

Engaging in “Whataboutery” Instead of Protecting Rights

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I HAVE HEARD THIS TERM a lot, most recently when I joined a heated BBC Radio debate on India: *whataboutery*.

This term does not refer to protesting inconsistencies by making a reasoned argument that presents opposing facts. Rather, whataboutery is used as a much more sinister challenge to human rights: the practice wherein perpetrators of violations, or their supporters, do not deny the abuses, but instead justify them and shout down criticism by citing the wrongdoings of their victims. All too often, they absolve collective punishment through whataboutery.

Human rights defenders often speak for the rights of the unpopular—including those accused of terrorism, murder, or rape—by calling for fair trials and protections from torture or ill treatment. While immediate revulsion to backing the rights of alleged criminals is an understandable emotional response, it is the responsibility of political leaders to uphold human rights and root societies in rule of law.

Instead, whataboutery has become a key part of populist political rhetoric, appealing to ethnicity, race, or religion. These awful justifications appear to be endless, particularly because social media offers a medium to express such views. Even democracies that have long endorsed universal human rights are faltering, whether in the United States, India, Australia, countries throughout Europe, or younger nations such as Bangladesh. Confronting the dilemma of terror attacks, rising crime, and a deluge of refugees is difficult, but instead of upholding human rights principles, too many political and religious leaders are promoting harsh, unrealistic alternatives. Their justifications for repressive countermeasures can

39

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cite alleged decades- or even centuries-old wrongdoings by particular groups of people. Meanwhile, majority groups, desperate for reassurance, believe that this sliding commitment to civil liberties is the appropriate response to the wrongs that they are forced to endure.

In Myanmar, over 600,000 Rohingya Muslims—more than half of the Rohingya population—have been forced to flee to Bangladesh to escape a brutal military crackdown. These crimes against humanity followed a militant attack by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army on 25 August 2017, which targeted police posts and an army camp.¹ Refugees said that they fled after Rakhine Buddhist

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mobs and the military surrounded their villages. Many were killed or raped, while many others remain missing.

From across the border

in Bangladesh and through satellite images, Human Rights Watch staff witnessed Rakhine State on fire.² As the world called upon Myanmar to end the abuses—which the UN secretary general has described as ethnic cleansing—the authorities, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, said the operation was a legitimate effort to end militancy.³ Myanmar’s army commander, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, engaged in a classic example of whataboutery by saying that the military was completing “unfinished business” dating back to the communal violence around World War II.⁴

40

As with Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, much of the recent whataboutery in other parts of the world is linked to attacks by extremist Islamist groups. Of course, the extremists themselves engage in whataboutery to justify their violent attacks, but the state response can end up collectively punishing entire communities. During his election campaign, U.S. President Donald Trump proposed a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what is going on.”⁵ After he took office, he followed through with executive orders to restrict the arrival of citizens from some Muslim-majority countries, suspended the Syrian refugee program, and acknowledged a preference for non-Muslim refugees.⁶ Many who campaigned to have the United Kingdom leave the European Union spoke of the risks posed by immigration.⁷ During the most recent presidential campaign in France, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right National Front who eventually lost the election, also targeted Muslims and criticized extremist Islam as an “ideology that wants to bring France to its knees.”⁸

After a recent spate of attacks in the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Theresa May said that she was willing to overturn human rights laws if they “stop us” from taking measures against suspects “when we have enough evidence to know they are a threat, but not evidence to prosecute them in full in court.”⁹ This shift is particularly unfortunate because the U.S. government and European governments have long led the campaign to promote international human rights standards; therefore, these altered policies will only encourage other abuses. Members of the political opposition and civil society accused India of religious discrimination for declaring Rohingya Muslim refugees a security threat because of its long established practice of sheltering Buddhist Tibetans or Hindus from Sri Lanka and Pakistan; in October, India’s Supreme Court told the government that it “must not be oblivious to humanitarian considerations.”¹⁰ Pointing out that Prime Minister May was willing to change human rights laws to tackle terrorism, the then Sri Lankan justice minister, Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe, informed UN special rapporteur Ben Emmerson that his government would not hold soldiers accountable for their violations because “we are simply following British Prime Minister Theresa May.”¹¹

There can be no justification for the recent terrorist attacks in numerous cities around the world, and the perpetrators need to be identified and properly prosecuted. But any attempt to combat extremist groups by backsliding on human rights principles simply fortifies these groups’ claims of persecution and revenge.¹² United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said that after the recent attacks in Europe, “Refugees and migrants were increasingly viewed as Trojan horses for terrorists. Hysteria raged in political circles across Europe, and the terrorists must have been grinning.”¹³ Al Hussein warned that the effort to contain terrorism “is being exploited by governments the world over to roll back the advances made in human rights. The curtailing of the freedoms of expression and association... is closing what is left of a democratic space.”¹⁴

JUSTIFYING ABUSES

A significant consequence of creating a resentful or angry political discourse is that it encourages, and even normalizes, human rights abuses by both state and non-state actors.

The radio show I joined in July 2017 discussed a spate of mob attacks by Hindu extremist groups—many of them affiliated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

(RSS)—upon Muslims in India who allegedly killed cows (considered holy by many Hindus) for beef consumption or trade.¹⁵

India is a Hindu-majority nation, yet religious nationalists, including members of the BJP and RSS, have been running a propaganda campaign claiming victimization, which has incited hate and even violence against minority Muslims and Christians. The BJP government was slow to criticize the attacks, leading to protests by civil society over patronage and complicity.¹⁶ The party even selected a Hindu militant leader, Yogi Adityanath, as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh state, although he faces allegations of inciting communal hate, as in his description of India's Muslims as "a crop of two-legged animals that has to be stopped."¹⁷

On the radio show, BJP supporters acknowledged that these attacks by so-called "cow protectors" were wrong but then immediately sought to attribute blame to Muslims and Christians. What about the Hindus of Jammu and Kashmir who were attacked by militants, chased from their homes, and are still displaced?¹⁸ What about proselytization by church groups?¹⁹ What about bombings and terror strikes by Muslim groups?²⁰ What about the mob attack on a police officer in Srinagar or the Maoist ambush on troops?²¹ This finally led to another exasperated panelist calling for an end to whataboutery: to accept that all these abuses are wrong, and that no one can justify the other.

42

These justifications are also used for state abuses. After some Rohingya militants in Myanmar attacked border police posts in Rakhine State, first in October 2016 and then again in August 2017, the Burmese military launched attacks against the marginalized Rohingya community, committing murder, sexual violence, and arson, all as collective punishment.²² In September 2017, a Myanmar government spokesman, Zaw Htay, claimed successful "clearance operations," saying that of the 471 Rohingya villages targeted by the military, 176 were now empty and at least 34 others partially abandoned.²³

An election in November 2015 brought Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) to power after a landslide victory, ending decades of rule by military juntas and military-backed political parties in Myanmar.²⁴ Aung San Suu Kyi, who is barred from becoming president under the military-drafted constitution, runs the government from her newly created position of state counsellor.²⁵ It is the Burmese military that has engaged in an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Rohingya, but Aung San Suu Kyi, once a political prisoner of the military, has, disappointingly, not only failed to condemn the violations but has also engaged in some whataboutery of her own. Responding to international criticism of the attacks on the Rohingya, she weakly declared

that there are “allegations and counter-allegations.”²⁶ She also referenced “a huge iceberg of misinformation,” paralleling Donald Trump’s consistent attribution of all criticism to “fake news.” When questioned earlier about the targeting of the Rohingya by the military, she told BBC that “it is not just a matter of ethnic cleansing as you put it. It’s a matter of people on different sides of the divide, and this divide we are trying to close up.” While agreeing that Burmese security forces are “not free to rape, pillage and torture,” she also did not call for accountability, underscoring that it was a counterterrorism operation and that “military matters are to be left to the army.”²⁷ Her government also rejected a UN Human Rights Council resolution to investigate abuses against the Rohingya and others and has said they will deny visas to members of the fact-finding mission. “We do not agree with it,” Aung San Suu Kyi said, “because we do not think that the resolution is in keeping with what is actually happening on the ground.”²⁸

Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is not the first leader in the region to try to stop a UN investigation: “We will not allow them into the country,” Sri Lanka’s then president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, declared after the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution in 2014 seeking an independent investigation into wartime abuses; “We are saying that we do not accept it. We are against it.”²⁹ This occurred against the backdrop of a brutal civil war that Sri Lanka’s military fought against the separatist Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for nearly 30 years. Particularly in the last few months before the war’s end in May 2009, there were serious violations of the laws of war by both sides, as the national army closed in on the LTTE fighters. The LTTE prevented 300,000 Tamil civilians from fleeing while the military fired on them indiscriminately with artillery and air attacks.³⁰ After the UN ordered an investigation into alleged abuses, Sri Lanka’s High Commissioner in London engaged in classic whataboutery, complaining to the *New Yorker*: “Colombia has been contaminating the world for years with its cocaine, and now Somalia is with its piracy. What do we hear about that in the UN? Nothing.”³¹

After Rajapaksa lost his re-election campaign in 2015, the new government pledged to undertake key human rights reforms, including resolving the many transitional justice demands arising out of the country’s decades of civil war.³² While there has been progress on many fronts in Sri Lanka under the new government, obtaining justice for the victims of the war on all sides has not yet been accomplished.

CHALLENGES OF IDENTITY

In a colliding world of aspiration and need, the struggle over limited resources inevitably leads to grudges. When those grievances and suspicions between communities and sects are articulated and advanced by irresponsible leaders, they can explode into violent conflict over identity. Millions have died due to internal armed conflicts, particularly in post-colonial Asia and Africa; many others have been killed in smaller, but deadly, communal flare-ups.³³

Post-colonial British India is now a set of independent nations, and while some have struggled and stumbled, they are now all democracies: India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and even Myanmar. V.S. Naipaul, with his evocative al-

But elsewhere too, battles over re- religious or ethnic identity have fostered more than “little mutinies.”

 literation, said of India, “People everywhere have ideas now of who they are and what they owe themselves... In India, with its layer below layer of distress and cruelty, it had to come as disturbance. It had to come as rage and revolt. India was now a country of a million little mutinies.”³⁴

44 But elsewhere too, battles over religious or ethnic identity have fostered more than “little mutinies.”³⁵ They have led to violence and civil war, brutal, retaliatory crackdowns by governments, and the rise of religious nationalism.

One of the deadliest conflicts over ethnic identity in the region exploded in Sri Lanka when minority Tamils sought equal rights in the Sinhalese-majority island. What initially began as a fight over jobs, language, and administrative autonomy later turned into a bloody war for secession led by an extremist Tamil group, the LTTE, which eliminated more moderate groups. Over 120,000 people died during the three-decade war.

In gradually gaining military control over predominantly Tamil areas in the country’s north and east, the LTTE assassinated both Tamil leaders and Sinhalese politicians. The group was responsible for countless suicide bombings and other attacks in public places, including hotels, markets, and the international airport. After the breakdown of a ceasefire agreement in 2005, largely because of a recalcitrant LTTE, the Sri Lankan army launched its offensive, and both sides stand accused of war crimes. The LTTE’s senior leaders were killed, and numerous combatants and civilians have not been accounted for.³⁶ But the country’s then president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, having won the war but not a state of peace, instead led a campaign of Sinhalese-Buddhist triumphalism and whataboutery

that did nothing to address the legitimate grievances of the Tamil population.³⁷

A few years after the war ended, the *New Yorker* reported these conversations with a Sinhalese and a Tamil, underlining the levels of distrust and disharmony between the two communities. Although Sri Lanka is majority Sinhalese Buddhist, a Sinhalese official lamented: “We are just a few Sinhalese, but the Tamils are millions, here and in South India. They can go to India, where there are so many Tamils. They can go all over the world. Who will take me, a Sinhalese? I must live and die on this island... It is the perishing of a race.”³⁸ A Tamil Catholic priest who survived the war, on the other hand, described its end to the same journalist: “At the end, we were walking out through fire and past dead people, and the soldiers were laughing at us and saying, ‘We have killed all your leaders. Now you are our slaves.’”³⁹

These remarks still echo in Sri Lanka. While Rajapaksa was defeated in the 2015 elections, his brand of populism has encouraged aggressive Buddhist nationalism. In 2014, ultranationalist Buddhist organizations in Sri Lanka denounced religious minorities, spurring Buddhist mobs to attack a largely Muslim town in the south, leaving at least four Muslims dead, nearly 80 injured, and many Muslim properties damaged.⁴⁰ The attacks have yet to be properly investigated, while groups like Bodu Bala Sena continue their campaign of hate. As Sri Lankan columnist Dharisha Bastians wrote: “In Goebbelsian fashion, these extremist groups repeat ludicrous claims and conspiracy theories about minority communities, mixed with a healthy dose of hate and fear, until the lies become truth to their followers.”⁴¹

The minority Muslim and Christian communities also remain under threat, and in a now-typical response, the messenger is denounced. In June 2017, the then justice minister, Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe, threatened to disbar human rights lawyer Lakshan Dias for criticizing attacks on religious minorities.⁴²

In India, too, activists who call for protection of religious minorities are routinely denounced and targeted now that a Hindu nationalist movement has solidified its political control. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the political arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which has long sought Hindu supremacy. BJP holds a significant majority in India’s parliament and also governs a number of provinces. Previously subdued, and for some time banned after the assassination of Mohandas Gandhi by a Hindu extremist for his supporting the rights of Muslims, the RSS began to gain strength in the 1980s. Its affiliate, the BJP, eventually won electoral support with its campaign for a temple to mark the birth place of the Hindu god, Ram. In December 1992, a mob incited by the RSS, BJP, and other ideologically akin groups demolished

the Babri Masjid, a mosque allegedly built by Muslim invaders at the birth site to insult and overshadow Hindus.⁴³ The site remains disputed awaiting judicial ruling, while several BJP leaders are facing criminal charges.⁴⁴

The RSS has spawned several groups—some loosely linked to it and others actively under its control—that front the Hindu nationalist agenda. These groups have mastered organizing mobs to assert their views; threatening or attacking cinemas and book discussions, seminars, and art exhibitions; challenging free expression as those in power plead helplessness over these interest groups; and imposing bans to appease religious sentiment or for public order.⁴⁵ Supporters of the Hindu nationalist movement are accused of mob attacks on Muslims in the Mumbai (previously Bombay) communal riots of 1992–1993, and for the same in Gujarat in 2002.⁴⁶

Since the BJP government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office three years ago, these groups, once deemed the loony fringe in a secular India, have been emboldened, triumphantly enforcing their views of Hindu supremacy and abrasive nationalism. They express righteous indignation over the victimization of Hindus through mob attacks, whether in person or with insistent trolling on social media.⁴⁷ Religious minorities, particularly Muslims, are routinely targeted; apart from blaming them for recent terror attacks, the groups also attempt to right historical wrongs dating back to the actions of medieval invaders, the murderous riots after the creation of Muslim-majority Pakistan in 1947, and the more recent targeting and forced displacement of Hindus from Kashmir in 1990. In July 2017, another RSS group, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, announced its plans to recruit 5000 “religious soldiers” to “control cow smuggling and love jihad,” and to “protect Hindu boys and girls, maths, temples, sant samaj, and the country.”⁴⁸ These groups deem those that protest as traitors.

Pakistan is also struggling with those deemed traitors to Islam, both by the state or by extremist Islamist groups. Like denunciations of “witches” and “communists” in previous centuries, Pakistan now arbitrarily uses allegations of blasphemy, justified with predictable whataboutery. Hundreds have been prosecuted under the “blasphemy law,” which makes the death penalty effectively mandatory. Although there have been no executions to date, several people languish on death row, most of them religious minorities. In April 2017, a mob attacked and killed Mashal Khan, a university student believed to have committed blasphemy.⁴⁹

Asia Bibi, the first woman in Pakistan’s history to be sentenced to death for blasphemy, was convicted after an altercation with other villagers when they

refused to drink water that she had touched, deeming it “unclean” because she was Christian.⁵⁰ In January 2010, the then governor of Punjab province, Salmaan Taseer, was murdered by his bodyguard for criticizing the blasphemy law and visiting Bibi in prison. Taseer’s killer was showered with rose petals when he was produced in court; protests erupted after he was eventually hanged for murder.⁵¹

During his decade of military rule from 1977 to 1988, General Zia-ul-Haq enforced religion along fundamentalist lines, demanding Islamic nationalism. He also began a policy of supporting armed Islamist groups, initially to target neighboring India and Afghanistan. But those groups soon proliferated, and many of them have since been responsible for bombings and other attacks directed at Pakistani citizens, particularly the Shia and Ahmadi communities, and also Christians.⁵² Meanwhile, the authorities arrest, jail, and charge members of minority communities with blasphemy and related offenses because of their religious beliefs.⁵³

In March 2017, a High Court in Pakistan compared blasphemers to terrorists.⁵⁴ In May, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) sent a text message to millions of citizens warning against sharing “blasphemous” content on social media and asking them to report such content. In response to widespread Pakistani criticism of the dangerous embrace between the military and some militant groups, interior minister Chaudhary Nisar Ali Khan ordered action against “all those dishonoring the Pakistan Army through social media.”⁵⁵ Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has described blasphemy as an “unpardonable sin.”⁵⁶ These strictures not only risk greater censorship and arbitrary arrests of critical internet voices, but also encourage whataboutery violence by militant groups against religious minorities and critics.⁵⁷

In Bangladesh, religious minorities such as the Shia, the Ahmadi, Buddhists, and Hindus have faced attacks. When bloggers with atheist sympathies or editors and writers promoting secularism criticized Islamist extremism, many were brutally attacked with machetes. Instead of assuring protection, the authorities recommended self-censorship; the police chief advised, “Those who are free thinkers and writers, I will request them, please make sure that we don’t cross the line. Anything that may hurt anyone’s religious sentiments or beliefs should not be written.”⁵⁸

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Meanwhile, Bangladesh is hosting hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims who have fled abuses in Myanmar. Many in Buddhist-majority Myanmar consider the Rohingya to be outsiders due to their race and religion. Denied citizenship rights, the Rohingya are viewed by the UN as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. Extremists, such as monk Saydaw Wirathu, have led hostile campaigns against Muslims in Myanmar, recommending, “do business or interact with only our kind: same race and same faith.”⁵⁹

In typical whataboutery, Buddhist Burmese are quick to blame Rohingya for incidents in which blame is not warranted. In 2012, hundreds of Rohingya were killed and injured in mob attacks after reports that a Buddhist woman was raped and murdered. Repeated flare-ups occurred after other rape allegations: Rohingya homes were burned, with scores killed and injured.⁶⁰ Rohingya militants, in response, justify their attacks by pointing to the persecution the community has endured for decades.⁶¹ After the August 2017 attack, which was claimed by the militant group known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, one fighter told the *Guardian*: “We want our rights. If it is not happening, either we die or they die.”⁶²

Burmese authorities deny the horrifying retaliation by their security forces, even though the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights concluded there were “widespread violations against the Rohingya population,” including rape and slaughter of children.⁶³ One Buddhist member of parliament said that the Rohingya had burned down their own houses and that soldiers would not rape Rohingya women because they were “too dirty.”⁶⁴

48

CONCLUSION

Hatred like this can run deep, and disputes can seem intractable. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by a world reeling from the horror of world war. Now, confronted with new battles, it is perhaps important to draw lessons from history. Populism might win elections, but it makes governance a challenge because it is difficult to match rhetoric with lawful action. Efforts to drown criticism further diminish human rights principles, leading us, once again, toward ugly authoritarianism.

Truth, particularly in the din of social media, is often the first victim of whataboutery, since facts about abuses are cushioned by justifications. In South Asia, millions of people still endure poverty and a lack of human rights. Progress is only possible if, instead of banking on short-cut populism, leaders commit to the hard work of actually delivering on the promise of democracy

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MEENAKSHI GANGULY

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