

Internet growing weapon in Asian radicalisation

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Reuters, 6 March 2009

Extremist groups in Southeast Asia are increasingly using the internet and social networking to radicalise the youth of the region, said a new security report released on Friday.

Internet usage in Southeast Asia has exploded since 2000 and extremist groups have developed a sophisticated online presence, including professional media units.

"For extremist groups in our region, the internet is an increasingly important tool for recruitment to violence," said the report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore**.

"Importantly, they aren't attacking only the West, but are drawing on their narrative to attack the governance arrangements of regional states," said the report titled "Countering internet radicalisation in Southeast Asia" (www.aspi.org.au/).

The report said online extremism first appeared in Southeast Asia in early 2000, particularly in the Bahasa Indonesia and Malay language cyber-environment.

Since then internet usage in the region has exploded and so too have extremist websites, chat rooms and blogs.

The number of radical and extremist websites in Bahasa and Malay rose from 15 in 2007 to 117 in 2008. Of those, sympathetic websites rose from 10 to 16 and sympathetic blogs and social networking rose from zero to 82.

Between 2006 and July 2007, radical regional websites have disseminated al-Qaeda and Southeast Asian militant group Jemaah Islamiyah propaganda videos, pictures and statements, it said.

In Indonesia, which has battled extremist Muslim groups responsible for bombings, internet usage rose from 2 million in 2000 to 20 million in January 2008.

The country now represents 80 to 90 percent of visitors to 10 radical and extremist websites in the region, said the report.

The Philippines, which has a Muslim insurgency, has seen internet usage rise to 14 million from 2 million in 2000, Malaysia 14.9 million from 3.7 million and Thailand 8.5 million from 2.3 million in the same period.

"The Bahasa and Malay language websites include sites manned by radical and extremist groups, Islamic boarding schools (pesantrens), and groups of individuals who sympathise with and support the ideology of violent jihad," said the report.

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One of the first appearances of a "tradecraft manual" was in August 2007 in the then forum, Jihad al-Firdaus. The forum had a section on electronic jihad, including

several hacking manuals. In 2008 the region's first sophisticated bomb-making manual and bomb-making video were posted on the Forum Al-Tawbah, which is registered in Shah Alam, Selangor and Malaysia, said the report.

But it said there had been no serious attempt to plan militant operations in these forums, adding further details of their activities were in private messages or personal emails.

Extremists were using a variety of technology to spread their message. "Blogs and personal social networking accounts provided more than half of the increase in 2008," said the report.

Militant groups have also become internet media savvy.

The Mujahidin Syura Council, an extremist group that claims to operate in southern Thailand, launched an official media wing in July 2008 as a blog on Google, said the report.

The Khattab Media Publication's blog is mainly written in Malay and was used to announce the start of a new military campaign, codenamed Operation Tawbah (Operation Repentance).

Another group, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, often produces high-quality videos of its activities and uploads them onto YouTube. Many of the videos focus on the failings of the Indonesian government and the need to implement sharia law and establish an Islamic caliphate, said the report.

"Extremist groups without access to mainstream media place great value on having online media units to boost their reputations and recruit people via the internet," it said.

The report said that regional governments had done little to stop the rise of online radicalisation, partly because attempts to regulate cyberspace have been a political minefield.

It said while websites inciting violence are subject to criminal laws in some countries, there are often no specific regulations covering the internet.

"Some governments don't want to appear un-Islamic by coming down hard on Islamist groups, and some don't want to appear undemocratic by seeming to rein in freedom of expression in cyberspace," it said.

"The problem of online radicalisation crosses national borders and will require a concerted international response."