



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

Self-Radicalisation and National Security: New Threat, New Response

Norman Vasu and Yolanda Chin

1 February 2008

The recent arrest of three self-radicalised Singaporeans has raised the question whether there is a need for the public to be further incorporated into the national security framework. This commentary argues for such a move.

THE MOST fundamental commitment of governments to its citizens is to defend the nation from threats to its collective security and prosperity. For the state to succeed in this herculean task, members of society enter into a social contract in which their individual right to defend themselves is relinquished to a higher authority for order and stability to prevail.

The implication of this is clear for the process of securitization – defined as the power to frame national security threats and decide on the best response to mitigate them. In this process, the state is seen to be empowered to decide what threatens the nation and also how best to defend the nation – often with the acquiescence of the people.

However, this clear division of roles may no longer apply due to the evolving nature of threats to the nation-state. In Singapore, two men were recently detained under the Internal Security Act and a third was placed on a restriction order for planning acts of terror after going through a process of self-radicalisation. This development may indicate that national security can no longer be the responsibility of the dedicated few. Instead, there may be a need now to increase public involvement in the national security process.

Self-Radicalisation: The Threat at Hand

One of the detainees, Muhammad Zamri Abdullah, reportedly tried to join a “mujahidin network” whose aim was to wage armed jihad. Zamri then succeeded in influencing Maksham Mohd Shah and Mohammad Taufik Andjah Asmara – making them take an oath of allegiance to him as well as donate money to a militant foreign group. Though enthusiastic to meet and join the wider “mujahidin network”, these three individuals are reported to have been unsuccessful at meeting up with foreign leaders. Worryingly for the government, Maksham had begun to experiment with sparklers to make

bombs while also going overseas to source the materials required in constructing improvised explosive devices such as ball bearings and fertiliser.

What these two developments show is that the terrorist threat for Singapore is not going to go away any time soon. Terrorist networks have developed diffused organisational structures whilst the unpoliceable Internet has become the preferred tool to disseminate their message of violence and hate. Pundits have warned that self-radicalised terrorists will be the “dominant threat” to Singapore. At the same time, it is almost impossible to detect self-radicalised “wannabe” terrorists until they take active steps to put their ideas into practice by preparing to take up arms.

Fortunately, judging from the fact that the public has remained calm in the face of continued arrests, it appears that public education measures put in place since 9/11 have paid off. These measures are designed to temper awareness of the threat of terrorism today with community bonding initiatives. Most Singaporeans are now savvy enough to know that these radicals constitute a minority whose misguided aspirations do not in any way represent those of the community they claim to speak on behalf of.

Nonetheless, this is no reason to rest on one’s laurels. Just as the terrorists have refined their *modus operandi*, so must strategies to strengthen the partnership between the government and people. Singapore’s national security needs to be enhanced further.

In view of the comprehensive measures already in place spanning both the technical hardware needed and the “heartware” of community bonding initiatives, the question now is, what more can be done?

Strengthening the Partnership

Under the current National Security framework to address the threat of terrorism, the role of the public is to galvanise government policies and respond in an appropriate manner during a crisis. Emergency preparedness exercises and community engagement programmes should therefore be taken seriously.

Though these central principles are sound, the threat posed by self-radicalisation may require an expansion of society’s role. It is imperative that the community at large – for example, family, friends and teachers – play their part by being the partners of the government on the ground.

It is critical that citizens take responsibility to aid the authorities in preventing acts of terror. Public awareness measures could be reviewed to enable Singaporeans to play this role.

Given the circumstances, the most recent detention seems to be an ideal opportunity to flesh out in more detail what Singaporeans should be looking out for. The following clarifications pertaining to recent detention, though certainly not exhaustive, may be a way forward to this end.

Firstly, the public has to be educated to discern between “wannabe” and “would-be” terrorists. Only when the public is clear on this distinction can false alarms and leads to authorities be minimised. The current provision by the authorities of typical characteristics of a potential self-radicalised terrorist is a necessary and logical first step to educating Singaporeans on what they should be looking out for. For example, telltale signs include born-again Muslims with little appropriate instruction on Islam who feel it is their duty to take up arms to protect fellow Muslims.

However, such broad strokes are insufficient to help Singaporeans sift out the “wannabes” from the bonafide “would-bes”. For example, there is a need to draw a distinction between harbouring sympathy for the plight of fellow human beings in other parts of the world and becoming a terrorist. Moreover, mere aspirations, no matter how fervent, to take up arms do not necessarily translate to capacity.

Secondly, of the estimated 6,000 extremist websites available, which were the ones this current crop of self-radicalised youths subscribed to? Identifying them will permit the public to scrutinise the flawed logic propagated by them – it is only by understanding extremist thought that it can be debunked. Moreover, by identifying these websites, proactive parents and friends can better monitor the websites their children or peers surf.

Finally, it may be helpful for the authorities to demystify the radicalisation process. How did Zamri manage to influence and convince the other two? Similar to protecting oneself against, for example, pyramid selling scams, it is important for the public to understand the *modus operandi* of radicalisation.

Of course, three suggestions do not make a counter-terrorism strategy. Regardless, they do provide some thinking (and talking) points to begin the necessary steps towards enhancing the government/public partnership so necessary in countering a threat that is set to remain for a long time to come.

Norman Vasu is an Assistant Professor and Yolanda Chin an Associate Research Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. They both conduct research on matters concerning the social fabric vis-à-vis national security.