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JEMAAH ISLAMIAH: AIMS, MOTIVATIONS AND POSSIBLE COUNTER-STRATEGIES

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The recent arrests of 21 more members of the Jemaah Islamiah network has once again compelled Singaporeans to ask: why are some of their fellow citizens seemingly willing to throw in their lot with such terrorist organizations? A successful terrorist strike would damage Singapore not just physically but more importantly, psychologically. Inter-ethnic, inter-religious trust, the bedrock on which Singapore's political stability rests, would be dealt a devastating blow. What drives membership of JI? Given the recent disclosure by the authorities that even local targets were targeted, is JI anti-Western or anti-Singapore?

Of the many possible explanations for why people become terrorists, one powerful view offered by terrorism studies is that men are driven to rebel by a combination of political repression and acute socio-economic deprivation. Individuals become radicalised and vulnerable to extremist appeals when governments not only fail to deliver economic growth, decent jobs, adequate health care and affordable education, but also suppress the ensuing protests from the ground in the interests of regime stability. But this is not the case in Singapore. All the JI detainees were gainfully employed and owned their homes, which included HDB five-room or executive flats. These were not exactly the children of poverty and despair. Moreover, it is not as if the Muslim community in Singapore has no influence on the policymaking process. There is a Minister looking after Muslim affairs in the Cabinet and bodies such as MUIS and MENDAKI wield considerable influence in policies pertaining to the local Muslim community. Government representatives dialogue also regularly with other local Muslim bodies. Despite these opportunities for interaction, a few members of the Muslim community were radicalised enough to join JI. Why?

Ideological appeal

The ultimate root cause of JI radicalism seems to be ideological. What really ties all the JI detainees together, regardless of income and educational background, is a desire for spiritual revival. All of them, whether they were delivery men, despatch clerks, canteen operators, civil engineering technicians, engineers or taxi drivers, wanted to learn more about religion and atone for their "sinful" lives. They sought out religious teachers who would be able to guide them in their spiritual quest. They found teachers like Ibrahim Maidin who presented an extremist interpretation of Islam imbibed from Afghanistan that included a strong anti-American, jihadist streak. In essence, the JI men were taught that to be a genuine

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Muslim meant, like fundamentalists of all faiths, to be serious about withdrawing from the secular, materialistic world and concentrate their energies on spiritual renewal. Unlike most Islamic fundamentalists, these men were also taught that genuine Muslims must forcibly establish a pan-Southeast Asian Islamic state or Daulah Islamiah Nusantara; that it was not possible to set up an Islamic regime peacefully within established national political frameworks because regional governments were worldly and Western-oriented. Hence JI was committed to overthrowing the secular regimes in archipelagic Southeast Asia.

Another characteristic of the radical Islam espoused by JI's leadership is its external orientation: leaders like Abdullah Sungkar, Hambali, Abu Jibril and Ibrahim Maidin all spent time in Afghanistan, the locus classicus of global militant Islam. Hence the JI members were told that to be good Muslims they had also to go forth to wage jihad on behalf of overseas Muslim brethren against their infidel oppressors. This is where anti-Americanism comes into the picture, as the United States is perceived throughout the Muslim world as an enemy of Islam. This is because of its support for oppressive Muslim regimes in the Middle East, and importantly, Israel – which is seen to be the oppressor of the Palestinians. One need not proceed to Chechnya or Afghanistan to wage jihad; one could also target American and Western interests right here in Singapore or the region.

Because of the formative Afghan experience of its key leaders, JI has since the early 1990s acted like a regional agency of Al Qaeda. The latter sees itself as the vanguard of the messianic project to supplant regional varieties of Islam with Osama bin Laden's own rejectionist version. Regardless of whether JI tries to attack American and Western interests in Singapore; destroy the island's water supply and other local targets; or foment Singapore-Malaysia conflict, the ultimate aim is the same: political power.

Regional and global caliphate

As JI attempts to create a radical Islamic form of Southeast Asian regionalism, other Al Qaeda-influenced radical Islamic groups are concurrently engaging in similar enterprises in Central Asia, the Caucasus, South Asia and the Balkans. Interestingly the official name of Osama's organisation is the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the United States and Israel. Al Qaeda is therefore presiding over a gradual, long-term process of "bottom-up" regionalism aimed at recreating an international caliphate from Morocco to Mindanao. While they may seem to be anti-modern and retrogressive, both Al Qaeda and JI are very modern in their appreciation of the uses of power to attain their goals. It is thus not oxymoronic to suggest that such organizations are "anti-modern moderns". While the caliphate project may be too ambitious to succeed it is whilst pursuing their aims that Al Qaeda and its associate groups pose great dangers.

The notion of belonging to the wider enterprise of setting up a regional and global caliphate would have seemed to the local JI members to be both deeply meaningful and perhaps even exciting. For the less accomplished JI members, whatever the ustaz said had to be the Truth. It is an Asian characteristic to repose great trust in one's teacher, and the blue-collar JI members were no different. At any rate JI required unquestioning obedience of their recruits as a precondition for admission to its ranks. But what about the relatively better educated detainees? Were they not better equipped to evaluate the teachings of their ustaz and discern Truth from Error? Significantly, the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister recently lamented that he was "very sad" that some "very highly knowledgeable" Muslim university "professors" had been involved in the JI-related Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM)

organization.

Techno-thinking?

Perhaps the better-educated JI men, like their KMM counterparts, did not exercise independent critical judgement because their professional training had not equipped them to do so. When one analyses the profiles of all 31 JI detainees in Singapore, what is striking is that a significant number of them, both blue and white collar, come from technical backgrounds. While at the lower end are those with NTC qualifications in metal machining or maintenance fitting, at the other end are those with backgrounds in computer information technology and electrical engineering. In fact, from the available data for Malaysia one finds that this pattern of a technical background is repeated. For example, the principal of the religious school in Ulu Tiram, Johore, that was closed by the Malaysian authorities in January 2002 was an engineering graduate of University Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). Moreover, several KMM militants detained by Kuala Lumpur were also lecturers from UTM's Science Engineering and Geoinformation Faculty. A senior leader of the KMM that was arrested by Malaysian police only last week held a Masters in Science in Construction from the United Kingdom and used to lecture at UTM as well.

Is this all a coincidence? Former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, who is also a leading Islamic intellectual, does not think so. He declared in a little noticed address in Seoul last April that there seems to be a nexus between training in the sciences and engineering and a literalistic interpretation of Islamic doctrine. He argued that young Muslims from the developing world tend to apply the "modelling and formulistic thinking" associated with "engineering or other applied sciences" to their "reflection on their faith". This leads, in his view, to both "Islamic leaders, on the one hand, and the people that they lead, on the other", adopting a "more or less literalistic approach to the textual sources of Islam". This theme has been repeated by two of the leading scholars of fundamentalism, Martin Marty and Scott Appleby. They have found that fundamentalists of all faiths seem to share a common trait: "educational and professional backgrounds in applied sciences, technical, and bureaucratic fields" that predisposes them to "read scriptures like engineers read blueprints – as a prosaic set of instructions and specifications".

It would appear that the JI detainees, regardless of educational, socio-economic and occupational background, were vulnerable to JI extremist appeals because of two key factors. First, their predominantly technical backgrounds predisposed them to readily embrace literalistic, formulistic readings of the Islamic scriptures. Second, their desire for a deeper religious experience compelled them to develop a deep trust in and uncritical respect for, the teachings of their radically inclined ustaz. As the renowned terrorism expert Walter Laqueur noted recently, some people who become terrorists dearly want to believe in the Cause articulated by their religious teachers/leaders. They do not want to be critical. For them, the key thing is that their search for deeper meaning is over. To reiterate, therefore, the most important and ultimate root cause of JI extremism in Singapore and to a large extent Malaysia, is not socio-economic or political, but ideological.

Counter-strategies

This suggests that beyond law enforcement measures, neutralizing JI must involve counter-strategies in three key areas: political, ideological and educational. Politically, it is incumbent upon the government, employers and the non-Muslim communities to avoid

behaviour that might be exploited by JI ideologues for propaganda purposes. Government policies that appear to hinder the practice of Islam, and instances of economic or even social discrimination, will be exploited to paint a portrait of a Singaporean Muslim community under siege. At another level, Singapore and other Southeast Asian governments should impress upon the United States the importance of carefully calibrated foreign policy behaviour on issues of importance to the Muslim world from Afghanistan to Iraq. This is because the political consequences of ill-advised policies might engender "blowback" effects in generally pro-US Southeast Asia, including Singapore.

Ideologically, Islamic authorities in Singapore should instruct local Muslims of all educational backgrounds in the principles of interpreting Islamic scriptures. Perhaps the works of classical scholars such as Ibn Sina and even modern thinkers such as the neo-modernist Indonesian Muslim intellectual Nurcholish Madjid might help more Muslims mesh tradition with modernity, and in the process develop a degree of intellectual immunity to the simplistic reductionism of "us and them" implicit in radical Islamic appeals. Finally, expediting such ideological measures requires systematically exposing local Muslim students from technical backgrounds – and in fact technical students in general - to a broader education. While this is not to imply that technical people cannot think critically, there might be value in a more systematic attempt to spread education in the humanities widely.

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