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COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES AGAINST JI BY SINGAPORE'S MUSLIM COMMUNITY

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SINCE the discovery of Jemaah Islamiyah's plot in Singapore, the Muslim community has taken commendable initiatives in response to the threat. In light of the constant calls for moderate Muslims to speak out and come forward to tackle the problem, it is important to highlight these initiatives not only as a recognition of the work done but also as a form of assurance to other Singaporeans. Indeed, these initiatives can be pertinent examples for other countries.

Singapore Muslim Community Response

Although the discovery of JI and the arrests of its members came as a shock, Singapore's Muslim community did not swing into a denial mode. Earlier, Muslim organisations had come out to condemn the September 11 attacks and initiated public debates on the importance of moderation amongst Muslims. Not surprisingly, they were quick to condemn JI's plots in Singapore as well as its ideology and links with Al Qaeda.

The condemnations came in two waves. In the beginning, public statements were made by individual Muslim organisations and leaders. In a show of collective concern, 122 Muslim leaders led by the imam of Baalwi mosque, Habib Hassan Alattas, came together in October 2002 to make clear where the community should stand. The leaders condemned terrorism and rejected ideological extremism, while reinforcing their commitment to the Singapore nation-state. Significantly, this crucial act against terrorism was done long before the Muslims in England, America and Australia rallied their respective communities to express their strong disapproval of the London attacks last year.

The statement was one of the earliest signals that the Muslim community leaders were committed and united in the battle against extremism in their midst. It also sent a strong message to members of the Muslim community to stay clear of extremism that promotes violence and poses a security threat to the country.

In early 2003, a book entitled "Muslim, Moderate, Singaporean" was jointly published by two Muslim bodies. The book proposed six principles of moderation as guidelines for Singapore Muslims in making their ideological stand on various issues. The six principles are the rule of law; recourse to peaceful means; democracy; being contextual in thinking and practices; respect for the opinions and rights of others; and upholding Islamic teachings.

In September 2003, Pergas, the association of Muslim scholars in Singapore, undertook a direct counter-ideological initiative against Al Qaeda and JI ideology by organising the Convention of *Ulama* (Muslim scholars). The objective of the convention was to rally Muslim scholars to define and combat extremism. The gathering led to a book entitled “Moderation in Islam in the Context of the Muslim Community in Singapore”.

The book is particularly relevant to counter-ideological efforts in two respects. It highlights key extremist thinking and misinterpretations of Islam and offers rebuttals—using the same arguments employed by Al-Qaeda and JI. Secondly, it offers a 27-point “Charter of Moderation” for the Muslim community in Singapore. The charter has been useful in guiding the community to practise Islam in the context of Singapore, particularly for Muslim scholars and religious teachers in their drive to promote moderation.

Another important initiative was the development of a system to self-regulate religious instruction. A collaborative effort between Pergas and the Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), the Asatizah Recognition System was launched in December 2005. The proposed system laid down the pre-requisites for the certification and registration of asatizah or religious teachers who provided the public with guidance and lessons on Islam. Initiated several years earlier, the proposal became more urgent following the JI arrests and subsequent inclusion in the 2003 White Paper on JI of measures necessary in countering terrorism. While such a self-regulatory system by the community cannot be enforced by law, a person can be struck off from the database of recommended religious teachers if he was found guilty of misconduct.

Pergas was not alone in efforts to counter ideological extremism. Many other Muslim institutions -- from mosques to civic groups, such as the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) and Jamiyah -- initiated cultural and inter-faith exchanges and dialogues between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. They also organised visits to places of worship to promote better understanding amongst them.

The Religious Rehabilitation Group

One of the most important initiatives taken by the community was the formation of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), which was launched on 23 April 2003. Following the detention of the first batch of JI members, the security authorities approached local Muslim scholars to assist in counselling the detainees. This resulted in the formation of the RRG. Among other roles, the RRG offers expert opinion on JI’s misinterpretation of Islam, produce counter-ideological materials on relevant religious matters and conduct public education for the Muslim community on religious extremism.

To date, 20 religious counsellors who are local Muslim scholars have volunteered to do RRG work. Many others are providing secretariat support for the group. In the beginning, the counselling programme covered JI detainees and supervisees (those under Restriction Order). This was later extended, on a voluntary basis, to the family members. As of June 2005, 93 counselling sessions were held for the detainees, 139 for the supervisees and 14 for the family members.

Apart from Muslim groups, various non-Muslim organisations were also briefed on the efforts taken by the RRG to continuously update and, in the process, assure the non-Muslim community. Since June 2005, the RRG has stepped up its public education programme. It has teamed up with local Muslim organisations and mosques to organise talks such as the recent

seminars related to certain misconceptions of jihad. The RRG has written for the counsellors a manual on rehabilitation work related to JI's ideology. The response to the religious counselling programme has generally been positive. Four detainees have been released and placed under Restriction Order; two others who were under the Restriction Order did not have their restriction extended due to their positive response to the counselling.

Since most of the detainees were the sole breadwinners and their wives were homemakers, their arrests meant that the families experienced financial difficulties. Several local Muslim groups such as AMP, the Young Muslim Women's Association (PPIS), Mendaki and the Khadijah mosque, have stepped in to provide psychological, emotional and financial support to the families. A key goal was to ensure that the education of the children was not disrupted or their future jeopardised.

These initiatives are important in helping to win over the hearts and minds of the detainees and their family members and to integrate them back into society. It is particularly important to minimise the risks of the children being radicalised in the future by the detention of their fathers or by economic marginalisation arising from disruptions to their education and loss of financial security.

Conclusion

Admittedly, the JI threat in Singapore is not as big as that in Indonesia or Philippines. But this should not undermine the significant impact of community-based initiatives undertaken by the Muslim community in reducing the threat of terrorism in Singapore. The community-based initiatives symbolise the close cooperation between the state and the Muslim community in counter-terrorism. Particularly significant, as a lesson to other countries, is the proactive role of the Muslim scholars in this drive. The community-based initiatives have made counter-terrorism in Singapore a good case study for others.

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