State of Violence:
Government Responses
to Violent Extremism
in South-East Asia

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AQ	Al-Qaida
ICOE	Independent Commission of Enquiry
IS	Islamic State
JAKIM	The Malaysian Islamic Development Department
NSC	National Security Council (Malaysia)
PVE	preventing violent extremism
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals

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STATE RESPONSES TO EXTREMISM OFTEN ENGENDER FURTHER V I O L E N C E.

IN THE MANNER OF AN OVERACTIVE IMMUNE SYSTEM, GOVERNMENT ACTIONS ... HAVE OFTEN

CREATED A MUCH MORE DANGEROUS AND DEADLY
ENVIRONMENT.

Skyscrapers in Jakarta, Indonesia.
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Governments can be reluctant to see violent extremism as an internal problem. The issue is most often framed and analysed as something that originates outside any society and its politics. But states clearly play a role in creating the political and security environment in which extremist violence emerges, and could do much more to reduce the risks.

Violent extremism occurs when a tightly defined group feels threatened by the world outside and decides to use violence against members of an out-group. These groups may be defined by political views, ethnicity, religious beliefs, or a combination of these characteristics. Groups are driven primarily by their own political experiences even if they are inspired by global movements or outside leaders. South-East Asia has seen various violent groups wax and wane over the years. Indeed, today's will eventually fade from importance if states create environments in which the existence of such groups is short-lived and is not merely replaced by more virulent groups.

States influence the actions and reach of violent extremists in many ways: by encouraging the hardening of identity politics that creates in- and out-groups; by using violence and abusing human rights, or supporting violence by others, at home or, more often, abroad; by employing oppressive laws or indulging in impunity for their security forces; and through political and social exclusion. States commit sins of omission and commission: sometimes through neglect and allowing grievances to fester and sometimes by targeting minorities in ways that make states complicit in violence.

States do not bear full responsibility for the actions of extremist groups. Governments can, however, also perpetrate extremist violence. Myanmar's government has allowed the use of violence through military campaigns against its Rohingya minority. The UN Human Rights Council mandated Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar has documented how such persistent attacks by an arm of the state have contributed to what it described as a "situation of severe, systemic and institutionalised oppression from birth to death".[1] These serious crimes and violations were found to be committed by multiple actors, including members of Myanmar's security forces.[2] While the International Criminal

Court (ICC) is investigating whether the systematic violence has been committed against the Rohingya and whether this qualifies as a crime against humanity, violence by security forces, or their proxies, can help other forms of violent extremism thrive.[3]

Research indicates that human rights abuses, conflict, and political repression all correlate with terrorism. Arguably, understanding how state policies may contribute to violent extremism is more important for prevention than unravelling the many and varied pathways of individual radicalization.

States that are serious about reducing the risks of violent extremism must go beyond the security responses that have been favored since the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States. Addressing conflicts, protecting human rights, stopping state collusion with violent groups, and limiting hate speech are some of the long-term solutions.

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STATES THAT ARE SERIOUS ABOUT REDUCING THE RISKS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM MUST GO BEYOND SECURITY RESPONSES.

The Petronas Twin Towers at night, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
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Extremism is the idea that an in-group can only advance its agenda and survive a perceived threat from an out-group through violence.[4] It hardens dividing lines between in-groups and out-groups and legitimizes violence by presenting the out-group as an existential threat. Extremism thrives in polarized environments, particularly where there is a denigration of minorities. It can be found in almost every country and throughout history. It does not attach to any single religion but faith can be invoked to legitimize violence or to define the in-group.

State responses to extremism often engender further violence.[5] In the manner of an overactive immune system, government actions—from counter-terrorism to eroding protection for minorities—have often created a much more dangerous and deadly environment. States most afflicted by violent extremism are also among the worst abusers of human rights and most likely to restrict political activity. Repression is strongly linked to violent extremism.[6] As the Institute for Economics and Peace notes: "92 per cent of all terrorist attacks occurred in countries where the Political Terror Scale was very high."[7] Conflict is likewise strongly associated; three quarters of the countries in the top twenty on the Global Terrorism Index are in a civil conflict or face at least one insurgency.[8] Failure to end conflicts through political means worsens the risk of extremism. Abusive rule of marginal areas can create pockets in which extremism thrives.

Yet government responses have relied on false assumptions about extremist violence. For example, research shows that terrorism does not correlate with poverty or education, either nationally or individually.[9] Economic development alone will not work. Political grievances motivate violent extremism and these have many sources.[10] On an individual level, the routes to radicalization are many and varied. Often they are linked to trauma or personal beliefs. As the UN Secretary-General's *Plan of Action* to Prevent Violent Extremism underlines, radicalization is highly individual, has no discernible path, is non-linear, has a huge range of "push" and "pull" factors, but has no single determining feature.[11]

While it is important who violent extremists are, and what they do, our research shows that what governments ought to do – or not do

– to prevent terrorism is even more important. As the UN-World Bank study *Pathways for Peace* notes, "exclusion from access to power, opportunity, services, and security creates fertile ground for mobilizing group grievances to violence, especially in areas with weak state capacity or legitimacy or in the context of human rights abuses."[12] Similarly, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 commits states to ensure inclusive, tolerant politics.[13]

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THE FAILURE TO RECOGNIZE THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM LEADS GOVERNMENTS TO ADOPT AN OVERLY SECURITY–FOCUSED RESPONSE.

The failure to recognize the political dimension of violent extremism can lead governments to adopt an overly security-focused response. Policing and international security cooperation are certainly essential areas with scope for improvement, but if there is to be a lasting reduction in violent extremism, states need to broaden and adjust their responses.

This adjustment by the state requires a return to the basics of working towards fairness in society. A focus on equal citizenship and inclusion, emphasis on the rule of law (particularly when dealing with extremists), genuine democratic progress (including the devolution of power to long-ignored regions), and a renewed commitment to human rights are all critical. Although terrorists can and do strike almost anywhere, there is a growing body of research indicating that a reduction in the risks of violent extremism comes not just from policing but from encouraging more open political and judicial systems. Given the links between conflict and violent extremism, it is also essential to focus on peacemaking and building trust.

It should be noted that this paper is only one part of a larger project being conducted by UNDP on preventing violent extremism (PVE) in South-East Asia, which is summarized in the publication *Entry and Exit Points: Violent Extremism in South-East Asia*.[14] It was guided by specific terms of reference after a division of labour by a team of researchers. It addresses the role of the state in responding to violent extremism and the manner by which some state responses may exacerbate rather than mitigate violent extremism.

IF THERE IS TO BE A LASTING REDUCTION IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM, STATES NEED TO BROADEN AND ADJUST THEIR RESPONSES.

A man walks a narrow alleyway in a slum area of Medan, Northern Sumatra, Indonesia.
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>> **CONFLICT**

AS WELL AS RELIGION, POLICING, PEACEMAKING, CITIZENSHIP, THE RULE OF LAW AND AUTONOMY

SHAPE THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH VIOLENT EXTREMISM CAN EXIST.

Fishing in northern Jakarta, Indonesia.
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This paper focuses on five countries in South-East Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand. Myanmar presents a distinct case among the five countries where the state has been investigated for the use of violence against the Rohingya —and has defended these actions internationally using the language of counter-terrorism.[15] Elsewhere in South-East Asia, the state has sometimes enabled or ignored extremist violence meted out by others.[16]

South-East Asia is in a much better position than most countries in Africa and the Middle East to tackle violent extremism. Yet, politics has significant implications for extremism. The five countries under consideration here are imperfect democracies with persistent weaknesses in judicial institutions, the rule of law and human rights protection.

Conflict dynamics and willingness to find political solutions vary across the five countries. All have had insurgencies at one point with some still ongoing. Malaysia has been mostly free of violence since the end of the communist insurgency decades ago. Indonesia has defied many predictions by consolidating democracy and ending the conflicts that once raged on its periphery. Violence, however, occasionally breaks out in Papua. The Philippines, Thailand and Myanmar have long-running insurgencies but none threatens the state. The Philippines has made serious efforts at peacemaking with Muslim insurgents in Mindanao yet still has a communist insurgency. Violence from Thailand's persistent insurgency in its southernmost provinces rarely spills out from there. Although the military regime has made few concessions to insurgents, the fighting has been increasingly contained in the past five years. Myanmar has multiple ethno-nationalist insurgencies, yet it is state violence directed at Rohingya minority that has attracted international attention.[17]

In South-East Asia, as elsewhere, there is an important distinction to be made between violent extremism and insurgency.[18] Violent extremists target all members of the out-group for violence. The in-group sees violence as the only way to secure its future and political aims. Insurgents fight for self-determination and a greater share of political power. Therefore, insurgencies can be resolved through political negotiation and compromise. All too often, governments

have adopted the language of the fight against terrorism as a bludgeon to suppress insurgents who may have legitimate grievances and political claims.

Violent extremists can use insurgencies and ungoverned space to organize, train and rest. In all five countries, these areas are on the periphery, out of sight of those with power in the capitals. However, the threats posed by violent extremists operating from remote areas are lower now than they were in the past, when some governments ignored the risks. Many groups in Indonesia have fragmented and the number and deadliness of their attacks have diminished. Only parts of the southern Philippines are still vulnerable. Following the end of the Marawi siege in 2017 and the implementation of peace agreements in Mindanao, the risks have lessened. Yet elections in 2022, and the failure to rebuild Marawi, may create the conditions for a resurgence in violence.[19] While there are periodic concerns that groups based outside South-East Asia such, as Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaida (AQ), will use the region as a second front, the danger is arguably overstated. Violent extremism does not pose an existential threat to any of these states.

In South-East Asia violent extremism is less deadly than thought and perceived by its citizens to be less of a problem than many terrorism experts suggest but is still more violent than many governments will admit. Violence by organized extremist groups is low—even though it attracts significant attention—and accounts for a tiny fraction of the violent deaths and injuries in each country per year.[20] According to the Global Terrorism Index, the Philippines ranks ninth and is the country most troubled by terrorism and violence in the region. Thailand is 18th, Myanmar is 26th, Indonesia is 35th and Malaysia is 74th.[21] The Philippines has the highest intentional homicide rate of these countries: 9.5 per 100,000 per year.[22] It is also the country with fewest restrictions on gun ownership. In Muslim-majority South-East Asia, the percentage of people very concerned about Islamic extremism is below the global average of 42 percent: just 20 percent in Indonesia and 26 percent in Malaysia.[23]

In each of these states, conflict as well as religion, policing, peace-making, citizenship, the rule of law and autonomy shape the political environment in which violent extremism can exist. IS and Al-Qaida play a role inspiring and shaping extremist violence but those who have taken up arms are not brainwashed; rather, they have made decisions to take on their perceived enemies with violence due to a deep belief that this is necessary for the survival of their own group

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THEY ARE NOT PASSIVE VICTIMS OF MALEVOLENT FOREIGN FORCES; THEY ARE DRIVEN BY POLITICS.

or the prospering of their faith. They are not passive victims of malevolent foreign forces; they are driven by politics.

States and violent extremism

Counter-terrorism

Since the attacks of 11 September 2001, the counter-terrorism agenda has shifted the balance between individual rights and security in policymaking. The impact is widespread, affecting civil and political rights, democracy and democratic institutions. It has reframed an increasingly wide range of public policy issues through the security prism of counter-terrorism. Most countries have introduced legislation that adopts overly expansive language and conflates terrorism with broader issues of national security and public order. Invariably, these laws undermine human rights. Indeed, in many cases, counter-terrorism policies constrain civil society.[24]

Previously, governments would use extreme tactics—and sometimes still do—to oppress organizations expressing legitimate dissent. Today, under the banner of counter-terrorism, governments deploy administrative policies and enact new legislation, leading to charges for sedition, criminal defamation, hate speech, electronic crimes and terrorism itself. Criminalization and incarceration are critical aspects of state behavior that can promote or diminish extremism. However, in contrast to the Middle East, and even Europe where prisons have been hotspots for radicalization, in South-East Asia prisons have not been universities of jihadism.

Yet, South-East Asia has largely followed the rest of the world in making terrorism a priority over the last two decades. The risk remains that state responses to individual acts of terrorism will shift the balance still further and pose greater obstacles to building equal citizenship and inclusion. Certainly, state responses to extremism can obstruct the rule of law, hinder genuine democratic progress through the devolution of power to long-ignored regions, and obstruct a state's previous commitment to human rights.

Indonesia is a case in point. Its response threatens its current pragmatic strategies of intelligence gathering and policing. The national shock at the use of women and children in terror attacks in Surabaya in 2018 galvanized support for new counter-terrorism legislation.[25] The legislation gives new powers to Indonesia's security forces and reinforces the creeping militarization of counter-terrorism operations. It reflects the long-term shift in the balance

between rights and security, and Amnesty International has said that its research has shown is likely to result in higher levels of human rights violations.[26]

Malaysia already had a longstanding set of strict national security laws that date back to the communist uprising. Opposition and civil society pressure led the government to abolish the 1960 Internal Security Act. However, it was replaced by a raft of sweeping anti-terror laws, including the National Security Council (NSC) Act 2016. The new laws are criticized repeatedly by civil society as likely to result in radicalization and misuse against political opponents. The new administration's policy on counter-terrorism has not yet been clearly formulated but it may be markedly different. The government has withdrawn its support for the war in Yemen and closed a high-profile Saudi-backed counter-terrorism centre.

Counter-terrorism in the Philippines has closely followed the militarized approaches of the United States, in particular with intelligence support. While Manila has sometimes been tempted by such an over-simplification,[27] it has evolved to a more nuanced position that distinguishes between insurgency and terrorism.[28] Muslim insurgents also saw the danger that links to violent extremists posed to the peace negotiations; those invested in a political solution distanced themselves.

Myanmar has gone the opposite way. Counter-terrorism was invoked to justify disproportionate military operations against the Rohingya.[29] The attack by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army on security forces was used by the Tatmadaw, with the support of the civilian government, to frame its response through the prism of the War on Terror. In this case, portraying insurgency as terror did not deflect international concern. Myanmar is still unwilling to accept Rohingya, but the government has engaged in political dialogue with other minority ethnic groups that took up arms. However, little progress in the peace process has been made.

Citizenship and identity
Exclusionary politics, as well as denial of ethnic identity and citizenship rights, are more deeply entrenched in Myanmar than in the four other countries. Rigid systems of ethnic identity, grounded in colonial laws and strengthened by an exclusive state ideology, have led to pogroms and state violence in Rakhine State. These attacks, targeted against one ethnic group and justified as an act of self-defense, fit the definition of extremism.[30] The scale of hate speech

against the Rohingya minority, and the degree to which many in Myanmar have adopted hostile views, illustrates how citizenship and identity are at the heart of state extremism.

Citizens of Myanmar must be a member of one of the 135 "nationalities" listed in the 1982 citizenship law. Rohingya are not included as the state sees them as immigrants from Bangladesh. Their old citizenship documents, and their right to vote, were taken away before the 2015 elections. Rendering the Rohingya stateless has been part of a concerted campaign over decades to eliminate them as a culture and people. They have been targeted for several reasons: they are not one of the national races and they are not Buddhist; they are viewed as physically distinct from the majority of people in Myanmar and they are portrayed as illegal immigrants. This "double difference" has marked them out for persecution.[31]

Myanmar lacks a national identity that can encompass the 40 percent of the population who are not ethnic Bamar. For decades, minorities were largely excluded from government, the military and economic opportunity. Many have fought against the central government. Even since the democratic transition began, they remain on the periphery, physically and politically. Buddhist Bamars continue to dominate the state, imposing an ideology of religious and ethnic dominance over others.

Thailand, like Myanmar, has generally resisted much transfer of power from the center. Its national identity is rooted in an ideology of religion, monarchy and state, dominated by a network of army officers and royalty. It has also been reluctant to acknowledge the distinct identity of its Muslim minority in the Deep South. Yet, despite protracted ethno-nationalist uprising in the periphery, the country has not seen much extremist violence in this area.

Politics in the Philippines remain a mix of feudalism, clan politics and corruption. The Muslim minority has fought a fifty-year war for greater autonomy. The conflict in Mindanao has created a constantly shifting landscape of violence in which ideological and criminal motives often blur together. A recent peace agreement that created the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) may eventually reduce violence. Opposition to the agreement remains, particularly among extremist groups that have pledged allegiance to IS.

Modern Indonesian identity was honed in the country's anti-colonial movement and then anchored in Pancasila, a national ideology that emphasizes pluralism because it focuses on monotheism rather than a specific faith. Pancasila also includes democracy, social welfare and justice among its five principles, not all of which have been fully realized by successive Indonesian governments. It is similar to the "e pluribus unum" (out of many, one) principle of the United States. Within this national framework, the people of West Papua and Aceh won greater autonomy while decentralization gave minorities more say in government. Pluralism persists even as religious intolerance has built.

Malaysia's post-independence ideology focused on the primacy of the *bumiputra*, or ethnic Malays, in state activities, while the Chinese and Tamil communities were politically marginalized.

Politics and Religion

How does state engagement with religion influence extremism? These five countries are dominated by three of the major faiths: Catholicism, Islam and Buddhism. None has a state religion—although some Malaysian politicians say it is an Islamic state—but in each there is a dominant faith that plays a major role in politics and identity. Religiosity is growing across the region, but this is a complex picture with countervailing and evolving trends.[32]

It is uncertain what has driven this shift. The rapid encounter with modernity in the past 50 years may be a contributing factor. Greater engagement with global religious forces or the travails and demands of globalization may also contribute.[33] The state has played a role, with politicians using religion and state engagement to win votes or marginalize rival parties. In Myanmar and Thailand, military and royalist regimes have subsumed the religious hierarchy to the needs of the state. In both, this has framed insurgencies waged by religious minorities as a threat to the dominant religion, creating a high barrier to resolution.[34]

One study has raised concerns about religious freedom in South-East Asia. Indonesia, Malaysia and Myanmar were all ranked as having "very high" government restrictions on religion in the 10th annual Pew Research Institute analysis of religious freedom.[35] Malaysia was among the top-ranked when it came to the government favoring one faith— something that Pew defined mostly as whether there was a state faith. None of the countries ranked highly in terms of social hostility towards religion, indicating a general tolerance for religion in the public sphere.

Where religious views are hardening and fragmenting, intolerance of minority faiths is creeping into the political mainstream. In Indonesia, for example, a rising polarization among voters along religious lines is evident.[36] Politicians see gain in tacitly approving, or even joining, the rising chorus of exclusion. Social media has torn off the thin skin of civility when it comes to ethnic and religious differences, with far more public expression of hostile views than before.

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WHERE RELIGIOUS VIEWS ARE HARDENING AND FRAGMENTING, INTOLERANCE OF MINORITY FAITHS IS CREEPING INTO THE POLITICAL MAINSTREAM.

State collusion with violence

There is a long history of state actors working with extremist groups. This has been most evident in South Asia and the Middle East but it has also occurred in South-East Asia. In some cases, groups condemned for their extremism may receive quiet support from the state. Mostly they have provided support or refuge for a violent group in a neighbouring country but states also support violent extremists such as vigilantes within their own borders. Playing with violent proxies has been a common tactic for many governments.[37]

The Japanese supported the rise of Darul Islam in Indonesia to mobilize resistance to Western colonial forces. Darul Islam went on to create a strand of extremism in Indonesian life that persists to this day; both times when it emerged—in the 1950s and the 1980s—its rise was linked to some form of state support.[38] In its later incarnation, the Suharto regime saw Darul Islam as a counterweight to what they believed was an enduring threat from communists, despite mass killings of the latter in the 1960s.

Malaysia and Libya supported armed groups in the Southern Philippines. Malaysia provided exile for the leaders of Jemaah Islamiyah in the 1980s and 1990s when the Suharto government in Indonesia had decided to rein in Islamists. It also provided a refuge for insurgents in southern Thailand.[39] The logic has often been "my enemy's enemy is my friend."[40]

A serious but underreported form of violence across the region is vigilantism, which is often supported implicitly by the police and the state. Far from occurring in those places where the presence of government and security forces might be weak therefore justifying individuals taking the law into their own hands, vigilantism more often occurs where the state has a firm grip.

Vigilantism is often a way for the security forces to control minorities while avoiding accountability. By allowing violence against religious

and ethnic minorities, the state is enabling violent manifestations of intolerance. In Indonesia, *pamswakarsa,* or vigilante forces, are commonplace and local authorities have often attempted to bring them under government control.[41] These hybrid forms of security are an enduring phenomenon in Indonesia.

Between 2005 and 2014, the National Violence Monitoring System recorded 33,627 victims of vigilante violence, including 1,659 deaths, in Indonesia. The death toll is three times more than those killed in communal riots.[42] It also vastly exceeds those killed in extremist attacks.[43] Rather than being a symptom of weak state capacity, vigilante attacks in Indonesia increased as security forces expanded. Such violence is more prevalent in Java, and in cities, despite the greater presence of the police.[44]

These attacks take various forms. Often they are about policing personal behavior and focus on what are seen as moral offences such as adultery or selling food while people are fasting. They also target criminals, with mobs even grabbing offenders from police custody before lynching them. Critically, they have increasingly targeted religious and ethnic minorities, particularly followers of the minority Ahmadi faith. Discrimination against religious minorities and the failure of the state to protect them from mob violence—or even in some cases for state actors to be complicit in this violence—is another way in which the state enables extremism.

Extrajudicial killings have soared in the Philippines since President Duterte unleashed a campaign that supposedly targets drug dealers but has been described as a "war on the poor."[45] The number of deaths to date is uncertain: Philippines National Police put the number at 6600—an astonishing figure in itself—but human rights monitors believe it may be as high as 30,000.[46] Widespread human rights abuses by state actors—or by vigilantes—normalize violence and raise the risk of extremism.

Hate speech

Hate speech is growing in the region and its relationship to violence, communal conflict and extremism is of particular concern. The UN recognizes that there is no international legal definition of hate speech, and the characterization of what is 'hateful' is controversial and disputed. In its Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, the term is understood as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on

the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor". Hate speech is rooted in, and generates, intolerance and hatred. It can be demeaning, divisive, and lead to violence.[47]

The UN strategy recognizes that rather than make illegal hate speech international law prohibits the incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence.[48] It notes that "incitement is a very dangerous form of speech, because it explicitly and deliberately aims at triggering discrimination, hostility and violence, which may also lead to or include terrorism or atrocity crimes.

Hate speech is growing in the region and its relationship to violence, communal conflict and extremism is of particular concern. In South-East Asia, hate speech is amplified by misinformation spread across social media.[49] State action and inaction has affected the way hate speech propagates and becomes part of public discourse. In the United States, the narrative of war with Islam arguably confirms the narratives of Islamic State and would appear to reinforce the credibility of their extremist world view among those vulnerable to radicalization.[50] Western government anti-Islamic narratives combined with fearmongering by IS and AQ —both facilitated by international and social media—have helped normalize hate speech and incitement globally.[51] These discourses risk providing "opportunities for extremist groups who are able to blend official narratives into their own discourses, enabling them to creatively update their existing belief systems and draw renewed legitimacy by bringing their ideologies into closer proximity to mainstream views."[52]

South-East Asia conforms to the trend of majoritarian identity politics and the risk of communal violence resulting from hate speech. Myanmar exemplifies the centrality of hate speech and misinformation in fomenting violence against religious minorities.[53] While Myanmar had always buzzed with rumours and conspiracy theories, they could grow exponentially with the advent of social media. Facebook became the vehicle for hate speech and false reports about Muslims. Examples include reports that IS flags were flying over mosques in Yangon and Muslims were stockpiling arms. An emerging narrative that Myanmar and Buddhism were imperiled by Islam took hold.

A study by Reuters in 2018 found more than 1000 examples of hate speech directed against the Rohingya on Facebook.[54] Some posts calling for the elimination of Muslims had been up as long as six years

HATE SPEECH IN MYANMAR HAS A STRONGLY GENDERED ASPECT: IT OFTEN FOCUSES ON EITHER SEXUAL VIOLENCE ALLEGEDLY BY MUSLIM MEN OR ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST MUSLIM WOMEN.

without Facebook acting. Hate speech in Myanmar has a strongly gendered aspect: it often focuses on either sexual violence, allegedly by Muslim men or on sexual violence against Muslim women. Muslim men are portrayed as a threat to Buddhist women and by extension to the entire state.[55] Women are often portrayed as both vulnerable and the embodiment of national identity by extremist movements, even as they simultaneously adopt the most misogynistic positions.[56]

Myanmar was particularly vulnerable because of a lack of awareness in social media companies of the extent of the problem, and the arrival of Facebook and others at a moment when multiple forces were contesting the political space. Hate speech is a growing problem elsewhere in South-East Asia as well. In the Philippines, the often violent rhetoric emanating from the highest levels of leadership has incited violence, as was the case in 2017 following the president's offer of immunity from prosecution for rape to troops engaged in the war on terror in Mindanao.[57]

In Malaysia, the prior government repeatedly referred to other ethnic groups in pejorative language.[58] Intolerance has been spread equally by the bureaucracy. Established under former Prime Minister Mahathir, JAKIM, the Malaysian Islamic Development Department, defines and regulates what it means to be a Sunni Muslim both theologically and in daily life. This includes how to dress and what behavior is considered appropriate for a Muslim. JAKIM has developed a powerful hold over Malaysian society. Those who challenge its authority are threatened with sedition. JAKIM writes all Friday sermons for delivery nationwide. In recent years, these sermons have sometimes used hate speech against minorities.[59] In Indonesia, moderate Muslims, Christians and atheists have been targeted with online hate speech.

Hate speech is difficult to tackle anywhere and the misuse of social media is a global problem. Awareness of the risks in South-East Asia has improved but corporations and governments have made only ad hoc efforts to limit hate speech. Across the region governments have restricted freedom of speech, and the attempt to control hate speech might only make this worse. Responses so far have tended to favour new cybersecurity laws that allow increased data surveillance and restrictions on free speech and legitimate dissent.[60] Arguably, social media companies do have the means and tools to control hate speech more effectively.

>> **CORPORATIONS AND: GOVERNMENTS HAVE MADE ONLY AD HOC EFFORTS TO LIMIT HATE SPEECH.**

A crossing in Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
© UNDP Asia Pacific/ Mailee Osten-Tan

>> GIVEN THE LINKS BETWEEN CONFLICT AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM, IT IS ALSO ESSENTIAL TO FOCUS ON PEACEMAKING AND BUILDING TRUST.

The community gathers to watch a chess game in the Sagonsongan Transitional Shelter, housing displaced former residents of Marawi, the Philippines.
© UNDP Asia Pacific/ Alecs Ongcal

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PREVENTION SHOULD ADDRESS
THE WAY **ENTIRE SOCIETIES**
HAVE BEEN MADE TO ACCEPT
WORSENING VIOLENCE
IN THEIR MIDST.

Children play at the edge of the Jakarta bay in a slum housing area, Indonesia.
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Turning a blind eye to citizens who left to fight in the Middle East will not improve security in South-East Asia. Instead, such a response risks dispersing experienced fighters who have the cachet of having fought for IS. That, in itself, may lead extremist groups down a path to greater violence. Islamic State may or may not regroup in the Middle East or North Africa—but whatever happens, it has normalized extreme levels of violence and the use of that violence as a way to attract recruits.

It is harder to be sanguine about the long-term trends. Across the region, lines are hardening between different religious and ethnic groups. Politics has polarized, as indeed it has done across the world. Social media has both opened the information space and closed people's minds. Increasingly, people live in closed circuits of information that only reinforces narrowing world views.

Populations are gravitating towards exclusionary visions of their states. Increasingly, support for pluralism and tolerance seems to be diminishing. Although the 2019 presidential election in Indonesia saw the victory of the, generally considered, moderate incumbent, the deep geographic and religious divides were rendered clearer than ever. In Malaysia, a multi-ethnic, broad-based coalition of opposition parties took power in 2018 but, in a climate of division, it has proved challenging to bring a more open and pluralistic vision to the country's politics.

The darkest developments have been in Myanmar, where the state responded to an insurgent attack by launching a genocidal campaign against the Rohingya. The violence was shocking in itself, but popular support and widespread acceptance of the government's narrative that this was a legitimate counter-terrorist operation showed how deeply extremist views are held by the population. From the Islamophobic rhetoric of state leaders such as Aung San Suu Kyi and laws governing marriage and reproduction, to the use of extensive violence and imprisonment of minorities, Myanmar has shown itself to be an extremist state.

Efforts to prevent violent extremism in South-East Asia need to shift focus. Policy debate cannot be restricted to Islamist extremism. It cannot be restricted to non-state actors. Rather than focus on the radicalization of individuals, prevention should address the way entire societies have been made to accept worsening violence in their midst. Terrorist attacks will occur and they will cause harm. But they will not irrevocably change societies unless those states respond in ways that encourage further violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

>> ### Balance human rights with counter-terrorism

Counter-terrorism laws should be narrowly applied in the circumstances for which are intended. Commitments to human rights should be not be undermined in the interests of national security.

>> ### Build inclusive politics through conflict resolution

Insurgencies provide space for extremists to operate, train and recruit. Distinguishing insurgency from violent extremism and recognizing the legitimacy of grievances vis-à-vis the central government can build trust with minorities and reduce risks of further violence.

>> ### Protect religious minorities

With religiosity and intolerance of minority faiths growing in South-East Asia, states must ensure that religious freedom is respected. Extremist groups should not target religious minorities with impunity.
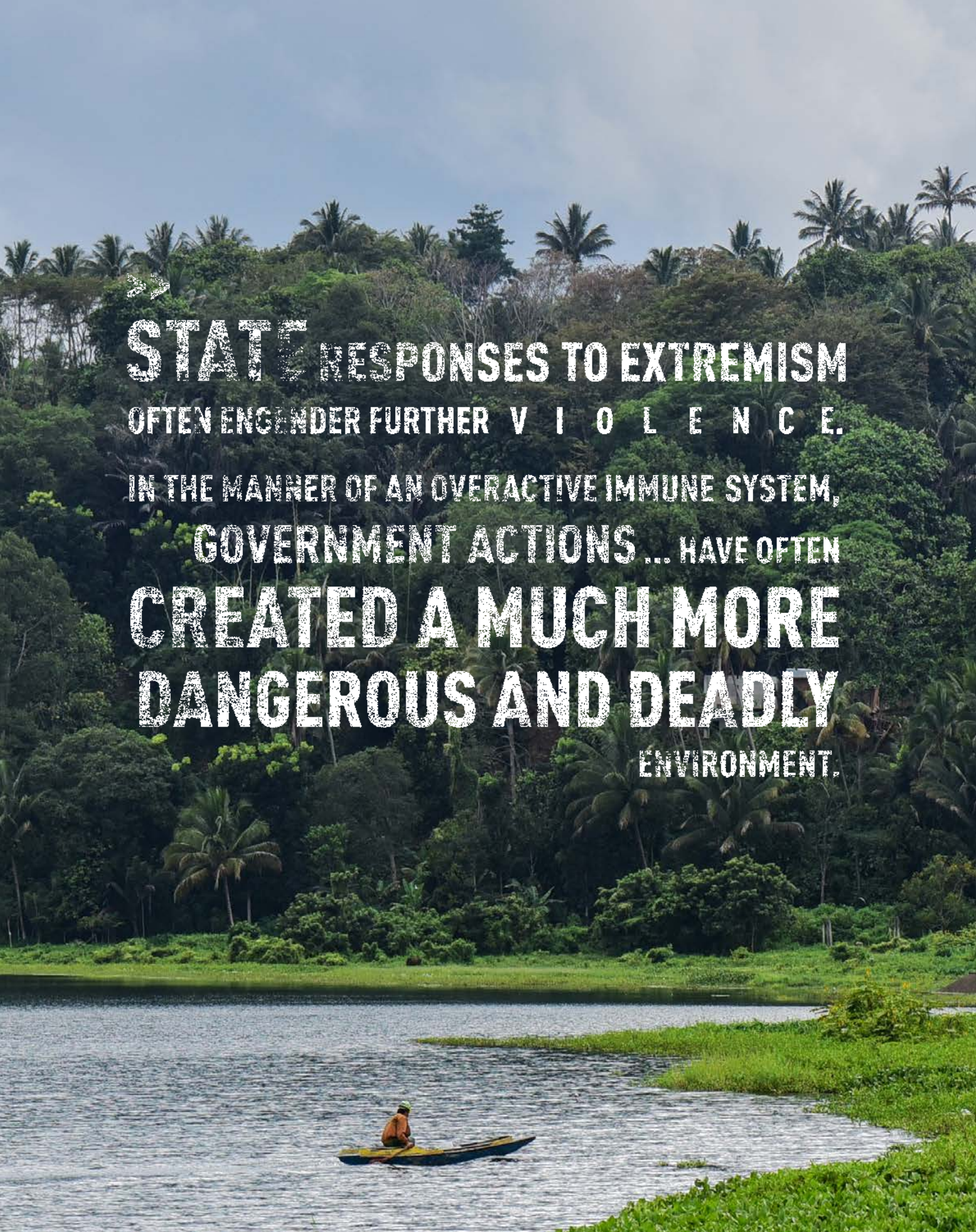
>> ### Reduce violence

Poor protection of human rights, and state collusion in violence, create fertile ground for violent extremism. Tacit support for violent groups, such as complicity in vigilantism, is a growing problem across the region. Often, minorities are victims. Encouraging such attacks is antithetical to the pluralism needed to maintain peaceful societies.

>> Tackle hate speech

Politicians resorting to dog-whistle politics—or even outright hate speech—combined with the rise of social media have accelerated the spread of hatred. South-East Asia should support the UN Secretary-General's campaign against hate speech, which calls for politicians to refrain from incitement against religious groups and minorities.[61]

>> **STATE** RESPONSES TO EXTREMISM OFTEN ENGENDER FURTHER V I O L E N C E.

IN THE MANNER OF AN OVERACTIVE IMMUNE SYSTEM, GOVERNMENT ACTIONS ... HAVE OFTEN **CREATED A MUCH MORE DANGEROUS AND DEADLY** ENVIRONMENT.

A mosque on the banks of Lake Lanao, Lanao del Sur, the Philippines.
© UNDP Asia Pacific/ Alecs Ongcal

1. Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, A/HRC/39/CRP.2, 17 September 2018, paragraph 458, p.108.

2. See United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar, September 2019 (A/HRC/39/64) and Independent Commission of Enquiry (ICOE), Executive Summary of the Final Report, submitted 20 January 2020.

3. "ICC judges authorise opening of an investigation into the situation in Bangladesh/Myanmar", ICC-CPI-20191114-PR1495, Press Release, International Criminal Court, 14 November 2019 https://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/item.aspx?name=pr1495.

4. Writing on extremism is plagued by definitional issues. Astrid Botticher developed this consensus definition: "Extremism characterizes an ideological position embraced by those anti-establishment movements, which understand politics as struggle for supremacy rather than as peaceful competition between parties with different interests seeking popular support for advancing the common good. Extremism exists at the periphery of societies and seeks to conquer its center by creating fear of enemies within and outside society. They divide fellow citizens and foreigners into friends and foes, with no room for diversity of opinions and alternative life-styles. Extremism is, due to its dogmatism, intolerant and unwilling to compromise. Extremists, viewing politics as a zero-sum game, tend – circumstances permitting – to engage in aggressive militancy, including criminal acts and mass violence in their fanatical will for gaining and holding political power. Where extremists gain state power, they tend to destroy social diversity and seek to bring about a comprehensive homogenisation of society, based on an often faith-based ideology with apocalyptic traits. At the societal level, extremist movements are authoritarian, and, if in power, extremist rulers tend to become totalitarian. Extremists glorify violence as a conflict resolution mechanism and are opposed to the constitutional state, majority-based democracy, the rule of law, and human rights for all." See Astrid Botticher, "Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 11 No 4 (2017). This paper also uses a similar definition found in J. M. Berger, *Extremism*, MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series (2018) that sees extremist groups as defining their very survival based on violent opposition to an out-group. Both definitions include the possibility of states being extremist.

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11. UN General Assembly *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*, 24 December 2015, (A/70/674). Available at http://www.refworld.org/docid/577615cf4.html. See also F. Patel, *Rethinking Radicalization* (Brennan Center for Justice, 2011); A. P. Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review". ICCT Research Paper 20 March 2013; M. Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism", Comparative Politics. vol. 13, No. 4 (July 1981).

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KEY TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT (GLOSSARY)

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE): Programs, projects of activities designed to actively counter violent extremism ideas and/or activities.

Counterterrorism (CT): Actions, often implemented by security forces, to actively counter known terrorist groups.

Disengagement: Disengagement is understood to be the process of an individual or group ceasing to use violence, leaving a movement or migrating to a non-violent role to achieve political goals.

Extremism: A belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group.

Hate Speech: Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.

Insurgents: Localized armed groups using violence to achieve specific negotiable goals that have their own political infrastructure as well as the control of population and territory.

Majoritarianism: Majoritarian politics promotes the idea that the majority — be it ethnic, racial or religious — is somehow threatened by minorities, even when they are mostly disadvantaged or already restricted in their access to public goods by law.

Preventing Violent Extremism: Programs, projects of activities designed to prevent violent extremism ideology taking route or activities taking off.

Radicalization: The process by which people are converted to radical ideas, such as those held by violent extremisms.

Terrorism: Terrorism, as used in this paper, refers to the use of indiscriminate violence, likely targeting civilians. It refers only to a behaviour or an act; it does not indicate the nature of the group or individuals responsible.

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TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM
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IS PART OF THE PROJECT
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A SERIES OF FIVE REPORTS PRODUCED
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