

Uneasiness as a Minority

Kota Suechika

Professor, Collage of Internatinal Relations,
Director, Center for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies,
Ritsumeikan University

At the end of February, I went to Lebanon. It is now difficult to even remember the world before the spread of the new coronavirus, but Lebanon on the day I arrived was in a somewhat idyllic mood, with only one reported case yet.

But that, too, changed abruptly within a few days. This is because the dire situation of

infection in China, South Korea, Iran and Italy was reported day after day, and the number of infected people in Lebanon was gradually increasing. In the midst of all this, I was walking on the streets of Beirut, the capital, when a stranger suddenly said, "Corona! began to happen.

This kind of discriminatory behaviour, even if not particularly malicious, is out of the question in today's world values and cannot be defended at all. Nevertheless, I still took it as a kind of joke or tease rather than discrimination based on hatred of foreigners. East Asians were still a rarity in the Middle East, and being accosted by passersby was a regular occurrence. Once upon a time, it was "Jackie Chan!!", "Honda!". Now, it is "Corona!" It was just like that.

But as the mood in Lebanon grew tense, I suddenly began to feel an uneasiness that I had never felt before. It's the scary thing about being a minority. What was merely a joke or a tease in peacetime, could turn into serious malice or hostility as soon as there is an emergency. If the number of infected people continues to increase, will I, as a foreigner, be treated as an equal human being to the Lebanese? If and when you do get infected, will you have a chance to treat it?



Hamra Area, Beirut (26 February 2020)

Also, minorities may be subject to direct attack as well as discrimination in case of emergency. During my stay in Lebanon, a large anti-government demonstration took place in the centre of Beirut. Normally, I would have rushed to the spot to do fieldwork, but this time I decided to forgo it. I didn't know when the citizens who were elated by the frenzy of the demonstration could start to point the finger at me, a foreigner from the "country of Corona". It was because I couldn't dispel such anxiety.

I'm not implying that Lebanese are such narrow-minded people. Every country makes a distinction between its own citizens and foreigners. However, the relationship between the two is different in peacetime and in an emergency. People can be tolerant of others when they can afford it, but on the contrary, when they can't afford it, they become exclusive and intolerant. We know this well from our experience and history. And the spread of the new coronavirus is making it visible all over the world. Even here in Japan, the hoarding of masks and some daily necessities has continued.

How much anxiety do minorities feel in such a situation? You never know as long as you are in the majority. No, the majority is rarely aware that they are the majority. Through my stay in Lebanon, I was able to feel the fear of the minority, albeit only a little, firsthand. Here in Japan, I am in the majority, so what can I do?

(The Japanese edition of this essay first appeared in the *Kyoto Shimbun* evening paper on 28 April 2020.)



Downtown Beirut (27 February 2020)

Author's Profile

Kota SUECHIKA

Professor at College of International Relations, and Director, Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies, Ritsumeikan University. Ph.D. (Area Studies).

Specialties: Middle Eastern Studies, International Relations, and Comparative Politics.

Among his works: Islamism: Search for an Alternative Modernity, Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 2018; Islamism and Politics in the Middle East: Resistance and Revolution of Lebanon's Hizb Allah, Nagoya: Nagoya University Press, 2013; State Transformation and Islam in Contemporary Syria, Kyoto: Nakanishiya, 2005.

Among his research articles: "Sectarian Fault Lines in the Middle East: Sources of Conflicts or Communal Bonds?" Routledge Handbook of Middle East Politics, London: Routledge, 2020 (co-author with Dr. Keiko SAKAI).

