

Voices

Neo-nationalism: A 2020 Perspective

As international educators, we must be better prepared to counter ideological rigidity and the demonization of the other.



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By [Supriya Baily, PhD](#) | December 9, 2020

With the U.S. general election in our rearview mirror, it might appear to some people that the country dodged a bullet and voted out a president who has, more often than not, sided with despots and dictators and catered to a misogynistic, racist, and nationalist view of the world. Yet, as we wrap up 2020, it is more critical than ever for international educators to take a hard look at what it means for us to do our work at this time in a world where divisions are fomented to consolidate power and marginalizing the “other” is a cheap and easy way to score political points.

From the United States to India, from Brazil to the Philippines, many governments have turned inward. Nationalism—defined by [Florian Bieber](#) as a “malleable and narrow ideology, which values membership in a nation greater than other groups (i.e., based on gender, parties, or socio-economic group), seeks

distinction from other nations, and strives to preserve the nation”—does not take into account the varied plurality of the nation-state, let alone the international community seeking instead to maintain certain supremacies over others. This viewpoint renders those who seek to effect positive change through the interactions of individuals, institutions, policies, and treaties as suspect, if not traitorous, in what are often seen as further efforts to undermine national sovereignty.



Supriya Baily, PhD

International educators are by nature optimists, even idealists, but it does not behoove us at this critical moment to assume a single election can change the tide. Nor does it benefit us to forget that the forces working to subvert internationalism are at bay. In the short term, we might see a renewed approach to global engagement and a momentary retreat by the forces of nationalism. What we can be sure of is that these forces will regroup and return. As international educators, we must be better prepared to counter ideological rigidity and the demonization of the other.

The Role of Educational Structures and Systems

Part of people’s willingness to move toward a nationalist ideology comes from the ways in which we structure education. As educational systems increased their focus on monetization and credentialing, education has shifted to align around ensuring conformity and compliance.

Conformity is expressed in how we structure our curriculum, as well as the evolution of expectations of what learning *must* constitute. How we design our “proof of learning” is grounded in conformist practices—from how we assess and how we report to what we anticipate learning must encompass. This conformity is reflected across the spectrum, from our youngest learners to those seeking the most advanced degrees. Conforming to a particular outcome and output helps an individual become that much more vulnerable to the rhetoric of nationalism and ideological rigidity.

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Compliance ensures that we create a structure of education that seeks to align systems, structures, policies, people, and organizations into a state of acquiescence. Avoiding challenging the system or aligning with the expectations set forth often allows for the amplification of the loudest voices. Compliance with rules that are not designed to meet the needs of the most vulnerable hastens the ability for those with

the loudest voices to take advantage of compliance. Compliance infused into educational systems also weakens the fabric of society, allowing for authoritarianism to take root.

Collectively Challenging Compliance and Conformity

These twin challenges of compliance and conformity become more complex when you look at an interdependent world with vacuums of power and destabilization. This is not cheery stuff, but it can be addressed. International educators are fortunate to have colleagues across the world who can recognize the threat, then work collectively to blunt the organization of far-right-wing movements around the world.

What might be a critical first step is acknowledging that the threat is real and global in nature. Those involved in international education cannot be restricted to their siloes—we have to recognize that our individual efforts, in all the myriad ways that we engage in internationalization, are foundational to resisting neo-nationalist ideologies. We need to argue against compliance and conformity, even in our day-to-day practice, as an effort to model vocal resistance.

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And we need to stand with colleagues working in environments that make them vulnerable to speaking out. Whatever your portfolio is as an international educator, social justice advocates who act locally on critical issues of marginalization and intolerance become our allies. There is a reason that among his last actions in office, President Trump has [ended anti-racism and bias training in federal workplaces and described the work of critical theorists as a threat to the country](#).

Crisis as Common Experience

This year has been undoubtedly challenging for the whole world, but on the other hand, it has been the most common experience we have had as a global people in decades. Crisis often brings people together, and as international educators, we might want to use this common experience as a way to build bridges with those with whom we have only found superficial connections in the past. The global pandemic has shifted how people who might have considered themselves digital outliers interact in spaces and with people they might not have had a chance to meet in a pre-COVID-19 world.

When borders reopen and we are able to move around more freely, do we ask ourselves, as international educators, how we represent both the fragility and strength of international bonds?

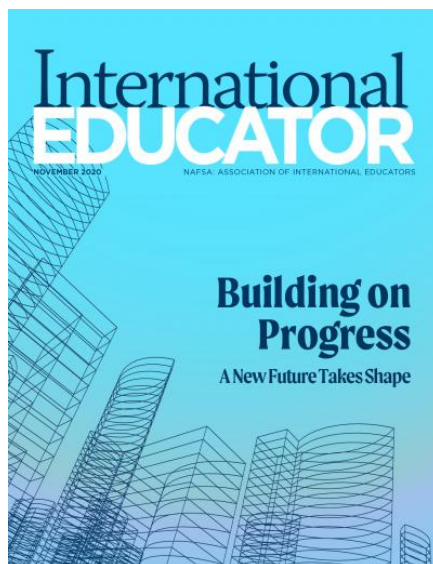
When borders reopen and we are able to move around more freely, do we ask ourselves, as international educators, how we represent both the fragility and strength of international bonds? History has shown us the outcome from nationalist ideologies, as well as large-scale public health crises; experiencing both together might be unprecedented. When we emerge from the chaos of 2020, international educators will need to have new conversations about how we engage with what we have inherited. It is my belief that international educators can put these issues into context in an effort to continue to advocate for a progressive, pluralistic, and socially just world. •

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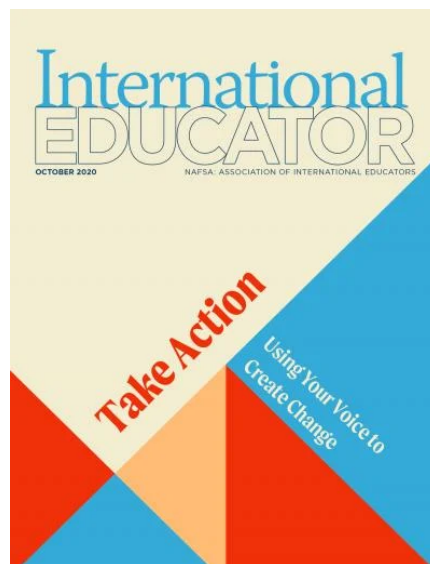
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