Opinion – Assessing Changes in How Australia Refers to Extremism

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Australia finds itself in a complex and constantly changing domestic security environment. In 2020, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation's (ASIO) deputy Director-General Heather Cook warned the Australian Parliament's Joint Intelligence and Security Committee that Covid-19 had seen the rise of radicalisation as far-right groups used lockdowns to recruit members. Heather Cook went as far to say that 40 per cent of the organisation's counterterrorism work was linked to right-wing extremism. With right-wing extremism accounting for such a significant amount of the organisation's work in 2020, some confusion could be forgiven when ASIO Director-General Mike Burges gave his second Annual Threat Assessment on March 17th, 2021, and revealed that the organisation would be changing the way it will refer to extremism. ASIO is stepping away from using the terms 'right-wing' or 'Islamic' and instead refer to the principal motivation of the individual or group: 'ideological' or 'religiously' motivated violent extremism.

The stated reasons for moving to use these new terms are 'the current labels are no longer fit for purpose; they no longer adequately describe the phenomena we're seeing.' And ASIO is aware of how issues are 'framed' matters to how they are discussed by policy makers, media, and the general public. Ultimately, ASIO is reinforcing the complexity inherent within contemporary extremist threats and the motivations of the people who carry them out, as: "when thinking about the proliferation of violent groups that subscribe to various political ideologies, it's unhelpful to categorise such groups as simply 'extreme left wing' and 'extreme right wing'."

The stated rationale is not to say that the terms' right-wing' and 'Islamic' are being retired entirely and replaced with this new terminology. Instead, they will remain in ASIO's lexicon and used when there is a need to 'describe a specific threat'. As described by ASIO, what exists is the creation and deployment of umbrella terms designed to address the complexity of contemporary extremist threats and specific terms that sit beneath them to be used when deemed necessary. Herein lies a problem.

This shift away from using 'right-wing' or 'Islamic' extremism in favour of umbrella terms, generally speaking, is an overall positive for national security discourse. What can occur is a destigmatising of minority groups, and a legitimate conversation can be had which won't descend into vilification. This shift away from specific terminology is also less gendered, or at least has the potential to not descend into debates about definitions that ultimately revolved around the gender and age of those who are radicalised and carry out extremist acts.

Ensuring that discussions about extremism and radicalisation are particularly important as research concerning the intersection of gender and populist movements remains focused on 'the role of men and masculinity'. This is particularly problematic, for example, when looking at the Q-Anon conspiracy, which has proven to be dangerous and able to radicalise a diversity of people, with a large number of supporters being female. Similarly, women have proved to be effective online recruiters for the Islamic State group (IS/ISIS/ISIL/DAESH). ASIO's shift away from specific extremist terms would allow for the space to discuss the role of women, youth, and specific issues, which permit increasingly diverse and tailored policy approaches to be formulated. However, the favouring of umbrella terms has drawbacks, namely, they obscure and politicise extremists and their actions.

An umbrella term is, by design, broad. Mike Burges mentions as much when talking about the complexity of extremism ASIO faces. Left- and right-wing extremism is seeing a growing number of members who 'fear of societal collapse or a specific social or economic grievance or conspiracy' or are linked to an ''incel' ideology'. These are not necessarily politically left-wing, right-wing or even neatly categorisable, but are nonetheless ideologically motivated. The umbrella of 'ideologically motivated violent extremism', then, encompasses a broad and diverse array of ideologies that, while helpful for a constructive discourse, can result in the obscuring of any specific extremist threat.

When, and if, specific terms are used within the national security discourse, their use will carry more political and media weight. As ASIO has deemed it necessary to be specific and focus attention on groups, this will mean that the media spotlight can been focused, whereas before, the changes in terminology led to a diffusion of this spotlight. While both situations have their pros and cons, the creation and deployment of umbrella terms changes the internal calculus for ASIO and creates a 'threshold for the use' of specific extremist terms.

There is a political element at play here too. ASIO has previously been criticised for using the term 'extreme right-wing' by Liberal Party Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, claiming it 'offended' conservatives. Similarly, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, whose ministerial portfolio oversees ASIO, has previously been criticised for lack of semantic nuance in discussing Islamic, left- and right-wing extremism, having previously conflated Islamic extremism with left-wing extremism. He has also shown a more general trend of downplaying the threat that right-wing extremism posed while amplifying the *threat* of left-wing extremism.

The shift to umbrella terms, as the preferred terms, plays into a political trend that sees the downplaying of right-wing extremism and a choice not to reject a certain nuance within the national security discourse. This situation can mean a shift in the political calculus within ASIO when discussing national security threats, not utilising a specific term for any one type of extremism, where it would for another, for fear of political browbeating. Such a hesitancy can was observed during the Trump Administration. President Trump often dismissed the threat that right-wing extremism posed, which led to his Justice Department prosecuting right-wing extremists differently, often less harshly than they could have, than it did with other types of extremism.

There should be no doubt that this move by ASIO to change the terminology to address complexity and shift discourses away from the vilification of particular groups is a positive step; creating space in a discourse allows for conversation and constructive action. Nonetheless, this change can obscure certain modes of violent extremism, whilst simultaneously spotlighting specific violent extremist groups that can be politically advantageous to vilify.

About the author:

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