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The Case of Imran Kassim: What Does It Tell Us?

By Amalina Abdul Nasir and Ahmad Helmi Hasbi

SYNOPSIS

The recent prosecution of 36-year-old Imran Kassim on terrorism financing charges invoked Singapore's Terrorism (Suppression of Financing) Act (TSOFA) for the first time. The public interest in his trial comments provides a timely reminder that in the wider context of fighting terrorism, counter-ideology efforts to protect Singapore's racial and religious harmony remain a work in progress.

COMMENTARY

IN 2002, Singapore's legal books introduced the Terrorism (Suppression of Financing) Act or TSOFA. Imran Kassim was the first individual charged under TSOFA in Singapore, and the second to be convicted under the law.

Ahmed Hussein Abdul Kadir Sheikh Uduman was the first man to be convicted for terrorism financing in October 2019 in close court. Imran's case was the first trial of its kind to be held in an open court. His rejection of Singapore law during the trial has caught public attention, with questions subsequently emerging on what can be done to further curb such extremist views to protect harmony in Singapore's multi-racial and religious setting.

Imran Kassim's Rejection of Singapore Law

Radicals arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA) have shown support for Islamic State (IS) by harbouring intentions to travel to Syria to fight in the so-called jihad there, propagating IS' materials online, and gathering support online for the terrorist group. As Imran and Ahmed's cases have illustrated, providing monetary assistance has become another means of showing pro-IS support.

Imran channelled S\$450 overseas for the publication of IS propaganda. He had erased all possible traces of his communication and evidence of the money transfer to evade detection from local authorities.

During his trial, Imran explicitly made clear his non-recognition of Singapore law, and the primacy of Syariah (Islamic) law in guiding his actions. Imran has now been convicted and will spend 33 months in jail.

Managing Muslim Identity in Today's Cosmopolitan World

According to Islamic tradition, Imran's assertion to only recognise Syariah law is flawed. Rejection of other forms of law and systems is heavily propagated by IS. This binary vision reduces the world to a black-and-white or 'us-versus-them' landscape; it is based on a heavily distorted version of Muslims being under Syariah rule.

Such extremist thinking rejects other important Islamic perspectives, where Islam enjoins its adherents to embrace diversity. Historical empirical evidence shows that Muslims have had no problem living under non-Muslim rule.

For instance, during the early period of Islam, many companions of the Prophet resided in Abyssinia, under the rule of a Christian king. It was an act which informed generations of jurisprudential specialists on the legality of Muslims to live in non-Muslim societies.

In another example, 9th century scholars like Al-Shafi'i (d.820) permitted Muslims to reside under the administration of a non-Muslim. Minimally, Muslims must be able to manifest their *wajibat-al-din* (duties of religion) which is commonly known as acts of private worship such as the daily prayer and fasting in the month of Ramadan.

Another consideration was the principle of peace (*aman*) in the host country. To that end, most jurists within classical Islamic thought agree that Muslims must abide by the law of the host country on the principle of *aman*.

Extremists like Imran reject man-made laws and consider them as concepts adopted from the West. Such opinions exhibit a feeble understanding of Islamic thought. Modern-day, respected jurists like Pakistani Mahmood Ghazi contend that as long as "man-made" laws establish justice and human rights, they can be regarded as Islamic.

Counter-Ideology: Efforts on The Ground

In Singapore, various alternative and counter-narrative initiatives have been taking place to reach every level of the community. Weekly Friday sermons prepared by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) often touch on related themes such as "the need to contextualise the religion in today's modern world".

Education and outreach programmes such as the "Being a Muslim in Singapore" series are organised by local mosques. This series aims to equip Muslims with the religious understanding of how to live in a secular state without compromising the principles of Islam.

The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), which is involved in the religious counselling of detainees, also launched the Awareness Programme for Youths in 2018, which focuses on the practice of Islam in a plural society.

The community is also seeing a rise in alternative ways to reach groups susceptible to online radicalisation by accredited religious clerics. Case in point is the Asatizah Youth Network, a group of 30 young religious clerics, who are trained to utilise social media platforms to reach out to youth.

These clerics discuss and refute distorted extremist ideologies online through creative ways that appeal to their targeted audience. Alternative narratives are also conveyed through offline pop-up events, online interactive video-logs and BuzzFeed-like articles.

Since it was first set up in 2017, it has been able to amplify the profile of local religious clerics within the community and increase the public's confidence to turn to them for religious guidance vis-à-vis online extremist clerics, who propagate exclusivist teachings that are not suitable in Singapore's multi-racial and religious context.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Distortions of Islamic jurisprudence and governance such as that held by Imran must be debunked rigorously. The religious and community leaders must continue to seek new and innovative ways to transmit the right understanding of Islam and values of religious tolerance and moderation to the Muslim community.

For example, sermons and education and outreach programmes must continue to be dynamic and able to reach different community segments via various modalities and languages. The day-to-day lived reality of local Muslims, based on responsible citizenry, tolerance and moderation, is the context which must remain at the front and centre of such initiatives.

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