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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Engaging Former JI Detainees in Countering Extremism: Can it Work?**

By Kumar Ramakrishna

### **Synopsis**

*Singapore's counter-radicalisation programme has been effective in rehabilitating many Jemaah Islamiyah detainees as well as immunising the wider community against violent extremism. Can there be an enhanced role for specially selected former detainees to complement the overall counter-ideological efforts of Singapore's Muslim scholars?*

### **Commentary**

TEN YEARS ago Singapore came close to being struck by a major terrorist attack - a mere three months after the September 11 attacks in the United States by Al Qaeda. To many Singaporeans, the news that a cell of the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jemaah Islamiyah lurked within their own borders seemed too surreal to be true.

But it was: the local JI cell - with the direct support of Al Qaeda itself - had plotted to mount truck bomb attacks against Western diplomatic and commercial interests in Singapore. Had the plot succeeded, the physical, economic, social and psychological repercussions for Singapore would have been catastrophic.

### **Success of RRG**

Over the past decade, it has become clear that dealing with the threat of transnational terrorism crucially requires the capacity to deal with the real-time, physical threat posed by terrorists and their access to explosive materials and funding. However, it is equally important to address the threat posed by the virulent ideology driving JI, Al Qaeda and a continuously evolving network of like-minded counterparts.

In this connection, Singaporeans can be proud that local Muslim community leaders have since 2002 devised and refined a highly sophisticated counter-ideological programme targeted at Singapore JI detainees at first, but expanded since then to encompass their families and the wider public. As more than two-thirds of all detainees since 2001 have been successfully rehabilitated, Singapore's counter-ideological programme, spearheaded by the all-volunteer Islamic scholars of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), has been internationally acclaimed to have been effective.

In Singapore it has been rightly recognised that moderate-minded scholars remain best placed to lead the overall counter-ideological effort. They are the most qualified to present widely accepted understandings of Islamic theology and to challenge the glaring flaws within JI and Al Qaeda ideology. They are also strategically positioned to offer authoritative opinions on a wide spectrum of issues ranging from the deeper meaning of the concept of jihad to how Muslims should conduct their daily affairs in a secular, multi-cultural polity like

Singapore.

### **What more can be done?**

Nevertheless, ten years on, it is worth asking if the overall potency of the counter-ideological programme can be further enhanced - via the engagement of rehabilitated former JI detainees in the counter-ideological effort as well. Supporters argue for a measured employment of carefully selected ex-detainees as such individuals possess a certain "street cred" by virtue of actually having been within the movement. They have witnessed at close range the problems and real-world contradictions within JI ideology.

Hence they are uniquely positioned to craft authentic "inside scoop" narratives aimed at cautioning vulnerable people against falling for JI ideological blandishments. In this way, former radicals could complement moderate scholars in counter-ideological work.

Such use of former radicals is nothing new. During the Malayan Emergency of the 1950s, disillusioned former communists were effectively employed in what was known then as counter-propaganda work. The former senior Communist Party of Malaya leader Lam Swee, for instance, had been well known amongst the ordinary rural Chinese folk that made up the mass base of CPM support. He had played a major role in the resistance during the Japanese Occupation and in the post-war labour movement. Hence when he defected to the government side and wrote a short booklet called *My Accusation* - an expose of the contradictions and blatant power plays within the CPM - it sent shock waves throughout the Malayan communist movement.

The panicked response of CPM ideologues in hastily publishing frenzied rebuttals of the points in *My Accusation* prompted the government psychological warfare expert C.C. Too to remark that the CPM themselves should be thanked for indirectly generating publicity for Lam Swee.

Our own historical record suggests that former "insiders" have potentially something to bring to the counter-ideological table today. Engaging former detainees in counter ideological work actually represents a form of continuous rehabilitation for them as well. Employing former radicals may well represent a win-win proposition for the three main stakeholders in the counter-ideological process: first, the former detainee; second, his audience - be it other detained individuals, detainee families, or the wider community - and finally; the relevant religious and secular authorities.

### **Challenges**

Employing former detainees in counter-ideological work is not without its challenges. In Indonesia, it has been found that a number of released JI militants promptly rejoined their comrades in plotting violence against the government and Western interests. The problem of recidivism lies in the sheer difficulty of actually changing the mindset of Indonesian JI militants. This has prompted observers to call for the minimal aim of simple detainee "disengagement" from violence as opposed to more ambitious ideological "de-radicalisation" - in which detainees ultimately give up their commitment to establishing the Islamic State and settle for practising their faith in Indonesia's secular and plural milieu.

Even in Singapore, the remaining unrepentant detainees - such as the former operational leader of the Singapore JI cell Mas Selamat Kastari - represent hard core elements that are likely to remain impervious to counter-ideological efforts. Again, this is not new: many hardcore Malayan communists refused to recant their commitment to setting up a Communist Republic in Malaya and Singapore well after unsustainable losses through eliminations and surrenders had forced Secretary-General Chin Peng to demobilise his fighting units at the end of 1958.

This however does not imply that there is ergo no role for former JI detainees in counter-ideological work. It does suggest that great care must be exercised in selecting former detainees for such efforts. While moderate scholars must continue to exercise overall strategic control and direction of the counter-ideological programme, the judicious use of carefully selected willing former detainees could potentially further enhance the overall effectiveness of the programme.

As Singapore enters the second decade of the ongoing struggle against a resilient violent extremism, it is imperative to ensure that it uses all available measures in this fight.

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