programme to tackle sexual violence ENABEL wants, on the one hand, to reduce cases of sexual violence, and on the other hand, to improve the quality of care for victims of sexual violence.





In 2023, projects executed by the UNFPA enabled 46,000 survivors of gender-based violence to benefit from healthcare, or 56 percent in the 72 hours after the rape incident. It should be noted that 97 percent of survivors are girls and women while 41 percent are children.

In a 2009 document, the Ministry of Gender, Family and Children presented an inventory of violence in the DRC, as well as the challenges to be overcome, including the coordination of prevention and protection of victims, rapid response to victims and survivors, synergy between public and private institutions, as well as support partners in the fight against sexual violence.

### **How to Tackle Sexual Violence in the DRC?**

The main way to combat sexual violence is to restore the rule of law, strengthen the population's security, and make the judicial system more efficient.

An effective judicial system makes it possible to track down the perpetrators of sexual abuse and to restore the victims. Rigorous justice can deter anyone who intends to break the law.

The persistent insecurity in the eastern region constitutes fertile ground for human rights abuses of all kinds. The State must strengthen the capacities of the army and the police, and restore its authority over the regions occupied by rebel groups. The State must also guarantee its sovereignty over the entire national territory to ensure the population's security.

Another way to tackle sexual violence is to raise awareness among the population about respect for human rights. Such awareness-raising makes the population aware of human dignity, mutual respect, and the integrity of the human person.

This awareness must be raised in schools and universities and through radio and television programmes, newspapers, and social media.

In conclusion, the prevention and fight against sexual violence in the eastern region requires urgent attention, not only from the government but also from the international community.

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# BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

## NAVIGATING PHILIPPINE-CHINESE RELATIONS AMIDST GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS



**W**hile Western colonisation by Spain and the United States significantly contributed to the development of Filipino anti-Chinese sentiment, **it is the subgroup's particularism in cultural preservation especially among the China-born generation, as well as government policies of integration and cultural biases that fuel the Filipinos' 'othering' of the Chinese.**



**T**he Philippine and Chinese diplomatic, trade, business and people-to-people relations have been an important part of the countries' relations that have spanned over a thousand years.

The latest figures indicate that about 1,02,577 of the 108.67 million Filipino population (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023) are of Chinese ethnicity, accounting for 44.4 percent of the foreign ethnic groups in the country. Ethnically Chinese-Filipinos comprise 1.8 percent of the population. As the saying goes, every Filipino can trace a part of their ancestry back to the Chinese.

Domestically, Chinese-Filipinos are perceived as the 'other'. That is because of historical practices where the subgroup distinguished itself by cultural practices, language and economic position.

Additionally, Chinese-Filipino history was defined by periods of exclusion by colonisers and integration by the Philippine government.

While Western colonisation by Spain and the United States significantly contributed to the development of Filipino anti-Chinese sentiment, it is the subgroup's particularism in cultural preservation, especially among the China-born generation, as well as government policies of integration and cultural biases that fuel the Filipinos' 'othering' of the Chinese.

Anti-Sinicism from stereotyping to major distrust of Chinese loyalty to the Philippines is ingrained in Philippine society. Nowhere are anti-Chinese sentiments most apparent than during former President Rodrigo Duterte's controversial appeasement strategy with China in the mid-2000s, when sectors questioned the loyalty of Chinese-Filipinos during the period when most of China's economic pledges to the country did not materialise.

The media has contributed to the institutionalisation of anti-Chinese sentiment. Solita Monsod, an economist and columnist, sparked counter-narratives against Sinophobia with her November 2018 column on 'Why Filipinos Distrust China?'

In her piece, she highlighted the perceived absence of distinction between the Chinese people and their government, unlike the situation with the United States. She also pointed out



Immediate takeaways include the need to mitigate provocative rhetoric, and support multiple voices as opposed to multiple messaging in the West Philippine Sea. **We should appreciate the thousand-year-old relations of China and the Philippines, and recognise that our relations with China go beyond politics.**

that many of the Philippines' billionaires are Chinese-Filipinos. They are seen as culturally reluctant to marry Filipino women and are often criticised as employers. These observations contribute to understanding the deep-seated distrust among Filipinos toward China.

The unique relationship forged by heritage between the Philippines, Chinese-Filipinos and Chinese nationals is increasingly jeopardised by geopolitical tensions in the South China/West Philippine Sea.

Contributing to this is the decline of diplomatic ties between the Philippines and China. This has stemmed from China's refusal to recognise the Hague Tribunal South China Sea ruling (2016) which favoured the Philippines and invalidated China's claims.

The West Philippine Sea is part of the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Yet, China has continued to transgress the EEZ waters surrounding Scarborough and Ayungin Shoals. The escalating and ongoing maritime confrontation in the West Philippine Sea, now a fact of life, may potentially escalate into a maritime military conflict.

As expected, the Philippine-China geopolitical conflict has spilled over to domestic politics exacerbated by illegal Chinese nationals' activities within the country. The recent discovery of a mayor in Tarlac province, Alice Guo, allegedly holding Chinese, not Filipino citizenship, has ignited speculation of China's espionage schemes within the country.



This incident validates the results of the March 2024 Octa Research survey that over 70 percent of Filipinos view China as the country's greatest threat. The exclusive singling out of a cultural group, specifically the Chinese (from China) in the government's immigration hot-list and of Chinese foreign students in the northern part of the country, home to US and Philippine military installations reflects anti-Chinese public perception in Philippine society.

Stalwart Chinese-Filipino scholar of Chinese studies, Teresita Ang See contends that this form of 'securitization' that unfairly singles out the Chinese among the other foreigners involved in criminal activity in the Philippines can become risky when public policy issues verge on emergency measures.

Filipino sociologist Randy David argues that anti-China sentiments emanating from its transgressions in the South China Sea represent the face of the 'new nationalism'. Presently, an individual's stance in foreign policy can simplistically categorise one as either pro or anti-China.

Not all narratives necessarily strike as anti-China or anti-Chinese-Filipinos. War avoidance narratives are prominent in emergent government de-escalation efforts to respond to China's escalating aggression.

Examples of these include the quote by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. who said, "We refuse to play by the rules that force us to choose sides in a great power competition."

Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo stressed the primacy of dialogue and diplomacy and peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international laws.

Senator Francis Escudero added that he hopes the Chinese-Filipino communities in the country will serve as bridges over the raging waters of the West Philippines Sea.

The May 5 to May 9 Pulse Asia survey of Filipinos in which 41 percent of 1,200 respondents chose to reduce tension through diplomatic means, aligns with the Chinese-Filipino business community's call for diplomacy and to safeguard peace.

These narratives contrast with patriotic rhetoric that recognises the need to stand up against China, even if at the cost of having to prepare for war.

The Project China Connect podcast which is a collaboration between myself and my colleague Dr Jovi Miroy of the Ateneo de Manila University (Philosophy) seeks to document conversations that illuminate the millennia-old people-to-people relations of the Philippines and China.

Immediate takeaways include the need to mitigate provocative rhetoric, and support multiple voices as opposed to multiple messaging in the West Philippine Sea. We should appreciate the thousand-year-old relations of China and the Philippines, and recognise that our relations with China go beyond politics.

We can work towards countering anti-Sinicism and reducing political polarity. This approach will help us navigate the complex relations behind our countries that are evolving on the diplomatic and geopolitical fronts.

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# **POLITICS OF POLARISATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS**

## **A CASE FOR DEMOCRACY IN UGANDA**





**P**olarised mindsets have negated inclusivity. But democracy demands reaching conclusions that benefit the national, social, economic, and political situation. **Instead, what boosts the collective national growth has been sacrificed at the expense of what benefits individual political parties.**



**I**n 1962, Uganda became independent. It had been a British protectorate since 1894.

Far from having a positive expectation, the country exploded into turmoil. This was manifested by power struggles to ensure its social, economic, and political directions. Within 30 years, nine presidents ruled the country. The country also registered three decades of a single political party system. It was not until 1996 through a national referendum, that the long-dreamt idea of democracy and its principles came to fruition.

Since then, the country has been running on democratic principles through electoral systems and administrative consultations at local and international levels. Despite this, the country's experience has shown that democracy and polarisation cannot fit on the same page.

Democracy is based on its original meaning of 'demos' (people) and 'kraiten' (rule) in the Greek language. This implies an administrative system that strives for collective decisionmaking and equality among participants. Unfortunately, polarisation has fostered individualism or sectarianism.

It has challenged what American political philosopher John Dewey has argued that democracy treks towards the national common good and the free exchange of ideas.

Polarised mindsets have negated inclusivity. But democracy demands reaching conclusions that benefit the national, social, economic, and political situation. Instead what boosts the collective national growth has been sacrificed at the expense of what benefits individual political parties.

Individualism among parties has been manifested through the spreading of messages that have bitter rhetoric, bias, and distrust. There are unresolved debates by the ruling and opposition sides.

Typical of this is the way the opposition side or ruling party describes one another.

For instance, 'The Daily Monitor' on December 14, 2023, narrates the statement of a leading political party leader in Kayunga district telling the youth, "Don't desert NRM (National Resistance Movement) because of opposition lies."

This indicates the attitude of the leader towards the opposition.

Faced with such accusations by some ruling party members, what is the response of the opposition parties? Because of polarisation, they are compelled to respond similarly.

The opposition uses undemocratic means or messages (such as boycotting parliamentary sessions and violent insinuations among the citizens) to counter the accusations. For example, the opposition members boycotted the State of the Nation Address on June 6, 2024, by President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni.

Similarly, we have seen the opposition speaking ill about the leading party. They have also tried to sabotage the programmes of the government such as the wealth creation campaign of 2021-2026.

**W**ith polarisation, the freedom to access information through media and social platforms is halted. **Instead, media houses have to conform to the requirements of the ruling party, not what media ethics demands.**



The same newspaper quotes in another report the opposition party secretary speaking against the programme. He said, “The government might have crushed people’s spirits but not their determination.”

African proverb has it, ‘When two elephants fight, the grass is trampled.’ The maxim suggests that such an exchange of bitter attitudes and messages leads to vulnerability among the citizens.

The resources that are supposed to be used to develop infrastructure, education systems, and health service delivery are perhaps used by the ruling party to protect its fame and national governance. The State now operates on a policy of survival of the fittest with vengeance towards parties that threaten it.

With polarisation, the freedom to access information through media and social platforms is halted. Instead, media houses have to conform to the requirements of the ruling party, not what media ethics demands.

It is called the journalism of conformity.

Since 2021, the social media platform, Facebook, has remained suspended. This came about after some accounts that were closely connected to the ruling NRM party were blocked.

The Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRlab) investigated disinformation connected to the 2021 Uganda general elections. Tessa Knight, assistant researcher in DFRlab speaking to Newzroom Afrika (South African Channel) said, “I noticed there was a network of accounts spreading false images from the protests of 2011, and 2013. They were saying that this is evidence of Bobi Wine’s supporters [of the National Unity Party] being hooligans.”



In response, the government suspended Facebook. The implication was that the social media behemoth cannot decide who is bad or good. This example shows how polarisation can compromise truth and transparency. Above all, it is the citizens who are suffering because they are not able to access Facebook.

Polarisation prevents opportunities for co-existential governance, collective discussions, and dialogue on national matters. Again, it makes the political actors believe that if one wins, the other loses.

As such, to avoid losing, one party, especially the privileged, has to use all the positive or negative tactics to achieve success. In other words, self-centred and individually-oriented plans are imbued with a spirit of tit-for-tat strategies. These are preferred to national and majority-oriented matters.

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# POLARISATION, VIOLENCE AND PEACE IN SRI LANKA

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**S**ri Lanka is an island nation with an area of 65,610 sq. km. and a coastline of 1,340 km. It is about the same size as Ireland. It is covered by thick greenery. The central mountain range rises to 2,524 m. above sea level. The country has experienced a series of colonial rule, starting with the Portuguese (1505-1658), the Dutch (1658-1796) and the English (1796-1948).

The Portuguese and Dutch mainly occupied the coastal belt, whereas, the British captured the island in 1815 with the help of the nobles who led a coup against the ruling monarch, Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe, of the Kandyan Kingdom, thus ending centuries of monarchical rule.

The country is inhabited by approximately 22 million people with a patchwork of ethnic and religious groups. The main ethnic groups are Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and Burgher, the latter being descendants of the colonisers. Four major world religions are present on the island, namely, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.

The British colonists, implementing the doctrine of 'divide and rule' promoted Tamil professionals as administrators in Sinhalese-dominated areas. This was initially accepted by the Sinhalese majority population.

Towards the end of the 19th century, there was a Buddhist revival led by Henry Olcott, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, and revivalist Anagarika Dharmapala. They instigated

the Buddhist population to 'rise from their slumber' and resist Christian evangelisation. However, the Buddhists continued to send their children to schools managed by Christian churches and missionaries. There was no serious religious polarisation experienced during the colonial era.

The ethnic polarisation which led to the protracted civil war (1983-2009) was due to three main factors which resulted in the marginalisation of the Tamil population.

(i) the introduction of the 'Sinhala Only Act' of 1956. This made Sinhala the sole official language of Sri Lanka and created barriers for Tamil people from seeking employment in the public sector.

(ii) The government-sponsored colonisation of Tamil-dominated areas of the East with Sinhalese settlers.

(iii) A measure called 'standardisation' to lower the number of Tamil students gaining access to public universities. Non-violent protests took place against the 'Sinhala Only Act'. This was met with violence and repression by the government.

Triggered by the killing of Sinhala soldiers by militants, a massive assault against Tamils living in Sinhalese areas was launched by extremist factions in July 1983. Numerous Tamils were killed. As a result, the Tamils living in Sinhalese areas were forced to flee to the north.

The escalation became an open war between the Tamil militants and the military. Despite many unsuccessful cease-fires, and the deployment of Indian peacekeepers, the warring parties chose to fight till the end.

**T**he civil war ended with the defeat of the Tamil militants by the military in May 2009. **In the latter part of the war, in addition to the militants and military, tens of thousands of civilians were killed or wounded.**





The civil war ended with the defeat of the Tamil militants by the military in May 2009. In the latter part of the war, in addition to the militants and military, tens of thousands of civilians were killed or wounded.

Even at the time of heavy fighting, there were heroic peace efforts taking place by mobilising the civil population and grassroots groups.

Among many such efforts we can highlight:

- (i) The work of the Peace Committee of Batticaloa which was able to curtail abductions by both military and the militants.
- (ii) The initiative of the Sinhalese and Tamil farmers of Ampara district. They negotiated with the military and militants to create a peace zone where farmers belonging to both ethnic groups could continue their farming without being killed either by the militants or the military.
- (iii) At a time of serious polarisation between the Tamil and Sinhala Catholic clergy and religious on the ethnic issue, an initiative was taken by Dr. Philip Setunga of the Asian Human Rights Commission in 2006 to bring together the Tamil and Sinhala priests and religious to create solidarity.

This initiative taken during the time of the war helped the priests and religious on both sides of the divide to create solidarity and to influence the church to engage in peacebuilding as a priority.

During the immediate aftermath of the war, a contribution towards ethnic healing was provided by the Centre for Society and Religion, one of Agiamondo's partner organisations, by facilitating the joint engagement of Sinhala and Tamil religious sisters in support of the victims of the war. This initiative signalled that Sinhalese and Tamils could cohabitate and work together.

The partner organisations of the Civil Peace Service of Agiamondo in Sri Lanka have been striving for peace and conflict reconciliation for many years. The Caritas network has been working on peace in diverse ways, especially through their Interreligious Forums (IRFs) and inter-ethnic and interreligious Exchange Programmes. The IRFs are constituted by Hindu, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist leaders at district and local levels.

One of the main contributions of IRFs has been to intervene when inter-ethnic conflicts arise and find peaceful solutions. Following the Easter Sunday massacre by Islamic extremists in 2019 wherein three churches were targeted, Caritas took on an instrumental role in avoiding a disastrous violent conflict between Muslims and Christians.

**T**he youth mobilised the public to non-violent struggle for a systemic change of governance. **During the protests, erstwhile enemies across ethnic and religious divides came together in a massive mobilisation. This forced the former president, prime minister and cabinet of ministers, to resign.**



Inter-ethnic and interreligious Youth Exchange Programmes are being conducted:

- (i) To expose the southern youth to the realities of the Tamil population who continue to suffer the consequences of the ‘negative peace’, such as problems faced by the war widows and their children, lack of employment opportunities for youth, trauma-stricken people who need continued psychological assistance, and the problems of those mutilated physically by the war.
- (ii) To free the young people of prejudices against the ‘other’ across the ethnic divide;
- (iii) To facilitate friendships and to build trust among youth of different ethnic and religious groups. The rationale behind these interventions is the importance of grassroots peace solidarity as a sine qua non for sustainable peace and to pressurise top-level political leadership to address minority grievances.

As a reaction to misgovernment and corruption that led to a national economic crisis in 2021, a solidarity movement of youth groups was formed named Aragalaya. This is a Sinhala term for ‘struggle’.

The youth mobilised the public to non-violent struggle for a systemic change of governance. During the protests, erstwhile enemies across ethnic and religious divides came together in a massive mobilisation. This forced the former president, prime minister and cabinet of ministers, to resign.

The struggle showed the strength of ‘people power’. Irrespective of religious and ethnic identities, people could come together to fight against injustice and oppression in the pursuit of peace and dignity for all.

Sri Lanka is an example of how a fragmented society suffering polarisation leading to extreme levels of violence, could also transform itself and find a path towards achieving unity in diversity. However, from the point of building sustainable peace, Sri Lanka needs to address the following questions: What further steps are to be taken to guide the nation towards the path of empathy and reconciliation? How can the efforts of various voluntary initiatives in peacebuilding be strengthened? And most importantly, how can the State become truly representative of regional, ethnic, and linguistic identities and foster non-violence and cooperation among all of them?

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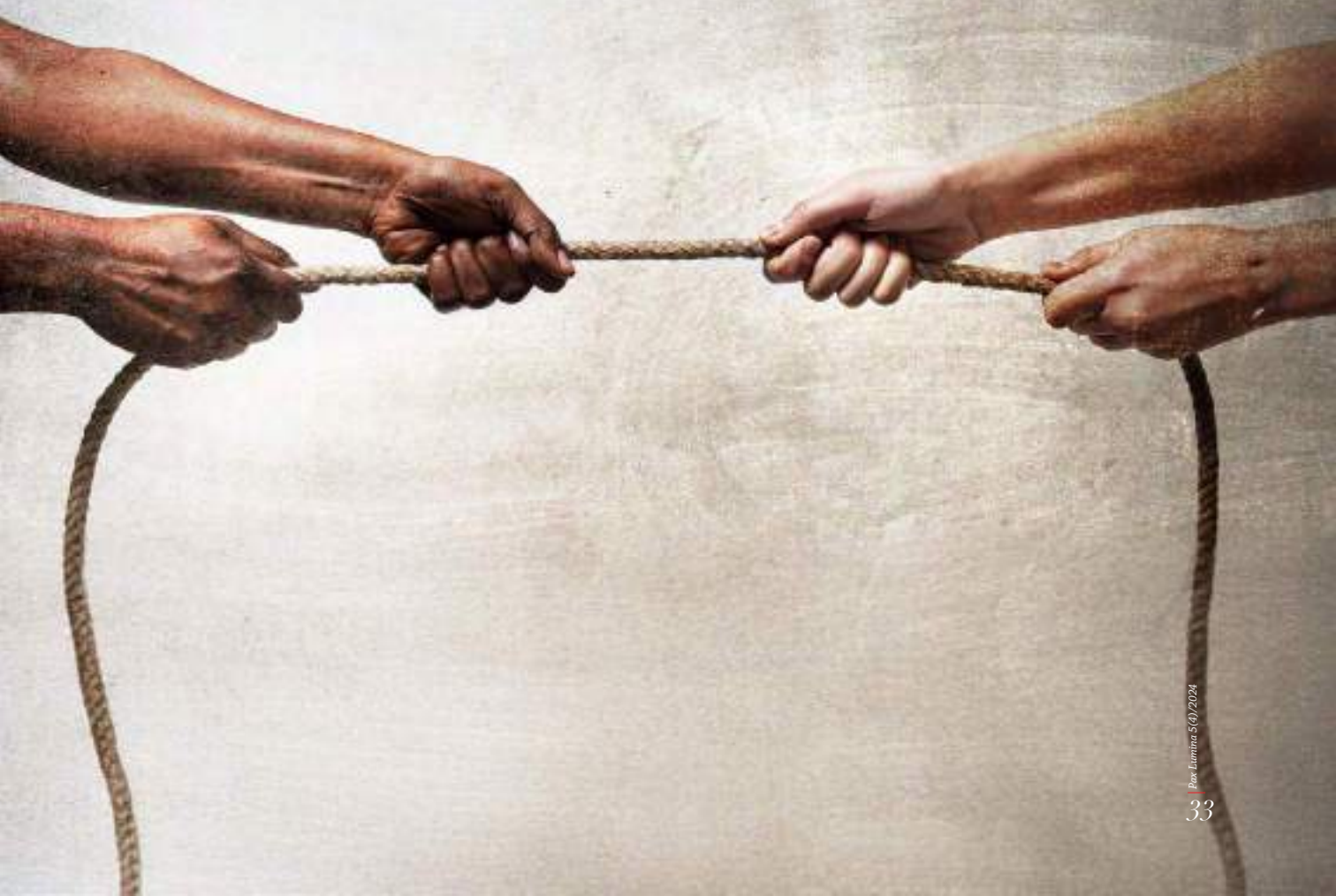




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# TOWARDS A SPATIAL NONVIOLENT APPROACH TO POLARISATION



Space is not an empty container for content but a generator of specific dynamics and content. **Some spaces generate polarisation and other spaces facilitate encounters, exchanges, and dialogues. Understanding the spatial elements that generate one or the other dynamics is fundamental for effective intervention.**



**P**olarisation is not a fact. It is a process. This process consists of a series of actions that aim to create the dynamics that allow different people or groups to perceive and act as identitarian opposites within a binary logic of ‘Us versus Them.’

This process takes place in specific spaces that need to be identified to reconfigure the polarisation. Being aware of this spatiality in the polarisation process is key, and from my experience as a mediator, the first factor and resource to start working with.

Polarisation attempts to construct an identity narrative (‘Us vs. Them’), even if it appears to address themes or issues. These issues are simply instruments for the construction of a closed identity and the identification of, differentiation from, confrontation with, and, finally, the destruction of the other identity.

Over time, nonviolence has developed practices of non-identity polarisation, in which the ‘we’ aim to include - not exclude or eliminate - the ‘them.’

The strategies, tactics, techniques and tools of confrontation/polarisation are precisely configured to bring about change in the other and the shared reality through convincing and including, not defeating and excluding.

A nonviolent approach to prevent and/or reconfigure polarisation starts from a multiple and complex concept of relationships. Analysing the spatial elements that have made polarisation

possible and that condition relational dynamics will help us design our strategies to transform them.

The experience and knowledge of nonviolence, with its multidimensional, multilevel, and cultural context-specific strategies and tools, and its cultural and symbolic perception and use of spaces, have much to contribute to this.

Nonviolence can contribute not only to the identification of spaces of polarisation and their elements but, above all, to the suggestion of strategies and actions to reconfigure these spaces, decolonise them, reoccupy them, de-occupy them, or even design and generate new spaces of encounter and non-polarised dialogue for multiple and complex coexistences.

Space is not an empty container for content but a generator of specific dynamics and content.





Some spaces generate polarisation and other spaces facilitate encounters, exchanges, and dialogues. Understanding the spatial elements that generate one or the other dynamics is fundamental for effective intervention.

‘Us versus them thinking is present in society at micro, meso, and macro levels,’ (Brandsma, B., 2016). A spatial approach to polarisation must also identify the micro, meso, and macro spaces in which to act.

My work as a mediator and researcher has allowed me to learn about and experience success and failure at these three levels while also observing their interconnectedness and dependency.

It should be kept in mind that polarisation aims to colonise not only the public spaces of discussion at the macro or meso level but also as many spaces of everyday life at the micro level as possible.

The European Radicalisation Awareness Network offers, for example, more than 200 practices that can inspire actions to work at the three different levels and, although not all of these practices work on the specific phenomenon of polarisation and refer to processes of radicalisation and extremism, they are an excellent collection of experiences that can inspire other actions in the field of polarisation.

The creation of regional and continental professional networks is a good practice in itself for the exchange of experience and knowledge.

An example of a spatial approach within this network is the ‘Donate the Hate’ campaign, a

project of Zentrum Demokratische Kultur in Germany that specifically acted in the digital space by turning every racist or xenophobic comment on social media into an involuntary donation to projects and organisations that help and support refugees.

In this way, they succeeded in de-occupying the digital space for hate speech through their occupation of donation messages and memes.

Special mention should also be made of the polarisation at the micro level. This is often neglected in approaches to this phenomenon. I will briefly present a specific example of my intervention in the field of family conflict with child-parent violence in Spain, which I hope will inspire other approaches inscribed in its cultural contexts.

A high school teacher, who is also the mother of a 15-year-old student at the same centre, came to me for help. A gradual process of ideological polarisation had been taking place between mother and son.

In the face of a mother who perceives herself as a leftist, although she is not a militant in any political party or particularly activist, her son has been developing a process of identification, belonging and radicalisation within an extreme right-wing group.

The mother is surprised not only by the son's ideological radicalisation but also, mainly by his behaviour towards her at home. The process that began in the digital space and initially had only discursive connotations ended up affecting the son's behaviour both in the family and social environment.



Understanding where the process of polarisation and radicalisation had taken place, **which had begun in the digital world, and acting on that specific space through boycott techniques and digital occupation was fundamental.**



The relationship between the mother and child before this process of ideological polarisation was good. Although the process takes place at the micro (family) level, the meso (educational centre) and macro (ideological polarisation in the country and the rise of the extreme right) connections have facilitated the achievement of this process.

Thus, although there may be specific individual-family traits, polarisation responds to a social phenomenon. Pupils from the same school as the son, where the mother also teaches, have undergone the same process. The polarisation of discourse and insults with ideological connotations has increased considerably.

The mother has been physically assaulted several times at home, each time accompanied by ideological discourse and insults. What should be done in this extremely painful situation when the violence is also perpetrated by one's child whom one loves?

In this situation, we worked on a spatial approach based on the tools and strategies of nonviolent resistance applied to the family environment to stop the violence and reconfigure the process of polarisation and radicalisation. This required specific training and preparation of the mother in nonviolence.

Understanding where the process of polarisation and radicalisation had taken place, which had begun in the digital world, and acting on that specific space through boycott techniques and digital occupation was fundamental.

Afterwards, acting by re-occupying spaces in the domestic sphere, holding celebration events with the inclusion of other actors (friends, family...), campaigns of non-collaboration (stop



shopping, cooking, tidying up...) and the use of symbols and ritual processes to reconfigure the offline family space that had facilitated the exercise of violence, was key.

All these actions were oriented towards the achievement of space and time for reunion. The result was a family process of rapprochement and reconciliation after the gradual and constant work of the mother for eight months. There was no attempt to change the son's 'beliefs' but rather his cohabitation practices (including discursive ones).

The spatial approach provided the mother with the tools and focus necessary to effectively change the situation. The training and discipline afforded her confidence to apply the nonviolent tools learnt.

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# POLARISATION CONFLICT AND PEACE





I started writing after watching the just-concluded British election. I admired the system which delivered the final results within 24 hours after the voting began. What struck me the most was that candidates stood in line to listen to the results in their constituency; the winner shook hands and often praised the other candidates for conducting a decent campaign. Nobody contested the results. In short, there was no sign of any vicious polarisation.

Out of the three words, Polarisation, Violence, and Peace, two are well understood. Polarisation is not always understood, especially in India. One of the reasons for that is that those who polarise society or rather the electorate accuse their adversaries of the same whether it is true or not.

Suppose one dishonest person without revealing his dishonesty preaches the virtues of honesty and attributes dishonesty to his adversaries even if they are honest, the public will get confused; and even more so in our times where critical listening and reading are not in fashion and lies can be transmitted at the speed of light; and the followers of Dr. Joseph Goebbels (Propaganda Minister in Adolf Hitler's government) is increasing.

Let us attempt a definition of the word 'polarisation'.

It was originally used in physics for the study of beams of light around 1812 in France where the word in French had its earliest use. By the 1870s political scientists borrowed the word to describe divisions in society arising from income inequality or otherwise.

For political theorist Karl Marx society was polarised into exploiting capitalists and the exploited proletariat. There was no question of the two classes working out a modus vivendi, advantageous to both.

France and England had a 100-year war (1337-1453). Both sides believed that peace between the two was not possible. So did France and Germany for a long time. Thank God history has proved the pessimists wrong.

Let us define polarisation as the inability or unwillingness to recognise that the 'other' is a fellow human being entitled to be treated as one, endowed with human rights as commonly understood.

We can recognise 'polarisation' in different contexts. We might see it even in a family. Happily, it is rare. More likely we see it in the workplace, but, above all, in the realm of politics. In short, we can see instances of polarisation across the world now and across history.

In ancient Sparta, the helots (slaves) were not treated as human beings. In America even after the 1776 Declaration of Independence where it was stated that 'all men are created equal...', slavery continued till the end of the Civil War. It saw the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln by stage actor John Wilkes Booth in 1865. Booth could not recognise Lincoln as a fellow human being. Hitler could not recognise the Jews as fellow human beings.

Let us attempt to figure out the causes of the two wars raging in Palestine and Ukraine.

We start with Palestine. The political leadership in Israel is unable or unwilling to accept that Palestinians are human beings. Defence Minister Yoav Gallant has stated that the Palestinians are not human beings. They are 'human animals' and should be denied electricity, food, water, and fuel.

It is important to understand that such polarisation is not new in Israel. The founding leaders of Israel, founded in 1948, maintained that they were taking land without people for a people without land.



Let us define polarisation as the inability or unwillingness to recognise that the ‘other’ is **a fellow human being entitled to be treated as one, endowed with human rights as commonly understood.**



This grabbing of land is based on a ‘polarised’ philosophy we can see in the American continent and Australia, to mention only two examples.

We should take note with distress that President Joe Biden did not find it necessary to point out to Minister Gallant that he was wrong. The genocidal war in Gaza, continuing despite the mounting grim toll of around 39,000 persons at the time of writing — the verdict of the International Court of Justice ordering Israel to stop it, and the resolutions passed by the UN Security Council and the General Assembly, shows that the polarised mindset has deep roots in our world.

Such polarisation has engendered a moral bankruptcy among many political leaders. Let us not forget for how many decades the West supported the horrible apartheid regime in South Africa.

In Ukraine, we see two wars. One is between Russia and Ukraine and the other is between NATO and Russia. By bombing civilian areas including infrastructure for electricity, President Vladimir Putin is upholding a toxic variety of polarised thinking that does not recognise fellow human beings in the Ukrainian civilian population.

But at a deeper level, there might not have been a war if President Biden had responded to Putin’s request for diplomatic negotiations made in mid-December 2022. Why didn’t Biden respond? His polarised thinking held that Putin should not be entertained on a footing of equality.

Biden wanted Putin to invade Ukraine knowing full well that thousands of Ukrainian civilians would be killed. Did he recognise them as fellow human beings?

In Ukraine, we see two wars. One is between Russia and Ukraine and the other is between NATO and Russia. **By bombing civilian areas including infrastructure for electricity, President Vladimir Putin is upholding a toxic variety of polarised thinking that does not recognise fellow human beings in the Ukrainian civilian population.**



Let us look at India. The worst example of polarised thinking is the millennial caste system. Did Vedic scholar Adi Shankara (788-820 AD) speak out against it? Coming closer to our times, how many of us know that the partition of India was first publicly advocated by freedom fighter Lala Lajpath Rai in a letter to political activist C R Das in 1925?

‘I have devoted most of my time during the last six months to the study of Muslim history and Muslim law,’ wrote Rai. ‘I am inclined to think it (Hindu-Muslim unity) maybe neither possible nor practicable.’ Rai uncannily predicted way back in 1925 the future borderlines between India and Pakistan. We spoke about some political parties charging their adversary political parties with trying to polarise the society in India. This dishonesty is more rampant in India than elsewhere.

To conclude, does it follow that a polarised mindset cannot be changed?

No, it does not follow. It must have occurred to those who held that slavery was right, that denying voting rights to women was right and so on. Let us recall that in the late 1920s when Mahatma Gandhi claimed independence for India, a professor from the UK had argued that he believed in the three immortalities of Almighty God, the human soul, and the British Empire.

However, as St. Augustine put it, the Lord who created you without you, will not save you without you. We, endowed with free will, need to work for the change we want to see.

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# WHAT ABOUT ISM AND COMPETING NARRATIVES THAT FUEL ONLINE POLARISATION





**F**ocusing on the recent decade, media platforms, like X, have become crucibles where identity politics are discussed, forged, and fought. **These platforms have evolved into powerful megaphones and resistance movements, echoing the voices of marginalised communities worldwide.**



**T**he mushrooming of online echo chambers has distinctly fragmented digital media houses and communities. From fostering radical dissent by spewing hate with divergent belief systems to manipulating political stances in the modern war-torn era, online polarisation has become pervasive.

As these divisions exacerbate, the shared ideology for the greater good shrinks to an 'us vs. them' mentality. This fosters victim competition and the tu quoque fallacy (see glossary below). The digital age has become a double-edged sword by breeding animosity in the name of whataboutism.

Whataboutism is a deflection tactic. It involves counter-commenting through digital mobilisation, pitting one group against another on ideological

beliefs. For instance, an original comment could be, "Politician X's new policy is unjust to the poor."

The counter could be, "What about politician Y, who did nothing to help the poor during his/her term?" This diverts discussion on the original criticism and shifts focus to another party, often halting productive dialogue to combat the issue.

As a result, emotional manipulation through astroturfing leads to content moderation, such as deleting or limiting the original comment to impact only a few. Subsequently, whataboutism engenders online polarisation. It pits those who support or stand with a particular ideology, incident, or solidarity movement against another.

Often, these targeted communities are subject to a barrage of counter-comments and competing narratives. This leads to a battle on social media platforms.



## Rise of Identity Politics on Platforms like Instagram, X, and Facebook

From the Renaissance to the digital era, media — be it traditional outlets or modern social media platforms — has catalysed political dissent and, at times, revolutions.

Focusing on the recent decade, media platforms, like X, have become crucibles where identity politics are discussed, forged, and fought. These platforms have evolved into powerful megaphones and resistance movements, echoing the voices of marginalised communities worldwide.

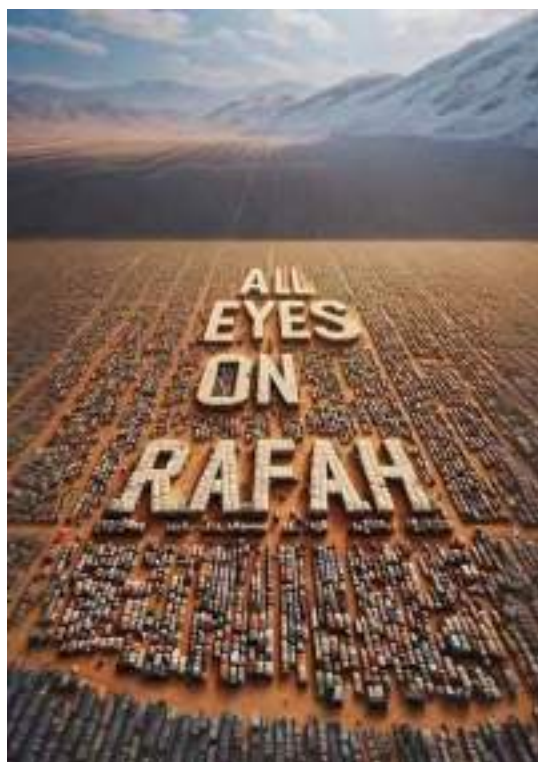
The revolutionary cries of the Arab Spring 2011, the rallying calls of the #MeToo movement, the solidarity chants of Black Lives Matter (BLM), and the critiques of Rainbow Capitalism show how media literacy has magnified and transformed social movements. All these led to significant policy changes.

Yet, it is pivotal also to acknowledge how these movements evolved into whataboutism, leading to online polarisation. For instance, BLM inspired 'All Lives Matter', the MeToo movement shifted focus to Men's Rights Activism, and the pride movement faced criticisms of Rainbow Capitalism. This whataboutery illustrates how original comments on issues can spawn counter-narratives, competing or opposing, at times, to undermine their initial goals.

### Case Study Overview - 'All Eyes on Rafah'

On the night of May 26, an Israeli airstrike on Rafah in the Gaza Strip claimed about 50 lives. Even though Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu admitted that it was a 'tragic incident,' graphic images depicting the harrowing scenes, including mutilated and beheaded bodies of women and children, rapidly spread on social media.

As a response, the 'All Eyes on Rafah' movement began, initially propelled by an AI-generated image that adhered to Instagram's content guidelines by avoiding graphic discrepancies. This template was soon shared by over 47 million Instagram users. Soon, there was criticism from all sides.



This became a victim competition through selective outrage. When celebrities began sharing their stories widely, several Hindu radicals countered with their slogans with posts, like 'My eyes are on Kashmiri Pandits', 'My eyes are on Pakistani Hindus', 'No eyes on Manipur', and 'Where were your eyes on October 7?' to spotlight overlooked injustices, highlighting other crises and contributing to a sense of polarisation.

### AI-Generated Activism and Gunning for Clickbait

This AI-generated activism turned into a platform for censorship and victim competition. Critics have framed it as 'slacktivism' for its morped portrayal of Rafah, which overlooks the harsher realities on the ground and perhaps suppresses authentic Palestinian narratives.

Furthermore, the narrative-building process in social media activism often implies cherry-picking issues that align with pre-existing sentiments, a phenomenon known as the 'confirmation cascade.' This selective equivalence is further compounded by algorithmic biases that tend to change civil discourse and popular viewpoints. Such group polarisation reinforces divisions within and between communities.

**P**eacekeeping initiatives like creating a 'Virtual Library' to understand the Syrian conflict by **organising resource materials about peace processes and conflict resolution tactics have been widely resourceful as knowledge arsenals for fostering peace.**



Alongside the spread of Islamophobia, group polarisation prompts extensive content moderation, leaving communities isolated within their filter bubbles with hypersensitive perspectives devoid of credible media and information.

### **Strategies for Effective Online Engagement to Combat Whataboutism**

The cycle of online polarisation must end. But how? Fact-checking measures such as acknowledging India's long-standing recognition of Palestine since 1988 and verifying sources is only a start.

Combating whataboutism to tackle issues promptly can be done by promoting diversity of viewpoints. From fostering global solidarity movements to widely sharing fundraisers for issues of immediate need, activism to conflicts and wars, have been reverberating.

To effectively counter the dangers of online polarisation, it is critical to demand evidence of injustices against communities, steering the conversation away from shallow engagements for clickbait in a meme competition and AI-generated images.

Promoting in-depth dialogue and discussions over surface-level content can prevent intense victim competition, which undermines solidarity.

From hosting community reconciliation efforts in Rwanda via online platforms to enabling a



global conversation on climate change, social media has become a force multiplier for mobilising crowds. It impacts policy implementation and creates a rallying cry for action.

Campaigns like #SoyCapaz (I am capable) redefined the playbook for peacekeeping initiatives in the conflict in Colombia between the government and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) rebels. Similarly, following post-election violence in Kenya, the youth actively mobilised crowds about safe spaces, routes to avoid, and so on to ensure peace and harmony.

Peacekeeping initiatives like creating a 'Virtual Library' to understand the Syrian conflict by organising resource materials about peace processes and conflict resolution tactics have been widely resourceful as knowledge arsenals for fostering peace.



Examples from all over the world have shown how media literacy counters any group polarisation by building positive narratives to ensure peace and harmony within diverse communities.

However, instances of peacekeeping efforts have gone wrong due to historical grievances and narrative differences. These include the Cyprus conflict and South Sudan civil war. These are lessons to learn in the contemporary era.

While narrative building has shaped discourse for centuries, today's competing narratives can be divisive and uproot any unity effort. Eliminating counter-commenting and cultivating an 'agree to disagree' culture can gain mutual respect.



Moreover, recognising deflection tactics like misdirection, red herrings, and whataboutism is essential in maintaining a tight grip on issues rather than getting sidetracked by filter-bubbled arguments.

Countering the trends of whataboutism, especially in the light of recent events is a critical need, more than a mere option. This is achievable with credible journalism, maintaining checks and balances, and, above all, always fact-checking comments and verifying authenticity. One must be prepared to listen, look for common ground, and, most importantly, comment on ideas, not people.



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## Glossary

→ tu quoque fallacy - Latin for 'you also' — is a logical fallacy in which an argument is discredited by asserting the opponent's hypocrisy.

→ astroturfing - the practice of masking the sponsors of a message or organisation to make it appear as though it originates from and is supported by grassroots participants

→ clickbait - sensationalised or misleading headline designed to attract attention and encourage clicks

→ crucibles - situation of severe trial or a place or set of circumstances where people or things are subjected to forces that test them and often make them change

→ deflection tactic - a strategy that redirects attention away from an issue or criticism

→ FARC - Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia

→ filter-bubble - ideational cocoon or informational isolation caused by personalised search queries or social media algorithms.

→ rainbow capitalism - the commercialisation of LGBTQ+ culture and identity by corporations, particularly during Pride month

→ red herring - a diversion or distraction from the main issue or argument

→ slacktivism - the practice of supporting a cause, typically on social media, by engaging in minimal or superficial actions

→ spatial strategy - use of spatial awareness and planning to achieve specific objectives





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# INDONESIA THE LAND BEYOND POLARISATION



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**H**istorical records indicate that Hindus constructed the outer walls while Muslims built the inner walls, evidenced by the temple-style outer wall. **The mosque's courtyard features a fish pond and a centuries-old banyan tree, enhancing its serene atmosphere.**



**T**he Ghede Mataram Mosque in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, which has a unique mix of Javanese and Hindu architectural style, is a testament to the country's remarkable religious harmony. With over 280 million people, Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority country.

Java, the world's most populous island, is home to more than half of the country's population. The Javanese are a Southeast Asian culture that speaks an Austronesian language, also called Javanese. The Javanese language is similar to other Indonesian languages. It is mostly associated with the languages of neighbouring islands, such as Bali and Malay.

The Javanese are also the largest cultural-ethnic group in Indonesia. Their culture upholds empathy and harmony.

The Ghede Mosque is the oldest in Yogyakarta. It is in the Kota Gede market area, in Jagalan village, Bantul district. Constructed during the reign of Panembahan Senapati, ruler of the Mataram Empire from 1578 to 1587, this mosque was built with the assistance of the local Hindu and Muslim communities. It was rebuilt in 1926 after it was destroyed by fire.

The Mataram Kingdom was a Javanese Hindu-Buddhist that flourished between the 8th and 11th centuries. Historical records indicate that Hindus constructed the outer walls while Muslims built the inner walls, evidenced by the temple-style outer wall. The mosque's courtyard features a fish pond and a centuries-old banyan tree, enhancing its serene atmosphere.

The mosque's main building, with its pyramidal shape, reflects Javanese cultural influences and ancient architectural designs. The mosque has a high roof and a spacious porch, while inside, a beautifully carved wooden pulpit and a large traditional drum can be found. The sound of the drum accompanies the call to prayer, creating a unique auditory experience.

Indonesia's long history of religious harmony is further exemplified by the Prambanan Temple, a 9th-century complex of 240 temples that combines Buddhist and Hindu sculptural styles. Similarly, the Christian Church, built in 1927, features a statue of Christ that closely resembles the crown and attire of a Javanese king.

During the Jesuit Education Seminar held in Yogyakarta from June 23-30, 2024, I had the privilege of visiting these sacred sites along with the delegates from Jesuit schools across the globe. It was a pilgrimage that resonated well with the seminar's theme; 'Educating for Faith in the Twenty-First Century.'

The pilgrimage was an unforgettable experience to witness the diversity of people, from various castes and religions, visiting the temples and mosques for prayer and reflection.

Indonesia stands out globally as a nation where both the government and its citizens diligently uphold the principles of brotherhood and unity. Let us hope that the religious fundamentalism and polarisation affecting many parts of the world never reach the Indonesian archipelago.

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# NAVIGATING **POLARISATION**



**T**he Indian church has a crucial role in countering the socio-political polarisation in India. My argument is rooted in the work of Kevin Vallier, a renowned American philosopher, whose recent publications, 'Must the Politics Be War? Restoring Our Trust in the Open Society' (2019) and 'Trust in a Polarised Age' (2020), have significant implications for our understanding of trust and polarisation.

**V**allier's research is particularly relevant to India, a country grappling with heightened levels of polarisation, as it sheds light on the erosion of trust among citizens and between different social and political groups. **This lack of social trust is a crucial factor in the gridlock of political decisionmaking and the undermining of social cohesion.**



Vallier's research is particularly relevant to India, a country grappling with heightened levels of polarisation, as it sheds light on the erosion of trust among citizens and between different social and political groups. This lack of social trust is a crucial factor in the gridlock of political decision-making and the undermining of social cohesion.

## The Partisan Divergence

Drawing on the insights of American political scientist Nolan McCarty, Vallier highlights the two distinct phenomena of political polarisation: polarisation and sorting.<sup>[1]</sup>

Polarisation refers to changing views on issues or strengthening loyalty to political groups, while sorting is about people with similar views and loyalties clustering together socially. These phenomena contribute to increased political division and ideological segregation.

Further, Vallier makes a distinction between Issue-based and Affect-based polarisation. Issue-based polarisation is about divergence in policy positions.<sup>[2]</sup> Affect-based polarisation transpires when individuals form new identities centred on their affiliation with a political group, driven by positive sentiments towards their in-group and hostility towards the out-group.

On the other hand, issue-based sorting transpires when individuals align with distinct political groups predicated upon their pre-existing positions on various issues. Conversely, affect-based sorting manifests when individuals affiliate with specific political groups driven by their positive or negative emotional dispositions towards those groups.<sup>[3]</sup>





Building on Vallier’s insight, ‘partisan divergence’ can encompass all four phenomena, providing a comprehensive understanding of socio-political polarisation.<sup>[4]</sup>

Scholars like McCarty argue that partisan divergence has significantly increased over the past decades.<sup>[5]</sup> The partisan divergence is driven more by emotional rather than rational disagreements.

Several countries across the globe are currently experiencing increased affective polarisation, leading to discriminatory behaviour between political groups exceeding racial, caste, class, ethnic, and religious biases. India is no exception to this phenomenon.

Declining social trust is correlated with increasing partisan divergence, i.e., political and social polarisation. This divergence, in turn, diminishes trust in political institutions, resulting in legislative gridlock and ineffective governance.

Therefore, social trust is fundamental for fostering consensus-building and cooperation, which is essential for effective policymaking. The erosion of social trust exacerbates partisan divergence, creating a reciprocal relationship between the two.

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Additionally, social trust promotes consensus and mitigates extreme political preferences. However, political trust is further eroded by legislative gridlock and populist rhetoric, which intensifies partisan divergence.







## The Political and Social Polarisation in India

Viewed through this framework, the current socio-political context in India becomes more comprehensible. The fundamental source of social and political polarisation in India revolves around the issue of nationhood: Should India remain a secular country or transform into a ‘Hindu Rashtra’ (Hindu nation)?<sup>[6]</sup>

This question penetrates the core of contemporary polarisation in post-independent India,<sup>[7]</sup> serving as the central axis of division today.

In Vallier’s framework, social and political polarisation in India predominantly manifests as affect-based polarisation and affect-based sorting. In post-independent India, the secular hegemony under the Congress party somewhat managed to contain this polarisation.<sup>[8]</sup> However, the ascendancy of Hindu nationalism has intensified it. The decisive electoral victories in 2014 and 2019 have further exacerbated intolerance and animosity towards India’s minorities, particularly Muslims.

Polarisation in India has historically manifested along caste, class, language, and regional lines.<sup>[9]</sup> However, these divisions have never posed an existential threat to the secular fabric of Indian nationhood.<sup>[10]</sup> In contrast, the emergence of contemporary socio-political polarisation driven by Hindu nationalism poses a significant challenge to the fundamental principles of India’s secular identity.

The current polarisation has its roots in the colonial period, which saw the emergence of two competing visions of nationhood. One

vision, championed by Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, envisioned India as a secular nation that respects all individuals regardless of class, caste, ethnicity, and religious identity.<sup>[11]</sup>

The opposing vision, articulated by Hindu nationalists, envisioned India as a Hindu nation where national identity is primarily based on religious affiliation.<sup>[12]</sup> Hindu nationalist V.D. Savarkar introduced the concept of Hindutva in his book ‘Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?’

This idea was transformed into a mass movement in 1925 by pro-Hindutva political activists who founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary volunteer organisation dedicated to promoting Hindu nationalism.

Despite long-standing divisions over Indian national identity, Hindu nationalism did not become a politically dominant force until the late 1980s. Since then, political leadership, particularly the polarising strategies of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014-present), has exacerbated polarisation to unprecedented levels.

The electoral victories of 2014 and 2019 have intensified intolerance and hostility towards India’s minorities, especially Muslims, thus bringing the issue of national identity to the forefront of India’s socio-political landscape.

## The Effects of Polarisation and Erosion of Social Trust

The most visible effect of the growing partisan divergence in India is the increasing intolerance and violence against minorities and other subaltern groups like tribals and Dalits, women, and transgender people.

India has witnessed a significant rise in intolerance and violence, driven by a toxic political discourse wherein leaders demonise opponents and minority groups. This hostile environment has precipitated increased attacks on minorities, activists, and human rights defenders, with Muslims and Dalits being particularly targeted.

Such heightened violence has also resulted in the political marginalisation of minorities.



Muslims and Christians are experiencing growing marginalisation in political life, marked by their underrepresentation in parliament and minimal representation within the ruling BJP.<sup>[13]</sup>

The Muslim minority represents just 4.24 percent of the Indian parliament. The 2.5 percent Indian Christian population often remains unheard of and unaddressed, primarily due to their representation falling below 1 percent.<sup>[14]</sup>

Political parties have largely avoided addressing minority concerns, thereby contributing to their exclusion and disenfranchisement. This stance has altered India's political landscape, increasing the prominence of identity politics. The BJP's success with Hindu nationalism has influenced other political parties to adopt milder forms of Hindutva.

This shift has resulted in a decrease in advocates for pluralism and a growing reluctance to speak out against hate crimes. Further, attacks on independent institutions have drastically increased.<sup>[15]</sup>

On account of political pressure and partisan attacks, India's independent institutions have faced significant challenges. Crucial institutions, including the Reserve Bank of India, the Central Bureau of Investigation, and the Election Commission, have experienced erosion of their integrity and operational independence.

**F**ostering youth engagement is crucial. By prioritising political activism and civic participation among the youth, the church can cultivate future leaders committed to democratic values and minority rights. **Establishing training programmes for young Christians in public service and politics, alongside creating platforms for political discourse, can significantly enhance their political influence.**



### **Countermeasures Against Polarisation: The Mission of the Church and Civil Society**

As Vallier proposes, addressing affect-based polarisation and sorting in India cannot be achieved solely through public justification.<sup>[16]</sup> While liberal ideals are optimistic, they may not effectively mitigate the intensifying partisan divergence.

New York Times's leading columnist and bestselling author David Brooks argues that liberalism's emphasis on individual choice can lead to social isolation and a lack of deeper virtues like bravery and loyalty.<sup>[17]</sup> This focus

on individualism neglects the importance of foundational institutions like family, faith, and cultural attachments, which shape people's identities and provide a sense of belonging.

To counter this, liberals must defend liberal institutions while honouring deeper loyalties that resonate with people. They must articulate a vision that combines the fairness of liberalism with the transcendent purposes found in various creeds and traditions.

Without addressing these deeper needs, liberalism risks losing to authoritarianism in the current political climate. Therefore, I argue that, as an alternative approach, faith communities, particularly the church emphasising solidarity and subsidiarity, can play a crucial role in mitigating polarisation.

The outcome of the 2024 Indian elections signals a clear rejection of communal polarisation and a demand for inclusive governance. Journalist Lydia Polgreen, of the 'New York Times' described this as a 'stunning rebuke'<sup>[18]</sup> by the electorate. 'The Hindu' newspaper emphasised that the election outcome reaffirms the centrality of the people in a democracy.<sup>[19]</sup>

This verdict necessitates political parties adopting a conciliatory approach to address the diverse aspirations of India's plural communities,

reinforcing the country's democratic fabric and preference for inclusivity.

In this volatile political landscape, the Indian church must reassess its mission. Historically maintaining an apolitical stance, the church's focus on self-preservation has led to political marginalisation.

Prominent Christian thinkers and activists argue that the church must now engage actively in the socio-political sphere, collaborating with civic organisations to foster grassroots political activism and civic participation.<sup>[20]</sup> This engagement is integral to the mission of evangelisation and upholding constitutional values of democracy and inclusivity.

To address these challenges, the church should foster grassroots political engagement and establish a think tank to consolidate intellectual resources for socio-political discourse.

The 'Eddelu Karnataka' (Wake-up Karnataka) movement, which mobilised voters during the 2018 Karnataka elections, serves as a model for such collaboration.

Additionally, the church's involvement in the 2015 local body elections in Kerala, where church-supported nominees succeeded, demonstrates the potential for broader political engagement.<sup>[21]</sup>







Fostering youth engagement is crucial. By prioritising political activism and civic participation among the youth, the church can cultivate future leaders committed to democratic values and minority rights. Establishing training programmes for young Christians in public service and politics, alongside creating platforms for political discourse, can significantly enhance their political influence.

Another critical task is addressing the systemic exclusion of minorities from political representation. This exclusion is evident in previous governments' lack of Christian or Muslim cabinet ministers and their minimal representation in parliament.

The church must advocate for greater political representation of minorities by supporting minority candidates, lobbying for inclusive policies, and raising awareness about the importance of minority representation.

Political engagement is essential to the Church's mission. By promoting social justice, advocating for minority rights, and fostering an inclusive society, the Church fulfils its evangelical mission.

In the context of rising Hindutva nationalism and the marginalisation of minority communities, peace-building necessarily implies the church's active socio-political participation. Promoting

grassroots activism and minority rights can help counter partisan divergence, thus safeguarding the secular foundations of Indian democracy. Therefore, the mission of evangelisation in India must encompass active socio-political engagement to promote justice, inclusivity, and democratic governance.

## Conclusion

India faces profound challenges stemming from polarisation, affect-based divisions, and the erosion of social trust, posing significant threats to its democratic foundation. Vallier's insights underscore the intricate relationship between social trust and political polarisation, emphasising the urgent need for inclusive governance and grassroots activism.

The ascent of Hindu nationalism has exacerbated societal divisions, necessitating a re-evaluation of political strategies and a renewed commitment to pluralism and democratic ideals.

The church and civil society play pivotal roles in fostering political engagement, promoting interfaith dialogue, and advocating minority rights. The church can help safeguard India's secular identity and promote social justice by actively participating in socio-political discourse and supporting inclusive policies.

Looking ahead, collaborative efforts among diverse communities, bolstering institutional integrity, and upholding democratic principles are essential to counter divisive forces and cultivate a more inclusive society. Upholding these values ensures India's stability and strengthens its global stature as a vibrant and pluralistic democracy.

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## Endnotes

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# POPULISM, POLARISATION AND POST-TRUTH

## BOOK REVIEW OF 'THE REVENGE OF POWER'

**T**he *Revenge of Power: How Autocrats Are Reinventing Politics for the 21st Century* by Moisés Naím, former editor-in-chief of 'Foreign Policy' magazine, is an in-depth analysis of the trends and events in the current political scenario.

In recent years, democratic societies around the world have been on the decline. They face a new enemy that threatens their freedom from within. It is a new form of political power that mimics democracy, but undermines the same. It strategically weakens the foundations of democracy. Naím calls it 'The Revenge of Power.'

Power relations in politics have undergone radical transformations over the centuries. The dominance of traditional power remained unshaken for long. However, in recent centuries, new constraints were placed on power relations, limiting their scope.

In the 21st century, power started decaying across democratic institutions due to an increase in personal freedom, mobility, access to information and accountability to people. This compelled the aspiring autocrats to deploy new strategies to gain and wield unlimited power.

The new set of power tools includes science, technology, social media, identity and politics.

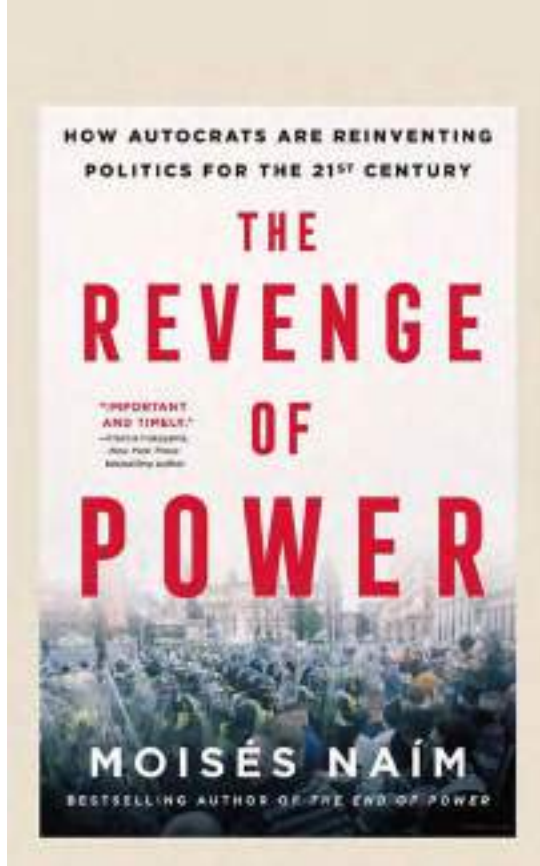
Consequently, a new breed of powermongers has arisen all over the world whether countries are rich or poor.

According to Naím, the formula of the new form of power relations is threefold: populism, polarisation and post-truth. He writes, 'Political leaders who reach power through a reasonably democratic election and then set out to dismantle the checks on executive power through populism,



Moisés Naím





polarisation, and post-truth. As they consolidate their power, they cloak their autocratic plans behind walls of secrecy, bureaucratic obfuscation, pseudo-legal subterfuge, manipulation of public opinion, and the repression of critics and adversaries. Once the mask comes off, it's too late' (p.xv).

Populism is not an ideology, but a strategy for gaining and wielding power even though it can be made virtually compatible with any governing ideology (p.xiv).

Populist leaders describe themselves as the most trustworthy caretakers of the people and as warriors constantly fighting against corrupt elites. There is a common set of populist strategies and approaches worldwide.

Elite-people divide, the criminalisation of political rivals, using external threats, militarisation, crumbling national borders, denigrating experts, attacking media, and undermining checks and balances are some of the major ones.

The second aspect of power relations is polarisation. The sources of this could be ideology, race, caste, religion, regional rivalries, historical grievances, economic inequality, social injustice, language, and many more. In a polarised political environment, political rivals are treated as enemies.

'Polarisation is always about us versus them, and drawing sharp boundaries between the us and the them is the key step in any polarisation strategy' (p.73)

For Naim, polarisation is not a new concept, as it has existed throughout history. Economic inequality, uncertainty, and social injustice are some of the root causes of polarisation. It is a clashing of different interests, perspectives, behaviour and identities.

What is new is how polarisation is intertwined and reinforced by populism and post-truth, becoming a potent tool for autocrats.

Technology, particularly social media, has amplified and empowered polarisation, making it a global phenomenon. Examples of autocrats who have used polarisation to their advantage include Russian President Vladimir Putin, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

In his writings, Moisés Naím has described political polarisation as a global pandemic that is manifesting itself in most of the world's democracies. He believes that the causes of polarisation are powerful and unstoppable.

The third aspect of power relations is post-truth. The concept of post-truth goes much deeper than simply lying. 'Post-truth is not chiefly about getting lies accepted as truths, but about muddying the waters to the point where it is difficult to discern the difference between truth and falsehood in the first place' (p.xix).

Populism, polarisation, and post-truth are mechanisms, which can weaken and destroy democracy from within.

The book is well-written and well-documented, offering a framework for understanding how populism, polarisation, and post-truth are being used to consolidate power.

The book also offers valuable insights and suggestions for how democracy can defend itself in the current political climate. The book is a must-read for anyone interested in politics and current events. It is valuable for understanding the tactics used by authoritarian leaders to consolidate power.

■



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**ART &  
PEACE**

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# **ART IN THE AGE OF AGGRESSION**

## **THE PALESTINIAN CANVAS**





**H**as the world ever been at peace?  
'Of the past 3,400 years, humans have been entirely at peace for 268 of them or just 8 percent of recorded history.' (Author Chris Hedges 2003)

Palestine has always been a war-ravaged country since time immemorial. It was repeatedly ruled and attacked by the Canaanites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Ottomans and the Jewish people, which made the country a site of cross-cultural interaction.

Israel's recent and incessant attack on the Gaza Strip has led to the destruction of many heritage sites of Palestine. Many of the ancient Palestinian monuments are destroyed.

As Palestinian archaeologist Salah al-Houdalieh said, "During the first six months of the current war on Gaza, the Israeli military destroyed about 60 percent

of the Strip's cultural heritage sites and monuments." These include the 1700-year-old St. Hilarion Monastery, the 13th-Century Pasha's Palace, the Omari Grand Mosque and many more (*al-Houdalieh 2024*).

The Church of St. Porphyrius, which was said to be the world's third-oldest functioning church, was turned into a heap of rubble after the Israeli attack in October 2023. Palestine's art and culture thus suffered irreparable loss due to Israel's systematic destruction through bombing and bulldozing.

The Palestinians are using graffiti or wall art as a form of protest. Different media of art have historically been used as resistance against Israeli occupation in Palestine.

Though art is the expression of a person's innermost feelings and desires, at times art can be a means of survival, a tool of resistance. According to a recent report by the news channel Al Jazeera, Palestinian children drew memories of these bombed historical monuments at a children's art workshop in Rafah, Gaza.

*Palestinian Artist Abed Abdi in his Studio at Haifa*







*A Palestinian Girl Painted her Lost Home*

*Artist Laila Ajjawi with her Graffiti*

For example, many of them painted the Qasr al-Basha and Omari Mosque, in their glorious old forms that could not survive the bomb attacks (Ford 2024). The project is funded by the United Kingdom Charity Christian Aid and run by a Palestinian NGO, Culture and Free Thought Association.

Palestinian visual artist Abed Abdi used his childhood memories of living in refugee camps to create his art. He was expelled from the Palestinian port city of Haifa in 1948



*Palestinian Student holding her painting of Qasr al-Basha*

**T**hough art is the expression of a person's innermost feelings and desires, at times art can be a means of survival, a tool of resistance. **According to a recent report by the news channel Al Jazeera, Palestinian children drew memories of these bombed historical monuments at a children's art workshop in Rafah, Gaza.**



*Palestinian Children doing Graffiti at an art camp*



at the time of Nakba or the elimination of Palestinians by Israeli troops in 1948.

Palestine suffered intense shelling by Zionist militia and attacks on residents. Nearly 750,000 Palestinians were forcefully displaced from their homeland due to this calamity. This ethnic cleansing of Palestine is known as Nakba or catastrophe. Most of them took refuge in Lebanon and Syria, the neighbouring countries.

Abdi told Al Jazeera from his art studio how his memories of war and exile served as stimulants to his art: “Those scenes are very painful. My memory of those moments is like a treasure to me. I remember the masses of people at the Haifa port. I remember the suffering of the people” (Tahhan 2023).

Abdi worked as the chief graphic designer and illustrator of the Haifa-based Al-Ittihad newspaper and Al Jadid literary journal. He drew illustrations for many famous writers of the time. He aimed to instil awareness of the country’s past and the history of its exiled people into the minds of the new generation of artists.

Abdi spent his childhood in refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria. He says, “I was in a situation where I realised I needed to activate my visual memory” (Tahhan 2023). Many of Abdi’s paintings depict Haifa’s neighbourhoods before, during and after the Nakba. Abdi told Al Jazeera he practises visual art ‘both as a participation of existence and to improve our cultural production’ (Tahhan 2023).

He recalls that the separations between the families at Lebanon’s refugee camp were made of sackcloth. So, he incorporated the sackcloth into his collage. Memories of displacement from childhood thus inspired him to produce art that is based on reminiscence

Laila Ajjawi, a digital and graffiti artist from Palestine, was a bio-scientist, who later adapted art as a form of protest. She was born in a refugee camp in Jordan. The Irbid camp was established in 1951 to accommodate Palestinian refugees displaced during the Nakba. Her refugee past is reflected in her art. Laila’s work showcased her identity as a woman and a refugee

*Abdi's Paintings Depict the Haifa Neighbourhood Before, During and After the Nakba*







*Palestinian Children in Art Workshops*

and gained attention from international magazines. In a live talk with Al Jazeera, she says that, being an artist and a Palestinian she must hold up to the world the sufferings of the Palestinians through art. Art has been used by these artists to uphold justice, rights, and liberty. (Borges 2023).

Jenin Yaseen, another Palestinian diaspora painter and illustrator, based in Michigan comes from a background of commerce and says that as Palestinians, they are connected in their colonised state. Their suffering and resilience inspired the artist both emotionally and physically.

**It is not only the artists who embrace art as a mode of resistance to chaos and anarchy, but also the children who take refuge in art to escape the trauma of the war.**

Artists across the world show support and solidarity with these Palestinian artists. As a member of the diaspora, she feels she must tell the world the condition of the Palestinians. Because of the radical and political aspect of Yaseen's work, the Royal Ontario Museum asked Jenin to remove the words, 'Palestine' and 'Exile' from her work.

It is not only the artists who embrace art as a mode of resistance to chaos and anarchy, but also the children who take refuge in art to escape the trauma of the war. Youth Palestinian activists organised art activity camps for the displaced Palestinian children taking refuge from Israel's bombs at Al-Shifa Hospital. In this camp, the refugee children painted the Palestinian flag and their lost homes. This is an effort to uplift the mood of the children during bombings in Gaza.

"Everyone in the Gaza Strip, from the elderly to the children, is going through hell due to the Israeli bombing and destruction we see





Art by Palestinian Diaspora Artist  
Jenin Yaseen

every day,” said Nadim Hamed Jad, one of the organisers (*Abu Riash* 2023).

Engaging in art might help them to set aside their fears briefly. Thus at a time of aggressive political polarisation and violence, the Palestinians use art to connect, share experiences, and preserve Palestinian culture and identity. Not only through painting but also through photography and documentary art has become an indispensable element of Palestinian resistance and an instrument to reaffirm their political existence and spread the message of peace.

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*Sudeshna Majumdar is an Assistant Professor of English, at Rampurhat College, Bengal.*

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*Image Sources: Al Jazeera,  
Getty Images and Wiki Images.*

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Pax Lumina 5(4)/2024/64



**D**ear Editor,  
*Excellent collection of articles. Congratulations !*

*Yes, I agree to to the fact that Indigenous land defenders face violence and even murder when they seek to protect their lands and way of living. Many Indigenous Peoples have been uprooted from their homeland due to discriminatory policies or armed conflict by the governments all over the world. They are regularly cut off from resources and traditions that are vital to their identity, wellbeing and survival.*

**Prof. (Dr) Sabu Thomas,**  
*Former Vice Chancellor  
Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, India.*

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**D**ear Editor,  
*Greetings from Croatia, where I'm teaching a course on peacebuilding. May 2024 Pax Lumina is a wonderful issue! Thank you for including me in this project. I look forward to further collaborations in the future.*

*Peace,*  
**Joshua Snyder**  
*Boston College, USA.*

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**D**ear Editor,  
*It is an excellent Issue on Indigenous People and their plight. Keep it up and best wishes*

**Jeyaraj Veluswamy**  
*Calcutta.*

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**D**ear Editor,  
*Thanks for the issue of Pax Lumina (May 2024). You are doing a significant work to highlight the issues facing the Adivasi communities. Thanks for the same as I dispatch the same to individuals and groups who are interested.*

**Robert Athickal**  
*Patna.*

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**D**ear Editor,  
*Thank you for Pax Lumina May 2024 on the plight of Indigenous Peoples. It has touched upon an important theme and an issue.*

**Stany D'Souza**  
*Delhi.*

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**D**ear Editor,  
*Thank you for this very interesting edition of Pax Lumina on Indigenous Peoples..*

*Best regards,*  
**Thomas Cecil**  
*Holy Cross College, Worcester, USA.*

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Jesuit Conference of South Asia  
225, Jor Bagh, New Delhi - 110 003, India



**Polarization affects families and groups of friends.  
It's a paralyzing situation. A civil war of opinion.**

- Mick Jagger