



IDSS COMMENTARIES (44/2004)

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MADRASAHS AS PARTNERS IN THE IDEOLOGICAL WAR AGAINST TERRORISM

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17 September 2004

The Singapore government has extended for another two years the detention of 17 members of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) who were arrested under the Internal Security Act between August and September 2002 for plotting acts of terror in the republic. In doing so, the Minister for Home Affairs stated that the JI remained a potent threat as seen in the suicide bombing attack on the Australian Embassy in Jakarta on 9 September which killed 9 people and injured 100 others. The 17 are still regarded as a threat because they had been deeply exposed to terrorist ideology.

While the Indonesian authorities step up their hunt for the suspected bomb makers and operational leaders of the terrorist group, there is growing recognition that the security approach alone is not enough to deal with the problem. A more comprehensive and multi-faceted strategy is called for, a key aspect of which is the “ideological battle” to deny the terrorists the ideological justification for their acts of violence. Muslim leaders in Indonesia have spoken up to condemn such terrorist acts, as have Muslims in Singapore. As the Singapore government publication, *The Fight Against Terror: Singapore National Security Strategy*, states: “In order to deny militants any ideological space, Muslims must speak out and denounce those who distort Islam. They have to engage the extremists, from the media to the mosque to the madrasah, and assert mainstream Islamic values.”

To deny the militants ideological space means to engage them in an ideological struggle. But what constitutes an “ideological battle”? In one key aspect, this must necessarily involve “winning the hearts and minds” of Muslims in such a way that extremist action is outrightly rejected and condemned as contrary to the religion. In Singapore, this goal is achievable as the majority of Muslims practise mainstream Islamic values which abhor extremism and terrorism.

This paper examines how the madrasahs in Singapore can be enlisted to help in this cause. These Islamic religious schools can become important conveyors of the message of Islam – peace and compassion. They can be strategic partners in the fight against extremism, provided they are seen not as a threat and their potential role is recognised.

It is all but overlooked that none of the JI detainees in Singapore had any formal religious education at local full-time madrasahs. Unfortunately, the JI connection with Pondok Al-Mukmin in Solo, Madrasah Lukmanul Hakim in Ulu Tiram Johor and other Indonesian pesantrens, and several Pakistani religious schools has tarnished the image of madrasahs

generally. However, the local madrasahs need not be a cause for concern.

Contrary to common misperceptions, madrasahs do not confine themselves to only religious subjects. Nor do they employ outdated traditional modes of teaching and learning. Indeed, the local madrasahs have been teaching non-religious subjects such as English, Science and Mathematics for many years even before the implementation of Compulsory Education, which requires such secular subjects to be taught in schools. Thus, local madrasah students have already been exposed to a mix of religious and secular education, albeit in varying degrees. Over the years, several graduates of local madrasahs have even been able to enrol in the National University of Singapore, with some emerging with honours. Though the numbers are small, the significance of this is both symbolic and substantive -- that local madrasahs can adapt and succeed.

Furthermore, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) which oversees Islamic education in Singapore, supervises and governs local madrasahs even though these schools are given some level of autonomy. This is unlike madrasahs in Pakistan and some pesantrens, (Islamic boarding schools), in Indonesia which operate independently. As there are also no tertiary institutes for Islamic studies in Singapore, the local madrasahs occupy a strategic position as the main provider of the right foundation for students keen on learning the traditions and theology of mainstream Islam which are important ballasts in combating extremist ideology.

The theological and juristic approach is crucial in the ideological war against terrorism. But the theological and juristic approach will not be effective without involvement of the *asatizahs* (religious teachers) who are themselves product of these madrasahs. Those who are not madrasah-trained may find difficulty in responding to the theological and juristic arguments of the extremists. Hence the *asatizahs*, being madrasah-graduates, are important players in propagating mainstream Islam to the community. Pergas, the Association of Religious Teachers and Ulama, is spearheading this effort through the Convention of Ulama. Local *asatizahs* have also been working quietly with the authorities to help reform and rehabilitate JI detainees in Singapore.

Local madrasahs will continue to be the bastion for the preservation of mainstream Islam, which is the moderate and pragmatic strain observed by Muslims in Singapore generally. The government can take steps to establish a cordial relationship with the madrasah community, which includes the schools' management, teaching staff, students and their parents. The Compulsory Education issue has affected the status of the madrasahs which in turn has psychologically impacted the madrasah community. In the process the relationship between the government and the madrasahs has been affected and careful nursing of the relationship is required. Otherwise an estranged relationship between the government and the madrasahs will not facilitate the involvement of the *asatizahs* and the madrasahs as integral elements in combating extremist ideology.

In his visit earlier this year to Al-Azhar University in Cairo and the International Islamic University of Islamabad, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong suggested that madrasah students should also equip themselves with secular subjects. This should not be difficult to pursue as the local madrasahs are already used to a balanced curriculum. It is certainly in the interest of the Muslim community to have local Muslim scholars who are not only competent in religious knowledge but just as well versed in English, Mathematics and Science. The government can help make this happen by playing a more supportive role such as extending

assistance to madrasahs in their efforts to achieve excellence in non-religious subjects. The madrasahs currently feel inadequately supported. If the relationship between the madrasahs and the government can be put on a more positive footing, a healthier relationship will help in the ideological struggle against extreme militancy.

However, even with the support of the madrasahs, winning ‘hearts and minds’ will be an uphill task as long as some of the root causes of global Muslim *angst* are not addressed. Three years after Sept 11, one sore issue is still the uneven foreign policy of the United States in the Middle East, especially vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine, the occupation of Iraq and the continued American support for undemocratic regimes in the region. Like their Muslim counterparts elsewhere in the region, Singapore Muslims share a deep sense of frustration with the injustices experienced across Muslim societies. As long as these issues are not resolved the hearts and minds of Muslims may not be easily won.

The Minister in charge of Muslim Affairs, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, has characterized the internal contestation within the Muslim community as one between two streams - those who practise Islam as a mercy to the world and those who are prepared to bring destruction in defence of the religion. The ideological struggle must necessarily be won by the bearers of mercy – which was how Islam first came to this region through early Muslim traders and sufi missionaries. But beneficent Islam will continually be on the defensive as long as Muslim grievances show no sign of being effectively resolved.

The long-term role of madrasahs as important bearers of the message of mercy should not be ruled out. As such they should not be seen as a threat but as key “strategic partners” in the fight against extreme militancy.

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