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Global Protests against Anti-Islam Video: Impact on Security in Southeast Asia

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Synopsis

Global protests against the video clip mocking Islam continue to spread, and could potentially cause upheaval in Southeast Asia. Although steps have been taken to prevent the dissemination of the video, governments should be prepared for the unintended consequences arising from the protests.

Commentary

THE MASSIVE demonstrations ignited by a video clip on the Internet have spread across the globe from the Middle East to Southeast Asia and Oceania. 'The Innocence of Muslims' trailer proved to be provocative and particularly offensive to Muslims and denigratory to Islam. Made in the United States, it was translated into Arabic and broadcast on Egyptian television and YouTube. The protests in Egypt and Libya culminated in an attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi in which the American ambassador and three other diplomats were killed.

The opportunistic involvement of radical Islamist groups in transforming protests against the video into a wider campaign directed at the US and Western countries suggest that more serious unrest cannot be ruled out. The possibility that such protests could turn deadly as they did in Libya should be of great concern.

From Anti-American to Anti-Western to possibly Anti-Christian

That the protests in Malaysia and Indonesia have been less violent than those in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was possibly because the video had not been translated into Bahasa Indonesia/Malaysia nor disseminated widely. The authorities in both countries have also appealed to Google/YouTube to restrict access to the video in their respective jurisdictions.

In Singapore, the Media Development Authority (MDA) has asked Google to restrict access to the clip on YouTube, saying the film was in breach of local laws. The Home Affairs Ministry said it has "taken the pre-emptive measure" of asking MDA to ask Google to block online access to the film because continued circulation is likely to cause disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different groups in Singapore.

The initial protests were carried out at the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya, presumably because the video clip was produced in the US. What is of concern is the apparent hijacking of the protests by Libyan militants and their deadly attack on the US mission, as well as massive protests at other US embassies in the Middle East. In

the skilled hands of extremist ideologues everywhere, the video has inadvertently become “political oxygen” fuelling the stock ideological narrative of a US-led alliance intent on demeaning Islam globally.

This is possibly why as the demonstrations gained momentum, the targets of the protests have shifted from anti-American to anti-Western targets: in addition to the US embassy, the German and British embassies in Sudan were attacked over the weekend.

Of great concern here is that the incident might end up being framed as a clash between Islam and Christianity. This would not at all be a surprise as reports indicate that the video was produced by Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, an Egyptian-born Coptic Christian (who resides in the US). Nakoula is said to have acted in support of the “concerns of Christian Copts [in Egypt] about their treatment by Muslims”.

If the video incident is successfully framed as symbolic of the “ancient Christian-Muslim conflict” assiduously promoted by the likes of Al-Qaeda, it would be extremely difficult to de-escalate since it would evoke primordial, absolutist sentiments on all sides.

Possible Ramifications for Southeast Asian Security

In light of the above, it seems clear that the video incident poses potentially serious national security risks for Southeast Asia. Firstly, at the very least, anti-Western and anti-US protests could increase and become more violent. This would not only disrupt regular business and social activities but strain resources as more personnel and equipment would be needed to contain the unrest. In Thailand, for example, the authorities have deployed approximately 700 policemen to guard the US embassy in anticipation of an upcoming protest.

Secondly, militant Islamist groups in the region might not merely organise protests - their more violent elements may also attack US and Western targets. The Philippine Army has for instance expressed concern about a possible strike by the Al-Qaeda-influenced Abu Sayyaf Group.

Thirdly, and most worrying, social cohesion in the region could be severely undermined as fear, distrust and anger between Muslim and non-Muslims increase. This can already be seen in Myanmar where the global protests against the video have further increased tensions between the Arakanese and Rohingya.

Government Responses and challenge for Muslim leaders

To be sure, Southeast Asian leaders have unequivocally condemned the video, and have called for their people to remain calm and practise restraint. However, it should be recognised that this is easier said than done. It is fair to assert that global Muslim opinion in general has been inflamed and undoubtedly receptive to exhortations to take action. One such exhortation by the Lebanese Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, urged Muslim governments around the world to “express their own anger to the US”.

The conundrum, as Professor Juan Cole puts it, is if moderate Muslim governments “stood with the Americans, they’d be guilty of blasphemy themselves. If they stood with the jihadis, they’d have surrendered some legitimacy to the latter”.

Possible Solutions

Anti-American and anti-Western sentiment in the Muslim world has long been premised on the perception that the West practises double standards in their dealings with other countries especially in the MENA region. The all-too-frequent stories of civilian “collateral damage” from US drone strikes and other military offensives have also fuelled such sentiment. Until the foreign policies and military strategies of the US and her allies become better calibrated, hostility toward the West will be inevitable. Nevertheless, Muslim governments challenged about their relationship with the West must highlight how such a partnership has genuinely benefited their countries, and especially the ordinary person on the street. This would help negate some of the ill-feelings and hostility toward the West.

More fundamentally, Muslim and other political and community leaders should reiterate that scurrilous attacks on not just Islam but any religion, while undoubtedly extremely disrespectful and hurtful, are nonetheless all too common in the modern world. Moreover, it is incumbent upon Muslim leaders especially to insist on non-violent means of protest and of defending the faith. This is because of the equally crucial need to continue the task of undoing the great damage done by Al-Qaeda and its affiliates to the good image of Islam over the past decade.

These solutions are not new, and at best provide perhaps a temporary solution to a rapidly unfolding crisis whose ultimate trajectory remains unknown. What is certain however is that maintaining a close watch on this episode is of vital importance for Southeast Asian governments and civil societies.

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