

# Global Studies Seminar A

## Essay assignment

### Religious Extremism and Ethnic Nationalism

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Question 1: Identify at least one religious extremist group in the world. What are its goals, methods, and characteristics? Using evidence, discuss whether religious extremism and democracy can co-exist or not.

**Student Name and Student Number**

## **1. Introduction**

On 11 September 2011, al-Qaeda attacked the United States' symbolic buildings; the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. This incident made a great shock to international society and gave strong conscious about religious extremists. Due to some Islamic extremists attacks reported on world news, we tend to imagine Islamic extremists when we hear the term religious extremism. However, concise oxford dictionary defines extremist as chiefly derogatory a person who holds extreme political or religious views. This means that religious extremism does not restricts Islam as a source of extremism. Any religion can be a source of extremism. This essay identifies two religious extremist groups, namely al-Qaeda as an example of worldwide known religious extremists and the Army of God as non-Islam religious extremism group, and explain their goals, methods and characteristics, after that discusses whether religious extremism and democracy can co-exist or not.

## **2. Two examples of religious extremists**

### **2-1 al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula**

Al-Qaeda is the radical Sunni Islamist group, founded in 1988. Osama Bin Laden was the leader of al-Qaeda when the group attacked the United States in 2001.

The al-Qaeda's goals are 'expulsion of Jews and crusaders from the Arabian Peninsula';

the re-establishment of the Islamic caliphate and the introduction of sharia; and the liberation of Muslim lands (Australian National Security 2013). In order to achieve their goals, they use violence such as car bombing, suicide bombing and kidnapping.

As these facts, al-Qaeda is characterized as exclusive and transnational group.

What makes al-Qaeda different from other Islamic extremist groups is modern technology use? Al-Qaeda spreads their ideology through modern technology such as online magazine *Inspire* (Milton-Edwards 2006, 157).

## **2-2 The Army of God**

The Army of God is one of the United States' Christian extremist groups. The group claims anti-abortion and carries out illegal activities in order to pursue their aims. According to the Army of God manual, they have ninety-nine ways to stop abortion. The first step is gluing doors and keys of abortion clinics and at last the method goes extreme; destructing abortion clinics and killing abortion providers (Army of God Manual Third Edition n.d.). For example, one of the members Paul Jennings Hill killed an abortion doctor and his bodyguard. Eric Rudolph committed the Olympic Park bombing in Atlanta (Henderson 2015).

Altum analyses that the characteristic of the group is anti-pluralism and most of the members are convicted as felons. The group does not confirm other opinions,

which contradict their aim. In addition they believe their aim is the justice. Due to the members' status as felons, they do not have the right to vote. Therefore they cannot express their opinion in democratic way. Altum also mentions that what the Army of God makes different from other anti-abortion group is use of violence (Altum 2003, 1).

### **3. Common characteristics of religious extremists**

Religious extremists share several characteristics as the two examples show above. In addition to exclusiveness, absolute righteousness and anti-pluralism, unwillingness to compromise and idealization of historic events and stories are considered as common characteristics of religious extremists (Rad 2014) These characteristics are interrelated. One characteristic leads to another characteristic, for example the conscious of absolute righteousness leads to notion that others are wrong. Due to these characteristics, religious extremists are considered as existences hard to deal with.

### **4. Whether religious extremism and democracy can co-exist or not?**

#### **4-1 Definition of democracy**

In order to discuss the question, firstly define characteristics of democracy. The United Nations defines that democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of the people to determine their own political, economic, social and

cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives. Minogue argues that a democratic society has come to mean a society in which everyone leads the same kind of life and disposes of similar resources. A democratic culture is one liberated from elite standards of what constitutes beauty (Minogue 1995, 84). Thus democracy provides liberation and equality and requires citizens' participation.

#### **4-2 Comparison between religious extremism and democracy**

Compared with the characteristics of religious extremism and democracy, there are two significant differences. The first difference is tolerance. Religious extremism does not accept other thoughts. Religious extremists likely see world as "us and them" and divide the world into two groups good and evil (Aslan 2009, 20). They consider themselves as absolutely good and others as evil. On the other hand democracy assures plural thoughts and provides people free expressions. Thus, religious extremists does not likely to admit the existence of other thoughts confronted to them, even though democracy tolerates people having extreme thought.

The second difference is value. Religious extremism puts a value on God's will and extremists follow what God indicates. On the other hand, democracy puts a value on each citizen's will and people in democratized society follow laws, which represent each citizen's will. Therefore extremists do not consider what democratic societies

prohibit and commit anti-democratic actions.

These differences make it difficult for religious extremism and democracy to co-exist. Religious extremists decide democracy is an enemy and do not compromise. There is an example that religious extremist groups confronted to democracy. In Indonesia, several Islamic extremists came out in the democratization process. Islamic extremist groups see democracy as a threat because the ideology coming from Western modern society. They did not try to understand what democracy is and believed that democracy destroyed the Muslim faith (Basya 2011, 54).

## **5 Conclusion**

Each religious extremist group has its own goal and sometimes carries out violent actions in order to show their opinions. Even though their goals are different, religious extremists share some characteristics; anti-pluralism, idealization of historic event and story and so on. Such characteristics define religious groups as extreme, in case of their goals are shared by other non-extremist groups.

Due to confronted characteristics, it is difficult for religious extremism and democracy to co-exist. However democracy can provide religious extremists legal methods to represent their opinion, such as right to vote. Democracy has possibility to reduce violent actions committed by religious extremists.

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