

GNET-CENS Workshop

The Fusion of Offline and Online Interventions against Extremism in the Philippines

Zoom, Wednesday, 16 December 2020, 16:00-17:30 (Singapore)

The Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) is an academic research initiative backed by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), and convened by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London. CENS organised and facilitated this event as a GNET core member.

Summary

The Workshop discussed interventions made by civil society and non-government organisations for Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) in the Philippines. There was consensus among speakers that while online interactions facilitate radicalisation and recruitment, offline interactions remain the most important factor behind violent extremism in Mindanao. Our select list of participants brought a wealth of knowledge and experience to the discussion, which proved engaging and seemed likely to produce further conversations and potential collaborations moving forward.

Speakers

- **Kathline Tolosa**, Senior Program Officer, The Asia Foundation, Philippines
- **Exan Sharief**, Country Director, Equal Access International, Philippines
- **Justin Richmond**, Founder and Executive Director, impl.Project, United States
- **Joseph Franco**, Research Fellow, CENS, RSIS, Singapore

Participants

- **Shashi Jayakumar**, Senior Fellow and Head, CENS, RSIS, Singapore
- **Raffaello Pantucci**, Senior Fellow, ICPVTR, RSIS, Singapore
- **Noor Huda Ismail**, Visiting Fellow, RSIS, Singapore
- **M. Faizal Bin Abdul Rahman**, Research Fellow, CENS, RSIS, Singapore
- **Jennifer Yang Hui**, Associate Research Fellow, CENS, RSIS, Singapore
- **Yasmira Moner**, Acting Director, IPDM, MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology, Philippines
- **Eliseo Mercado**, Senior Policy Adviser, Institute for Autonomy and Governance, Philippines
- **Nass Dunding**, Chair of Programs and Operations, Bangsamoro Youth Commission, Philippines
- **Nassef Manabilang Adiong**, Assistant Professor of Islam and IR, University of the Philippines-Diliman

- **Parminder Singh**, Assistant Director, National Security Coordination Secretariat, Singapore
- **Juhi Ahuja**, Asia-Pacific Lead, Counterterrorism & Dangerous Orgs, Facebook, Singapore

Moderator

- **Cameron Sumpter**, Research Fellow, CENS, RSIS, Singapore

Presentations

Kathline Tolosa, *Senior Program Officer, The Asia Foundation (TAF), Philippines*

Kathline highlighted the use of hope-based narratives for PCVE by local governments engaged by TAF in Mindanao.

In the Philippines, especially among residents of rural and/or conflict-affected areas (CAAs) in Mindanao, Facebook is synonymous with and practically indistinguishable from the internet. As community quarantines remained in place, local government officials and their constituents have increasingly relied on social media to sustain their interactions.

The pandemic has also amplified pre-existing issues such as the dearth of government services provided to CAAs in Mindanao. Jihadist propaganda has seized on the narrative that the government has left communities in Mindanao to fend for themselves.

In response, TAF has pushed for the implementation of digital literacy campaigns to be spearheaded by local government units (LGUs). LGUs are trained to go beyond counter-narratives or 'fear-based' communications, which highlight the threat posed by violent extremists. Instead, there is emphasis on 'hope-based' communications that highlight solutions and cooperation with LGUs.

In conclusion, offline follow-through is important to build on hope-based messaging strategies. Real improvements to quality of life is important—LGUs cannot simply "meme or TikTok their way out" of their problems.

Exan Sharief, *Country Director, Equal Access International (EAI), Philippines*

Exan discussed the cross-platform PCVE messaging strategy employed by EAI in Mindanao, which includes the use of transistor radio networks and social media content.

EAI programmes in Mindanao are meant to create positive 'adaptive community change', especially among CAAs. It contributes to the goal of peacebuilding in Mindanao, particularly the transition to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

For the EAI, limitations and constraints to the flow of information can exacerbate conflict. Social media can lead to echo chambers, with violent extremist organisations often

structuring their narratives into something akin to a monologue. In response, EAI promotes dialogue among the youth in Mindanao to disseminate the messages of diversity and inclusion.

Recognising the patchy nature of internet connectivity in Mindanao, EAI utilises cross-platform messaging. This includes broadcasting content on radio stations and establishing transistor radio operators' groups to reach communities. On the digital side, EAI runs 'tech camps' to train youth leaders in skills needed for online/social media content creation and distribution.

Justin Richmond, *Founder and Executive Director, impl.Project, United States*

Justin outlined how impl.Project uses technology-based 'last-mile' data collection to identify and assist communities vulnerable to violent extremist recruitment.

impl.Project differentiated itself from other PCVE-related organisations in the Philippines through its emphasis on 'last-mile' data collection. Ongoing studies by impl.Project reveal that membership in violent extremist organisations, particularly in the provinces of Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur, are often motivated by socioeconomic deprivation or resistance to the predatory practices of local government officials.

Across Mindanao, impl.Project staff were able to conduct wide-ranging surveys. Locally hired enumerators using technology developed by impl.Project engaged 25,000 respondents compiling what was likely the largest database of CAA residents in Central Mindanao. Based on impl.Project data, the lack of livelihood opportunities act as the primary driver for recruitment into violent extremist organisations.

During the 2017 Battle for Marawi, impl.Project determined that the bulk of the militant force that occupied the city for five months were comprised of young men, aged 14-19. They hailed from the town of Piagapo, an impoverished municipality adjacent to the Islamic City of Marawi.

Joseph Franco, *Research Fellow, CENS, RSIS, Singapore*

Joseph outlined how the Philippine military's PCVE messaging have triggered polarisation and led to public backlash.

PCVE by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in social media suggests continuity with offline counterinsurgency propaganda. A cursory look at Facebook pages associated with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) highlights ad hoc fusions of offline and online efforts--aviators would share videos of leaflet drops, while civil relations personnel would livestream AM radio broadcasts.

However, there are apparent limits to innovation. There is a wholesale replication of counterinsurgency themes. Content made targeting communist insurgents are misapplied against jihadist-inspired groups. Aesthetically, content that can be attributed to pro-

government sources takes on a trolling character, as seen in botched attempts at image/photo manipulation and falsely 'red-tagging' famous celebrities as communist sympathisers.

There is also rampant misunderstanding among military personnel regarding social media platform usage policies. Some military and law enforcement personnel would use their own personal social media accounts to report inappropriate content or to organise mass reporting. Such initiatives, however well intentioned, can be miscategorised as 'brigading' or a form of coordinated, inauthentic behaviour by platforms such as Facebook.

Discussion

Question:

How are programme outcomes evaluated?

Responses:

The PCVE initiatives presented during the online workshop are meant to elicit behavioural change. In some cases, changes in communities and/or target audiences only manifest after five years or more. This may be at odds with funding institutions who require immediate feedback. In the interim, PCVE programmes may use annual 'method reviews', while gathering feedback for long-term, multi-year measures of effectiveness/outcomes.

When it comes to the effectiveness of counter-narratives, CVE initiatives in Mindanao monitor the themes and messages being pushed by threat groups. As an example, Mindanao-based VE groups previously emphasised the narrative of historical injustices against the Bangsamoro. There are now indicators of messaging suffused by more contemporary political concerns (i.e. the adverse effect of community quarantines/lockdowns).

Question:

What are the proxy indicators used to assess PCVE programmes?

For some CVE organisations, measures of effectiveness may be ascertained using proxy indicators. At the individual-level, one measure of effectiveness used to identify positive change is whether CVE programme recipients have expanded their peer networks away from VE group recruiters and sympathisers. In one example, the existence of a formal PCVE plan was once considered a positive indicator of an effective policy intervention. It was later determined that a more accurate indicator of policy buy-in was whether local governments allocate a budget for PCVE-related activities.

Question:

Are there regional alliances among Southeast Asian militants?

Responses:

There seems to be no strong evidence to suggest the existence of “orchestrated social networks”. However, there are loose informal networks that share content written in Bahasa and/or Arabic. Some of these foreign VE content can be translated ad hoc into the various Mindanao languages.

Question:

What were the languages used in the Philippines by VE groups and/or PCVE practitioners? Filipino?

Responses:

Content used in some PCVE messaging are often translated into other Mindanao languages and not just the national language (Filipino). Themes, messages and actual materials may be centrally produced but adapted to local contexts by either in-house staff or grassroots volunteers.

Question:

One recurring issue in the presentations is how bad online governance can create a permissive milieu for VE group recruitment and radicalisation efforts. What can be done to address bad online governance in the context of PCVE?

Responses:

Facebook’s takedown of trolling networks controlled by the Philippine military is symptomatic of the lack of transparency when it comes to social media-based counter-narratives. There are examples of gender-sensitive, nuanced content pushed by personalities linked to the security sector. However, lack of clarity and transparency of the Philippine security services’ social media policy can lead to doxxing, trolling, and libellous content aimed at legitimate activists.

Question:

What plays a larger role/or comes first, offline or online radicalisation?

Responses:

Youths often stumble upon VE content due to curiosity. Given the lack of reliable wireless internet, sharing of jihadist videos entail passing around physical thumb drives within and across peer groups. In one estimate, ninety percent of violent extremist group members in Mindanao are radicalised and recruited offline. Once recruited, follow-up indoctrination can

happen offline. A small minority (less than 10 percent) of violent extremists online play an “outsized” role, which gives the appearance of a pervasive online presence. University-educated VE group members are usually the most active online.

There should also be emphasis not just on counter-narratives but also on media literacy. Taking down content often elicits resistance from Filipinos and may lead to anti-government sentiment. It could be more effective in the long run to ensure that groups vulnerable to VE recruitment would be able to identify illicit content on their own. It must be stressed that adversary groups also calibrate their messaging, which complicates a takedown-heavy approach. This necessitates increasing the resilience of potential recruits from VE propaganda.

Question:

What are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic to violent extremist groups in Mindanao?

Responses:

The pandemic and the subsequent mishandling of the government responses has only exacerbated dysfunction. Desperate people become even more desperate, and some government agencies have become more unresponsive. This could further incentivise membership and recruitment into violent extremist groups.

At the same time, violent extremists have also been adversely affected by the pandemic. Subject to movement restrictions facing the wider population, there have been no “major movements” among violent extremists in terms of attacks. The pandemic appears to have given violent extremist groups space for a strategic pause to rest and refit. It is similar to the dynamic that played out after the 2017 Battle for Marawi, where IS-inspired groups took heavy losses, which decreased their operational tempo.

Question:

What is the best way to detect the presence of violent extremist groups online?

Responses:

Offline tips lead to online tracking. In Mindanao, would-be recruits provided the best information to PCVE practitioners on the online presence of violent extremist groups. Youths would volunteer to share information (i.e. group chat names, passcodes). This allows PCVE practitioners to observe jihadist chat groups either on platforms like Facebook, or messaging apps such as Telegram or WhatsApp.

However, it was pointed out that given the anonymous nature of some messaging apps, it is hard to tell who is really part of an active operational cell. There are some instances that an individual claiming to be a VE group member are just fan boys, pretending to be fighters based in Mindanao. The ability of tech companies and platforms to take down content have also affected open source investigations of VE groups.