

Religion, Nationalism, and Resistance in Southeast Asia and Its Diasporas

New University in Exile Consortium
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Photo by Tun Song: The native village of one of the instructors in Southeast Asia symbolizes an “ungovernable community” amid the ongoing state coup.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

“The nation is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their community” — Benedict Anderson

“Most resistance in the world is not about protests, but everyday resistance” —James C. Scott

Southeast Asia is home to the world’s largest stateless population and some of the longest-running ethnic and religious conflicts, yet the region remains understudied. This course examines how religion, ethnicity, and nationalism shape identity politics, minority–majority tensions, civil war, and resistance movements in the region and its global diasporas. Through case studies such as the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and ethno-religious movements in Southern Thailand and the Philippines, we explore how religious traditions can both fuel exclusion and violence and offer resources for reconciliation and peacebuilding. We will analyze Western perceptions of the Dalai Lama’s version of Buddhism alongside its paradoxical roles in legitimizing violence and

inspiring nonviolent resistance through the lived experiences of insiders. The course engages doctrinal, historical, and lived perspectives to illuminate how communities navigate power, military rule, and everyday forms of hidden, symbolic, and public resistance, as well as the roles of social media, social movements, advocacy, and activism in both homeland and exile contexts.

The seminar also offers a comparative examination of decentralized resistance movements following Myanmar's 2021 military coup, the emergence of "ungovernable communities" amid civil war, and the interplay between international human rights law, customary law, and local governance. It will consider how grassroots communities across Southeast Asia's hill regions and Buddhist valleys articulate their own understandings of indigenous democracy beyond centralized military state control and dominant forms of ethno-religious nationalism.

The course further reflects on how these Southeast Asian religious and ethnic dynamics illuminate similar identity-based conflicts in other parts of the world, including the United States. In doing so, it encourages critical and public engagement with debates on the complex relationship between religion and conflict, asking how religious traditions can be both implicated in violence and mobilized as sources for peacebuilding and democratic governance.

Open to All:

There is no prerequisite for this course. It is open to all, especially will be relevant for educators, diplomats, policymakers, government officers, public health workers, and practitioners seeking to better understand how religion shapes politics, identity, and society in today's globalized world—a world in which globalization connects people together, while religion divides them.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Analyze Theoretical Frameworks

Participants will critically engage key theories of religion and nationalism, and different forms of resistance across democratic and undemocratic contexts.

2. Examine Historical and Contemporary Case Studies

Participants will comparatively evaluate how religious traditions (Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim) interact with nationalist movements and state formation in Southeast Asia.

3. Access Religion as a Resource for both Power and Resistance

Participants will critically examine how religious institutions and narratives are mobilized to legitimize state authority as well as to sustain grassroots resistance and social movements.

4. Understand Diaspora and Transnational Dimensions

Participants will critically analyze how Southeast Asian diasporas reshape religious and ethnic identities, contribute to transnational activism, and reconfigure notions of belonging, homeland and resistance through solidarities formed in digital networks.

5. Develop Critical Research and Interpretive Skills

Participants will contextually produce analytical research that integrates interdisciplinary

approaches from religious studies, anthropology, history, and political science to interpret complex relationships between religion, nationalism, and resistance in today's world.

COURSE SCHEDULES

Week One

- **Beyond Mainstream Protests: Resistance from the Hill Villages and Valleys**

Required readings

- Scott, James C. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009, read, "Hills, Valleys, and States: An Introduction to Zomia," pp. 1-39.

Questions:

- What makes the Southeast Asian context unique?
- How does religion shape nationalism?

Description: This topic introduces participants to Southeast Asian context. Centering local voices across hill villages and valleys, it examines how faith, identity, and political belonging intersect in communities shaped by colonial legacies, ethnic diversity, and struggles for justice.

Week Two

- **The Origin and Theories of Nationalism**

Required readings

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 1983, read "Introduction," pages 1-7 only.
- Anderson, Benedict. "Western Nationalism and Eastern Nationalism: Is There a Difference that Matters? In *New Left Review* 9 May/June (2001): 31-42.

Questions:

1. What is nationalism?
2. Any distinctions between nationalism in the West and the non-Western world?

Description: This topic provides a comparative examination of theories of nationalism across global contexts, with a particular focus on the expressions of nationalism in Southeast Asia.

Week Three

- **Religion and Anti-colonial Movement**

Required readings

- Ito, Reynaldo. "Religion and Anti-colonial Movements." *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, ed, Nicholas Tarling. Vol 2. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, chapter 4, read pages 213-244 only.

Questions

1. How have religious traditions shaped anti-colonial movements in historical contexts?
2. In what ways has anti-colonialism used religion as a source of resistance against power

Description: This topic examines how religion has shaped the political visions, mobilization, and leadership of anti-colonial movements across different historical contexts. It also explores

how religious ideas and institutions have functioned as both sources of resistance against colonial rule and frameworks for imagining post-colonial political order.

Week Four

- **Post-colonial Nationalism and Anti-Ethnic Minority Movement**

Required reading

- Keys, Charles. "Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist Nationalism: Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 14/4 (2006): 42-52.

Video: "[Myanmar's Anti-Muslim Monks](#)." *Al Jazeera*, 2015.

Questions

1. How do religion and ethnicity shape national identity after independence?
2. Why do ethnic and religious minorities experience the politics of exclusion?

Description: This topic examines how post-colonial nationalist projects construct national identity through selective boundaries of ethnicity and religion. It also explores how these processes can generate exclusionary politics ethnic minorities in post-colonial societies.

Week Five

- **Protest and Resistance: Comparative Approaches**

Required reading

- James C. Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance." *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*. 4//89 (1989): 33-62.

Questions

1. What is everyday resistance?
2. How can we distinguish between protest and resistance, and where do they overlap in social and political practice?

Description: Drawing on James Scott's theory of resistance, this study examines protest and resistance through a comparative lens across different contexts. It explores both theoretical approaches and lived practices to understand how ordinary people engage in everyday resistance.

Week Six

- **Decentralized and Interreligious Resistance to Centralized Regime (Myanmar)**

Required readings

- Pum Za Mang, Iselin Frydenlund, Phyo Wai & Susan Hayward. "Religious Responses to the Military Coup in Myanmar." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 19/3 (Fall 2021): 77-88.
- James C. Scott and David Thang Moe, "The Study of the Burmese Revolution: Its Three Distinct Forms of Resistance." Unpublished (2023).

- **Video:** "[Myanmar Diaries](#)." This firsthand short film traces Myanmar's trajectory from the February 2021 military coup to nationwide protests and civil disobedience, followed

by brutal repression in which thousands of peaceful protesters were imprisoned and killed, and ultimately to a growing popular armed resistance against the brutal junta.

Questions

1. How do decentralized forms of resistance challenge military power?
2. In what ways can interreligious collaboration shape resistance and resilience?

Description: This topic explores how decentralized movements resist military power through dispersed and subtle forms of organization. It also examines the role of interreligious collaboration in shaping ethical, social, and political responses to authoritarian control.

Week Seven

- **Women, Warriors, and War: Gender and Resistance**

Required readings:

- Yin Le Le Tun. "Testimony." *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship*, Special Issue: Memories of Leaving the Myanmar Military vol. 1 (August 2022): 194-99.
- Collins & Gynn. "Visible and Invisible Barriers for Women in the Karenni War Zone." *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship* 4/2 (2024): 33-42.

Questions

1. In what ways do women participate in resistance movements, both visibly and invisibly?
2. What structural, cultural, and institutional barriers limit women's role in politics?

Description: This topic examines the intersections of gender, warfare, and resistance, with particular attention to how women engage in social and political movements?

Week Eight

- **Social Media and Diasporic Mobilizations**

Required readings

- Lim, Merlyna. *Social Media and Politics in Southeast Asia*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024, pages 38-58 only.

Questions

1. How do diaspora communities use social media to mobilize political resistance?
2. Is there a delicate balance between diaspora advocacy and not speaking over those on the ground?

Description: This topic explores how diasporic communities use social media platforms to organize social movements among young generations across national borders.

Week Nine

- **Academy, Advocacy, and Activism: Hidden and Public Resistance**

Required readings

- Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1990, chap. "The Infrapolitics of Subordinate Groups," pp. 183-201.
- Anderson, Toor S. et al, "Activism in the Social Media Age." *Pew Research Center*, 2018. [Link](#) here:

Questions

1. How do academics navigate the boundaries between scholarly work, advocacy, and activism in contexts of political or social repression?
2. In what ways do hidden and public forms of resistance complement with each other?

Description: This topic explores the intersections between academic work, advocacy, and activism in contexts of political struggle. It examines both hidden and public forms of resistance and how scholars navigate the tensions between knowledge production and political engagement.

Week Ten

• Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding: Wrap Up

Required reading

- Peter Friedlander, "Conflict and Peace in Buddhism." In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Religion and Conflict Resolution*, ed. by Lee Marsden. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012, pp. 79-98.

Questions

1. How do religious beliefs, narratives, and institutions contribute to both the escalation of conflict and the promotion of peacebuilding in different contexts?
2. What roles do religious actors play in processes of reconciliation and post-conflict recovery?

Description: This topic examines the paradoxical roles religion plays in both fueling conflict and fostering pathway toward peacebuilding. It explores how religious beliefs, institutions, and actors contribute to reconciliation, justice, and healing in contexts of violence and post-conflict recovery. It also promotes public debate on the relationship between religion and conflict.

Foundational Resources for the Course

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. New York: Verso, 2016 [originally in 1983] (PDF: [online access](#)).

Anitwongse, Kusuma and W. Scott Thompson, eds. *Ethnic Conflicts in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: ISEAS, 2005 (online access [here](#)).

Scott, James C. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.

———. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990 ([online access](#)).

———. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985 ([online access](#)).