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Mas Selamat Kastari's Disappearing Act: Assessing the Fallout

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3 March 2008

On 27 February 2008, Singapore was hit by the "wild card" of Mas Selamat Kastari's brazen escape. Such an unfortunate episode will have wide repercussions, both strategically and operationally, for Singapore and regional counter-terrorism efforts.

NEWS OF Mas Selamat Kastari's audacious breakout from the Whitley Road Detention Centre has been a startling and depressing turn of events in Singapore's efforts against terrorism. According to various reports, Mas Selamat made his getaway when he requested to use the toilet of the detention centre, just before a meeting at the family visitation room. At the time of writing, Mas Selamat is still at large and it has been widely speculated that he would try to make a beeline for Sumatra, Indonesia — if possible — where remnants of his old Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network is believed to still exist and where there will be more secluded "safe houses" for him to lie low.

Avoid finger-pointing

Mas Selamat is considered one of the most ambitious and dangerous terrorists alive today: he infamously harboured grandiose "Al-Qaeda" dreams of hijacking a commercial aircraft in Bangkok and landing it into Changi Airport. With direct links to the top echelons of the JI leadership, Mas Selamat had been chosen by JI operations chief Hambali himself to assume the role of head of JI operations in Singapore in 1999 and had undergone military training in Afghanistan. While Mas Selamat was first arrested in Bintan in 2003 after fleeing to Indonesia in the wake of the Singapore Government's 2001 JI crackdown, it was only in 2006 that he was finally deported back to Singapore after being arrested for a second time in Malang.

In light of Mas Selamat's brazen disappearing act, there may be a tendency by some to viscerally turn to unconstructive and retrospective finger-pointing. This is unfruitful in our opinion. Instead, what would be more important and analytically useful is to address the larger question of ramifications. Specifically, what does this escape incident mean, strategically and operationally, for Singapore and regional counter-terrorism efforts? Concerning this, there are various issues to ponder.

Assessing the Fallout

For a start, it is likely that Mas Selamat's escape would be construed, painted and hailed by existing JI members as an act of divine intervention: the "narrative" of how Mas Selamat, seemingly with the odds stacked against him, was able to miraculously beat Singapore's security system with spiritual assistance. Like how some extremists perceived Osama Bin Laden's continued elusiveness from security forces — despite massive rewards and state-of-the-art intelligence technologies — as the "will of God", Mas Selamat's escape may well be interpreted in the same "theological" bent. Indeed, like-minded individuals or groups with similar agendas to JI, may even opportunistically hijack and exploit the "Mas Selamat escape" storyline for their own recruitment and indoctrination purposes.

Second, for the past few years, the JI terrorist organisation has been suffering a series of consistent and major setbacks. The arrests of scores of JI members, including prominent figures such as the likes of Abu Dujana, Hambali and Zarkasih, meant that while JI remains a strategic threat, its operational capability has been severely decimated. Now, with this "good news" (from JI's perspective) of Mas Selamat's escape, it is possible that JI will see this as some sort of an operational watershed that suggests a turning of the tide — constituting a timely psychological shot in the arm for the morale and spirit of their cadres. At the same time, the longer that Mas Selamat remains at large, the greater his legend in regional terroristic circles. This point should be noted because Mas Selamat is one of those few JI radicals with *bona fide* "strategic potential", in the sense that he is well capable of re-generating and re-orientating a terrorist cell around him.

Full and fair inquiry needed

The third issue relates to the concern of whether regional counter-terrorism cooperation with Singapore would be affected as a result of this escape incident: Mas Selamat, after all, escaped under Singapore's charge after being handed over by the Indonesians. Of course, it cannot be denied that Singapore's generally strong reputation in homeland security matters has taken a hit; yet it is also equally far-fetched to say that this reputation — founded on robust fundamentals and a sterling track record — would be severely dented just because one focal incident.

In fact, if there is a full and fair inquiry into the reasons behind the security lapse and as well as the preventive measures to be taken, to ensure no such incident happens again, then some good may actually come out of it. For instance the publication of a Government White Paper like the previous one on JI put out in January 2003, which identifies key lessons learnt: this would not only benefit the operational agencies within Singapore and the region, but also signify a transparent and forward-looking attitude towards the whole episode.

Finally, it is highly possible that in escaping, Mas Selamat may have left a number of inadvertent signatures and footprints that would be invaluable to intelligence and counter-terrorism agencies in enhancing their operational insights into a wider network, if any, that may be lending him support. Perhaps the role of previously unknown self-radicalised supporters with no institutional links with JI, but nevertheless have bought into Mas Selamat's "Global Jihad" vision, and played some role in his escape, would be uncovered.

Final Word

We must recognise that the war on terror is a long-term one; one cannot expect an unbroken string of counter-terrorism successes. There will be ebbs and flows. Enduring success in the ongoing campaign against JI and its ideological bedfellows -- both known and currently unknown — must involve a range of measures well beyond tightening detention processes, such as combating the threat of radicalisation, self or otherwise.

Ultimately, what matters is that Singaporeans and our friends in the region, regardless of colour or creed, must rally together and stubbornly keep the faith in the ideals of tolerance and reason, till one day the danger of radicalism — whatever form it takes — is overcome.

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