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The MSK Family Affair: Is Blood Thicker than Water?

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

The announcement that Singapore JI leader Mas Selamat Kastari has been sheltered by three family members has focused attention on how family ties can come in the way of national security considerations. In the final analysis, there can be no excuse for harbouring family members intent on doing the wider society harm.

Commentary

IT HAS emerged that three family members of Singapore Jemaah Islamiyah leader Mas Selamat Kastari (MSK) – his niece, brother and sister-in-law -- had knowingly harboured him from the authorities following his daring escape from Whitley Detention Centre two years ago. They have since been arrested and sentenced to prison terms ranging from three to 18 months. This affair has caused much soul-searching.

In particular 32 out of 100 people interviewed by The New Paper – one in three – reported that had one of their own close relatives who was a wanted fugitive sought them for shelter, they would have provided it – knowing full well that they were breaking the law. One respondent, a 23-year old student, hit the nail on the head by commenting that he would give such a relative refuge because in the end "blood is thicker than water". What are we to make of all this? If one in three Singaporeans would willingly shelter wanted terrorists who may later go on – as MSK clearly intended to - wreak havoc on society at large, are we as a nation in big trouble?

The Four Social Circles of Violent Extremism

To answer this question requires perspective. Terrorism experts like Marc Sageman have noted that family ties or kinship forms merely one circle within which a militant may find himself enmeshed. Militants of the JI and Al Qaeda ilk are frequently and simultaneously part of three other social circles of violent extremism: a religious-ideological subgroup (worship); a casual subgroup of like-minded friends (friendship) and a relationship with a respected spiritual-operational mentor (discipleship). In short the four social circles of kinship, worship, friendship and discipleship overlap and the individual militant is located at the centre where all the four circles intersect. What is important to note is that the relative importance or size of these four overlapping circles with the enmeshed militant at their intersection need not be static.

The relative sizes of each circle may fluctuate over time – with respect to a particular individual militant -- as well as from militant to militant. In the case of MSK, we can only speculate at this juncture that for some reason

– perhaps the apparent decimation of the larger JI support network in Singapore since 2002 -- the kinship circle loomed large relative to other social circles. The pull of kin also seems to have been true for the "Smiling Bomber" Amrozi , who consistently sought after his revered elder brother and senior JI leader Mukhlas. For Imam Samudra, another of the 2002 Bali bombers, however, it was the discipleship and friendship circles that seemed to nurture his violent extremism.

He was inducted into the Darul Islam separatist movement in Indonesia (from which JI later emerged) through a respected school teacher and former Darul Islam commander. Samudra had also been deeply influenced by a friendship circle of Afghan veterans from all over the world. The discipleship circle seemed to have the greatest pull on the former JI operational chief Hambali – who saw in the late Abdullah Sungkar a much-needed father figure. For other Indonesian, Malaysian and Singapore JI members, the communal exposure to the sermons of the charismatic cleric Abu Bakar Ba'asyir created an influential worship circle whose effects on their psyches persist to this day.

Implications

There are implications here for three constituencies: non-Muslim Singaporeans, the relevant authorities, and families of JI detainees. First, non-Muslim Singaporeans must recognise that just because MSK's family sheltered him does not mean that the families of other JI detainees should also be viewed suspciously. To hold such a "they-are-all-the-same" attitude would be counter-productive and undermine social cohesion.

Nevertheless - and this is the second point, the MSK family episode does suggest that counter-ideology and pastoral counselling work amongst the immediate family members are important measures that should be continued, and if policy resources permit, further intensified. Third, the MSK family affair reiterates the operational importance of "deep diving" into the detailed life histories of wanted militants, to assess the relative importance of the four social circles of violent extremism in their lives. As part of this process, key influencers and trusted points of contact for each wanted militant – be they family, friends, disciplers or fellow worshippers – can be identified.

Is Blood Thicker than Water?

What about the implications for the JI detainee families in particular? This brings us back to the disturbingly candid comment of The New Paper respondent that "blood is thicker than water". Actually if one were to consult with evolutionary psychologists, there would be sympathy for such a view. One of the core tenets of evolutionary psychology is that close relatives are driven – at an unconscious level - to support one another, often at great personal cost. This is because their shared genes are compelling them to co-operate to ensure that there is, above all, genetic propagation from generation to generation.

From this vantage point, the actions of MSK's family members are actually understandable, as one in three Singaporeans seem to attest. But just because something is understandable does not make it excusable. We are all shaped in significant ways by our genes but we are not slaves to them. We can make a choice informed by moral, social and religious considerations. This is precisely why the comments of the Deputy Mufti of Singapore on the actions of MSK's family deserve greater attention. He states that "the tendency to help, protect or defend a family member or next-of-kin is a natural instinct of a human being". Nevertheless he insists that it is "not acceptable in Islam, if in doing so, it will jeopardise the peace and security of society and the country". In short, blood may well be thicker than water, but there can be no excuse whatsoever for harbouring those who would do the wider society harm – kin or not.

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