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Terror Threat in Malaysia: Warning Signs

By Kevin Fernandez & Greg Lopez

SYNOPSIS

Since the beginning of 2019, Malaysian Police had arrested several individuals, both Malaysian citizens and foreigners residing in the country, for suspected links with Islamic State (or "Daesh"). Effective and efficient as they are, Police will continue to face significant challenges in counter-terrorism efforts due to wide-ranging developments in domestic politics, as well as regional and international settings.

COMMENTARY

SINCE THE beginning of 2019, the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) has made vital arrests to foil planned attacks by individuals, both local and foreign, some of whom have pledged loyalty to Islamic State (IS, also known by its Arabic tag Daesh).

The individuals caught were affiliated with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Maute Group, Royal Sulu Force (RSF), Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) and the Muslim Brotherhood Al Ikhwanul Muslimin. Domestic, regional and international conditions appear to have heightened the challenge of terrorism in Malaysia.

The Struggles Within

Domestically, in the face of increasing Islamic conservatism at home, the new Pakatan Harapan (PH) government in Malaysia faces challenges of navigating a complex political, social and security terrain when it comes to Islam.

PH's response was to promote an inclusive form of Islam through three pillars: '*rahmatan lil alamin*' (compassion for all); '*maqasid syariah*' (interests of the greater

good, including that of a multiracial society); and '*manhaj Malizi*' (the Malaysian approach of being appropriate to the local context).

This approach of a more inclusive Islam has been compared to previous frameworks under Barisan Nasional (BN) such as the '*Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Islam*' (Inculcation of Islamic Values) under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, '*Islam Hadhari*' (Civilisational Islam) under Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and '*Wasatiyyah*' (The Middle Way) under Prime Minister Najib Razak and does not detract significantly.

Internationally, Malaysia's foreign policy under the PH administration remains consistent in its support for the Islamic 'ummah' narrative that first became pronounced under the first Mahathir administration (1981 to 2003).

Further Politicisation

The PH administration has already seen several flashpoints in the encounter between conservative and a more inclusive Islam, with conservative forces gaining the upper hand.

In June 2018, as part of the PH government's reform process, the Group of 25 (G25), an assembly of former high-ranking bureaucrats, judges, ambassadors and scholars of the Muslim faith, recommended a review of the role of JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia/Islamic Advancement Department of Malaysia).

JAKIM, the federal-level agency organising and regulating Islamic societal life, is seen as the face of bureaucratic Islam, and not often in a complimentary light by adherents of a more inclusive Islam. To date, the status quo remains.

The PH government also suffered embarrassment when it had to reverse two international treaties that it agreed to, in the face of a conservative backlash. Malaysia, under second-time Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, reversed its decisions to ratify the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Who Were Arrested

Between 2 and 9 February 2019, nine terror suspects were arrested, including Egyptians and Tunisians, in the Klang Valley of Peninsular Malaysia, and Serian, Sarawak. The Tunisians were said to be members of Ansar Al Shariah Al Tunisia. The Egyptians were members of Al Ikhwanul Muslimin who functioned as facilitators to secure lodging, logistics and jobs, including buying air tickets for members.

Two of the Egyptians were students from institutions of higher education in Malaysia, and the others were religious and Arabic teachers. The Malaysian suspects were charged with terror offences relating to facilitating the movement and transit of foreign fighters. The Egyptian man arrested in Serian, Sarawak, posed as a restaurateur and had married a local widow.

March 2019 saw the arrest of 12 Filipinos believed to be members of the outlawed ASG, Maute Group and RSF, as well as a Malaysian in Sabah. Four of the suspects

were from Maute Group and were involved in the Marawi conflict in the southern Philippines in 2017. Two of those detained were members of the RSF who were responsible for the attacks in Sabah's Lahad Datu and Semporna in 2013.

In another incident, a 20-year-old Rohingya refugee who was working in Peninsular Malaysia as a waiter was arrested. He admitted that he supported ARSA and planned to attack the Myanmar Embassy in Kuala Lumpur.

Tactical Convergence?

Malaysia's new Inspector General of Police (IGP) Abdul Hamid Bador commented that an Islamist "wolf pack" was preparing to strike during the first week of Ramadan (May 2019) to avenge the death of Muslim fireman Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim.

Adib, the fireman, was injured in an emergency response call from the Sri Mariamman Temple in Seafeld in Selangor on 27 November 2018; he later succumbed to his injuries and died. Hindu activists were resisting the closure of the temple by local authorities and violence had occurred. Adib's death became the subject of an inquest and has been used by several conservative Islamic groups to portray that Islam is under siege in Malaysia.

The IGP also raised serious concerns about two members of the wolf pack, Muhammad Syazani and Muhammad Nurul Amin. They had gone for bomb-making training in Jogjakarta in 2018 conducted by JAD. According to intelligence sources as reported in the news, Syazani and Nurul Amin managed to produce the same type of explosives in their homes as used in the Surabaya bombings of 2018.

These developments point to possible signs of coordination, if not tactical convergence, between JAD and Malaysian terrorist cells. News reports claim they appeared to be targetting non-Muslim houses of worship, entertainment spots and four high-profile personalities during the fasting month of Ramadan. The groups involved had also claimed that their primary objective was to avenge the death of fireman Adib.

'Near Enemy' and 'Far Enemy'

The Malaysian terrorist cells seem sympathetic to the doctrine of 'near enemy' (Muslim regimes they regard as "apostates"). This jihadi concept is once again potent among Indonesian terrorist groups in contrast to the idea of 'far enemy' (the US and the West) that was used by Osama bin Laden calling for the deaths of US civilians and its allies. The number of 'far enemy' attacks in recent years has paled in comparison to the number of attacks on the 'near enemy' (the Indonesian state and its agency, in particular, the police force).

The RMP has been effective and efficient in heading off terrorist threats in Malaysia. Since February 2013, it has arrested a total of 488 militants, and the Counter-Terrorism unit of the police has thwarted 25 terror plots in Malaysia.

However, unfavourable domestic, regional and international developments will continue to challenge the RMP. Domestically, the authorities have to steer sensitively amid the growing narrative among sections of the Muslim community of an Islam under

siege, the need for Muslims to reject secularism, and to oppose those governments that promote liberalism, secularism and pluralism.

Kevin Fernandez from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan and Greg Lopez from Murdoch University, Perth are involved in a research project to understand radicalisation and violent extremism in Malaysia. They contributed this to RSIS Commentary.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg