

Mas Selamat may not be a 'lone Rambo'

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Since the arrest of Mas Selamat on April 1 by the Malaysian Special Branch was revealed, we have been regaled by reports of his previous escapes from custody while under detention in Singapore and Indonesia.

He escaped from Internal Security Department (ISD) custody on Feb 27 last year, taking advantage of lapses in the supervision of such detainees and weaknesses in the physical security of the detention centre. When he was first detained by the Indonesian police in 2003, a failed escape attempt left him with a broken leg and a subsequent permanent limp. On his release in 2006, he disappeared for five months until he was detained again by the Indonesian police - for using a false identity card - and handed over to Singapore.

Within the circle of Jemaah Islamiah (JI) sympathisers, myth and reality are being conflated. Mas Selamat is getting a larger-than-life image as a determined, resourceful and innovative leader of the remnants of JI. The terrorist organisation had been severely undermined by the coordinated action of regional governments since the Bali bombings of October 2002.

While some information on Mas Selamat's support network in Johor has emerged, his escape to Johor revives concerns that he may have activated JI sleeper cells in Singapore to assist him in his getaway. JI networks are resilient as there are closely knit kinship associations among its members.

As the Indonesian experience with Darul Islam has shown, these loyalties can be transferred from generation to generation, with many JI activists today having grandfathers who participated in the Darul Islam revolt of the 1950s against the then newly established Indonesian state. While few wives of JI activists have been detained, they have been active in supporting their spouses within the JI network and in some cases have played a significant role in handling JI finances and logistical arrangements.

In Singapore, the wives and children of JI members tended to isolate themselves from the Muslim community as well as Singapore society in general. The role of Singaporean Muslim religious leaders in rehabilitating former JI activists and in influencing the attitudes of their family members is critical in ensuring the detainees do not return to the comfortable embrace of the JI network.

Mas Selamat's exploits are likely to gain attention among JI adherents in the region. He would have had an even larger group of sympathisers if he had been articulate and capable of rousing support for his beliefs through books and articles, as has been the case with some Indonesian JI leaders such as Bali bomber Amrozi. Instead, Mas Selamat's influence comes from his skills as a planner and executioner of JI operations.

Although he has now been re-captured, his reputation has not suffered from the revelations that he made his way without any funds from the Whitley Road Detention Centre to Singapore's north coast opposite Johor, crossed the Strait of Johor using an improvised flotation device despite his poor swimming ability and managed to reach JI members in Skudai who provided him with accommodation and support for over a year. His supporters are likely to believe that his time on the run was not wasted as he had set about rebuilding the JI network and had engaged in planning for future attacks on Singapore.

And if the image of a solitary escapee acting independently is replaced by the view that he may have tapped on contacts in Singapore, it would give rise to a more alarming scenario. The possibility of unknown domestic sympathisers would be a reminder that JI operated below the radar screen in Singapore and was unknown to the security authorities here for more than a decade before a loyal Muslim Singaporean informed the authorities when he was approached to assist in logistics arrangements for a series of planned truck bombings.

Only timely action by the ISD in late 2001 disrupted these plans and resulted in the arrests of leading JI members here.

There is no room for complacency in Singapore. We cannot assume that JI does not have members or sympathisers in this country. While they may have adopted a low-key approach when the JI leadership was decapitated by arrests, such supporters may still be willing to assist in JI operations. This assessment is less comforting than the story of Mas Selamat as a lone Rambo who successfully outwitted Singapore's entire security apparatus last year.

But it would draw attention to the need for continued vigilance and the maintenance of close contacts with rehabilitated former JI members, including mentoring the family members of detained JI members, especially the children, since they are likely to regard their fathers' continued detention as an act of oppression.

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