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Countering the Far-Right

By Paul Hedges

Synopsis

The recent jailing of far-right extremists in the UK reflects the tip of the iceberg of a growing threat from extremist and radical rhetoric. It is becoming a global network that is infiltrating mainstream politics across the Western world.

Commentary

ON FRIDAY 2 March 2018, Paul Moore, who had driven his car into a lady named Zaynab Hussein before proceeding to drive over her prone body in Leicester, United Kingdom, was convicted of attempted murder in what is seen as a hate crime. The reason why Zaynab was attacked, leaving her with severe fractures and hospitalised for three months, was that Moore believed he was revenging terror attacks by Muslims. In the words of the victim's husband, Moore "was attacking a British mother, a British wife, a productive British worker and charity volunteer".

This incident, shocking in itself is not, however, unique or isolated. Since the Westminster attack of March 2017, the London Metropolitan police have reported stopping at least four other far-right extremist attacks. Meanwhile, the UK charity Hope not Hate in its annual "State of Hate" report has detailed the alarming rise of far-right extremism and violence. Police are currently investigating leaflets handed out for what appears a potential incitement to violence on "punish a Muslim day". This appears to be part of a global resurgence of the far-right, especially in parts of Europe and North America.

Multiple Targets and Agenda of Far-Right

The far-right is not focused only on Islam. Their rise is linked to Anti-Semitism, attacks on the LGBT community, and also the political left. Indeed, their enemies can include anyone who does not accord with their worldview. Nevertheless, especially in populist

political forms, the agenda or named opponents can vary. It must also be considered that while much of the far-right has links to militant extremism there may be more moderate followers or representatives not seeking violence.

Nevertheless, the murder in 2016 of the British Member of Parliament Jo Cox made clear that in the mind of the attacker her concern for immigrants and minorities was to be equated with treason. While an individual attack, it may be said to exemplify that much of the far-right has no respect for the rule of law and parliamentary democracy. Both historically, and today, we see attacks on freedoms, the values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and minority groups both from extremist and populist political versions of the far-right.

Mainstreaming Extremism

Perhaps most worrying of all is the mainstreaming of far-right rhetoric. The recent Italian parliamentary elections have seen gains for the far-right, while Germany and the Netherlands have also seen openly Islamophobic parties gaining traction. Meanwhile far-right politics are prevailing in Poland and Hungary.

But the trend is not limited to Europe, with the United States also seeing right-wing political populism, exemplified in the controversial legislation for travel bans targeting certain Muslim-majority countries. Indeed, there seem to be growing transnational links, seen in Steve Bannon's recent tour through Europe, his first publicised "ideological" trip overseas since falling out with President Donald Trump.

Importantly, though, the threat is not simply extremist far-right violence, but more centrist right or traditional right-wing parties pandering to, or adopting, far-right concepts and ideas. Virulent rhetoric against refugees, renewed nationalist jingoism, and stoking of fear and resentment against minorities, especially Muslims, is sadly becoming normalised in various places. This can provide the seedbed for normalising hatred and more militant extremism.

On social media platforms, Islamophobic and anti-Semitic prejudice that would once be unspeakable is reaching a wide audience. Buoyed by quite extreme political rhetoric, what is acceptable is changing. There are, of course, counters to this, but the political and public spheres are seeing a fight for hearts and minds where far-right extremism is coming closer to the mainstream discourse.

Law Enforcement and Policing

There are certainly measures in place to tackle this growing problem. While it is slow, British government anti-extremism and anti-terrorism efforts are increasingly focusing on the far-right rather than focusing almost primarily on neo-Islamist militant extremism. Existing legislation is being used to bring perpetrators to justice.

On Wednesday 7 March, the leader and deputy leader of the extremist Britain First movement, Paul Golding and Jayda Fransen, were found guilty on charges of religiously aggravated harassment. Golding was found guilty on two of three counts, while Fransen was convicted on three of four counts of harassment. Both have been jailed, but sentencing is pending at the time of writing.

Nevertheless, both have been involved in years of campaigning that has arguably done much social damage. Their jailing, while significant, will do little to deal with growing rhetoric and activism. Meanwhile, a previous criminal conviction for religious hate speech against Geert Wilders in the Netherlands did little to stop his electoral advance, and may even have strengthened him in some circles.

Hate, Threats, and Innocent Victims

In both extremist, and more mainstream, right-wing rhetoric, predictions are made of violence on the streets. Their rhetoric is of an inevitable civil war in Europe in a clash of civilisations between what they see as “European values”, which are sometimes termed “Judeo-Christian” to try and gain “religious legitimacy”, against others who may be termed “barbarians”, or more directly as “Muslims”.

The language employs age-old orientalist tropes that contrast the supposedly progressive values, peacefulness, and decency of Europe against what is seen as the regressive values, violence, and inhumanity from beyond its borders. This is, of course, a myth. The violence of the militant far-right shows their true colours and intent. While any threatened civil war remains rhetorical, the extreme far-right is certainly recruiting and motivating members to violence. Unsavoury right-wing rhetoric in political and public life can provide legitimacy for this.

Need for Action

Not only in Europe and the US, but globally, governments and peace activists need to find ways to curb the rhetoric and increasing violence of right-wing and hate-filled rhetoric and campaigns often directed at innocent victims who are caught up in the crosshairs of extremism.

Countering not just direct violence, and calls for violence, but hate speech and rhetoric against Muslims, Jews, those aligned with the political left and others is needed in the public space. The far-right needs to be exposed as extremist and not allowed to become a mainstream voice.

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