

Singapore's Muslim Community -Based Initiatives against JI

By Muhammad Haniff Hassan

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Since the discovery of Jemaah Islamiyah's (JI) plot in Singapore, the Muslim community has taken commendable initiatives in response to the continued threat. In light of the constant calls for moderate Muslims to speak out and come forward to tackle the problem, it is important to highlight these initiatives not only as a recognition of the work done but also as a form of assurance to other Singaporeans. Indeed, these initiatives and their lessons learned can act as pertinent case studies for other countries.

Singapore Muslim Community Response

Although the discovery of JI and the arrests of its members came as a shock, Singapore's Muslim community did not swing into a denial mode. Earlier, Muslim organisations had come out to condemn the September 11 attacks and initiated public debates on the importance of moderation amongst Muslims. Not surprisingly, they were quick to condemn JI's plots in Singapore as well as its ideology and links with Al Qaeda.

The condemnations came in two waves. In the beginning, public statements were made by individual Muslim organisations and leaders. In a show of collective concern, 122 Muslim leaders led by the imam of Baalwi mosque, Habib Hassan Alattas, came together in October 2002 to make clear where the community should stand. The leaders condemned terrorism and rejected ideological extremism, while reinforcing their commitment to the Singapore nation-state. Significantly, this crucial act against terrorism was done long before the Muslims in England, America and Australia rallied their respective communities to express their strong disapproval of the London attacks last year.

The statement was one of the earliest signals that the Muslim community leaders were committed and united in the battle against extremism in their midst. It also sent a strong message to members of the Muslim community to stay clear of extremism that promotes violence and poses a security threat to the country.

In early 2003, a book entitled "Muslim, Moderate, Singaporean" was jointly published by two Muslim bodies. The book proposed six principles of moderation as guidelines for Singapore Muslims in making their ideological stand on various issues. The six principles are the rule of law; recourse to peaceful means; democracy; being contextual in thinking and practices; respect for the opinions and rights of others; and upholding Islamic teachings.

In September 2003, Pergas, the association of Muslim scholars in Singapore, undertook a direct counter-ideological initiative against Al Qaeda and JI ideology by organising the Convention of *Ulama* (Muslim scholars). The objective of the convention was to rally Muslim scholars to define and combat extremism. The gathering led to a book entitled “Moderation in Islam in the Context of the Muslim Community in Singapore”.

The book is particularly relevant to counter-ideological efforts in two respects. It highlights key extremist thinking and misinterpretations of Islam and offers rebuttals using the same arguments employed by al-Qaeda and JI. Secondly, it offers a 27-point “Charter of Moderation” for the Muslim community in Singapore. The charter has been useful in guiding the community to practise Islam in the context of Singapore, particularly for Muslim scholars and religious teachers in their drive to promote moderation.

Another important initiative was the development of a system to self-regulate religious instruction. A collaborative effort between Pergas and the Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), the Asatizah Recognition System was launched in December 2005. The proposed system laid down the pre-requisites for the certification and registration of asatizah or religious teachers who provided the public with guidance and lessons on Islam. Initiated several years earlier, the proposal became more urgent following the JI arrests and subsequent inclusion in the 2003 White Paper on JI of measures necessary in countering terrorism. While such a self-regulatory system by the community cannot be enforced by law, a person can be struck off from the database of recommended religious teachers if he was found guilty of misconduct.

Pergas was not alone in efforts to counter ideological extremism. Many other Muslim institutions -- from mosques to civic groups, such as the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) and Jamiyah -- initiated cultural and inter-faith exchanges and dialogues between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. They also organised visits to places of worship to promote better understanding amongst them.

The Religious Rehabilitation Group

One of the most important initiatives taken by the community was the formation of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), which was launched on 23 April 2003. Following the detention of the first batch of JI members, the security authorities approached local Muslim scholars to assist in the counselling detainees, which resulted in the formation of the RRG. Among other roles, the RRG offers expert opinion on JI’s misinterpretation of Islam, produces counter-ideological materials on relevant religious matters, and conducts public education for the Muslim community on religious extremism.

To date, twenty religious counsellors who are local Muslim scholars have volunteered to do RRG work. Many others are providing secretariat support for the group. In the beginning, the counselling programme covered JI detainees and supervisees (those under Restriction Order). This was later extended, on a voluntary basis, to the family members.

As of June 2005, 93 counselling sessions were held for the detainees, 139 for the supervisees and 14 for the family members.

Apart from Muslim groups, various non-Muslim organisations were also briefed on the efforts taken by the RRG to continuously update and, in the process, assure the non-Muslim community. Since June 2005, the RRG has stepped up its public education programme. It has teamed up with local Muslim organisations and mosques to organise talks such as the recent seminars related to certain misconceptions of jihad. The RRG has written a manual on rehabilitation work related to JI's ideology for counsellors. Generally, the response to the religious counselling programme has been positive. Four detainees have been released and placed under Restriction Order; two others who were under the Restriction Order did not have their restriction extended due to their positive response to the counselling.

Because most of the detainees were the sole breadwinners and their wives were homemakers, their arrests meant that the families experienced financial difficulties. Several local Muslim groups; such as AMP, the Young Muslim Women's Association (PPIS), and the Mendaki and the Khadijah mosque, have provided psychological, emotional, and financial support to the families. Ensuring that neither the education of the children was not disrupted nor their future jeopardised was a key goal of the organisations.

These initiatives are important in helping to win over the hearts and minds of the detainees and their family members and to integrate them back into society. It is particularly important to minimise the risks of the children being radicalised in the future by the detention of their fathers or by economic marginalisation arising from disruptions to their education and loss of financial security.

Conclusion

Admittedly, the JI threat in Singapore is not as big as that in Indonesia or Philippines. But this should not undermine the significant impact of community-based initiatives undertaken by the Muslim community in reducing the threat of terrorism in Singapore. The community-based initiatives symbolise the close cooperation between the state and the Muslim community in counter-terrorism. Particularly significant, as a lesson to other countries, is the proactive role of the Muslim scholars in this drive. The community-based initiatives have made counter-terrorism in Singapore a good case study for others.

Post-Script

Since it was first reported in January 2006, the Singapore Muslim community has created many new initiatives to combat extremism and terrorism in the country. The new initiatives showcase the community's exemplary and unrelenting vigilance against extremism and its commitment to preserve peace and stability for the country.

Singapore's community-based initiatives against extremism have been commended by researchers, policy makers, and frontline security agencies from all over the world, and have been a source of inspiration for many counter-ideology programmes. Interest remains high; in 2007 alone, representatives of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), the main body that spearheads counter-ideology work in Singapore, and its affiliates have been invited to present their work to 9 conferences in the United Kingdom, Belgium, Austria, Germany, Malaysia, Egypt, Australia, and the Philippines.

In October 2006, a book titled *Unlicensed to Kill: Countering Imam Samudra's Justification for the Bali Bombing* was published to counter misinterpretation of jihad. [1] The book offers a point by point rebuttal to Imam Samudra's book *Aku Melawan Teroris (I'm fighting terrorist)*. Imam Samudra was the head of the first Bali bombing operation, and he is currently in prison on death row.

Another publication initiative was the book *Fighting Terrorism: The Singapore Perspective* edited by Abdul Halim Kader, the President of Taman Bacaan. [2] The organisation also collaborated with the RRG to organise two conventions for students of government and local Islamic schools in January and July 2007.

Young Singaporean Muslims are also taking up the initiatives. Muslim students from the National Junior Colleges and Mendaki organised separate dialogue sessions in 2007. Those in attendance of both sessions included a representative of the RRG and a senior officer of the Internal Security Department.

In order to assist the public in understanding the meaning of jihad, two local Muslim scholars jointly published a booklet titled *Questions and Answers on Jihad*. The booklet contains 22 questions and answers on jihad and terrorism. It was published in English and Malay and by the end of 2007 will be produced in Tamil. [3]

The Islamic Religious Council (MUIS) also launched major initiatives to promote moderation and combat extremism among Muslim communities in Singapore. Additionally, MUIS has periodically been issuing Friday sermons to remind Muslim congregations of the danger of extremism and highlight the deviant tendency of the extremist ideology.

The council established the Harmony Centre, in the newly built An-Nahdhah mosque on 7 October 2006. The centre aims to counter exclusivist tendency and intolerance espoused by extremist ideology. The Harmony Centre has two broad aims: (1) to promote understanding about major religions in Singapore among Muslims so they can better relate with fellow Singaporeans; and (2) to promote better understanding about Muslims and Islam among non-Muslim Singaporeans so outsiders will not have prejudices towards Singaporean Muslims. The Centre is designed like a mini museum for Islamic civilisation. It provides exhibits, audio-visual and artefacts divided into four sections: images of Islam, civilisational Islam, essence of Islam and Islamic lifestyle.

MUIS also seeks to lead the Singapore Muslim community beyond simply promoting moderation and tolerance. It aspires to create a progressive and modern Muslim identity rooted to Singapore and well-integrated with fellow Singaporeans. After much consultation, MUIS has constructed for Singaporean Muslims a “10 Desired Attributes” documented titled *Risalah (Document) for Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence*. [4] The 10 attributes have become the basis for answering the question, “What does it mean to be a Muslim Singaporean?”

Singapore has also recognized that one of the critical areas for extremist propaganda is the internet. Therefore, in an effort to counter this medium of the extremist ideology, various initiatives were taken by individuals and organisations in the country. Some of these initiatives include:

- A dedicated counter ideology blog, <http://counterideology.multiply.com> ;
- A counter ideology blog based on a woman’s perspective, <http://2jay.wordpress.com/avata/>
- The launch of RRG’s official website: <http://www.rrg.sg>. The site has quickly gained popularity and international attention; attracting visitors from Japan, the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia to name a few.
- MUIS has developed three websites –
 - a religious query platform located at <http://www.iask.com.sg> for Muslim youths with the objective of preventing them from seeking religious guidance from wrong websites,
 - a sharing portal to reach out to young Muslims at <http://invoke.sg/cms/portal/Home.aspx>
 - a dedicated website to counter extremist ideology and promote moderation at http://radical.mosque.sg/cms/Radical_Ideology/index.aspx

Although MUIS is a government statutory body established by The Administration of Muslim Law Act, the initiatives can be viewed as community initiatives. Most critically, the bulk of the Council’s annual budget comes from the money contributed by the community, not from the government, thus illustrating how integrated the council is with the community. [5]

Between 2004 and November 2007, the RRG has participated in various community engagement programmes. It has made 33 presentations to various local grassroots organisations. The RRG made ten public forums at stadiums and mosques and three conventions for local youths, students from government schools, and students from local *madrrasah* (Islamic schools). During the same period, the RRG conducted 816 counselling sessions, 718 of which were for detainees and supervisees and 98 for their family members. [6] There are currently no direct methods to measure the effectiveness of the programmes. However, there are several proxy indicators that can be used to ascertain their effectiveness.

Despite the presence of local Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) cells in Singapore, and its close proximity with its base in Indonesia, the security situation in Singapore remains relatively

calm. Singapore has not experienced home-grown attacks and self radicalised individuals like Europe. Finally, from late 2001 till 1 December 2007, 19 (37%) out of 51 persons were released after being detained under the Internal Security Act for their affiliation with JI or other armed groups after an average of only three years of detention. This figure does not include those who were investigated and subsequently put under Restriction Orders, without detention. Although, the number of releases is not conclusive evidence that the detainees have been rehabilitated, it does however provide an indicator based on the assumption that the authority would never approve their releases until they had made significant progress in religious rehabilitation.

There is always room to improve the existing programmes. It is imperative to study radicalization more thoroughly in order to better understand the process in detail and to identify at risk groups. This effort at pre-emption will enhance the effectiveness of counter-ideology work by reducing the number of potential radical recruits. The Muslim community should be lauded for its efforts and commitment to date. Hopefully, the dedication and energy will continue to develop innovative solutions to the critical problems facing the community, and the nation as a whole.

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[1] Muhammad Haniff Hassan, *Unlicensed to Kill: Countering Imam Samudra’s Justification for the Bali Bombing*, Peace Matters, Singapore, 2006.

[2] Abdul Halim bin Kader (ed.), *Fighting Terrorism: The Singapore Perspective*, Taman Bacaan, Singapore, 2007.

[3] Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Mohamed bin Ali, *Questions & Answers on Jihad*, 2007. Available for download at http://counterideology.multiply.com/video/item/11/Q_A_on_Jihad_English_version (17 October 2007).

[4] Office of Mufti, *Risalah for Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence*, Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, Singapore, 2006.

[5] For more information about the council, visit <http://www.muis.gov.sg> (17 October 2007)

[6] Interview with Mr. Mohamed bin Ali, Secretariat of the RRG, on 4 Dec. 2007.