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Countering Religious Extremism: The Need for Regional Collaboration

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

In this digital age, where information flows seamlessly across borders, the interplay between misinformation, disinformation, hate speeches, hoaxes, and violent extremism demands our attention. This intricate nexus is not just theoretical; it played a major role in the harrowing journeys of individuals like Rullie Rian Zeke and Ulfah Andayani Saleh and their children. Their story reflects the broader challenges facing our interconnected world and emphasises the critical need for regional collaboration in fighting transnational terrorism.

COMMENTARY

Rullie Rian Zeke and Ulfah Andayani Saleh, an Indonesian Muslim-convert couple, found themselves entangled in a web of extremist ideologies. Exposure to distressing images of Muslims being oppressed by American soldiers fuelled in them a deep sense of victimisation and injustice, laying the groundwork for their radicalisation in the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) network in Makassar around 2014.

This paved the way for their allegiance to ISIS in 2016, which illustrated the profound impact of misinformation on vulnerable individuals susceptible to extremist ideologies. An attempt to join ISIS in Syria was thwarted by Turkish authorities in 2017 and they were subsequently deported. Back in Indonesia, the couple underwent rehabilitation but only briefly, raising concerns when they moved to Makassar, Sulawesi, from whence the authorities lost contact with them.

The Perceived Honour of Martyrdom

Zeke and Saleh played a direct role in the bombing of the Jolo Cathedral in the Philippines in 2019. Interviews with Zeke's friends who were arrested by Detachment 88, Indonesia's elite counterterrorism unit, suggest that his motive for the suicide bombing was driven by a desire to attain the perceived honour of martyrdom, and to seek intercession in the afterlife. It also stemmed from his concern for what he viewed as a predominantly nominal Islamic identity within his own family and the undesirable presence of non-Muslims.

Originally a convert from Manado, North Sulawesi, among a few provinces in Indonesia where Christianity is a majority religion, Zeke had aspired to foster a more devout Islamic lifestyle within his family. A similar sentiment resonated in Saleh's family, as they too were converts seeking a more Islamic way of life through learning.

Unfortunately, their earnest pursuit of religious knowledge took a fateful turn when they came across a misguided but charismatic local *ustad* – a religious teacher – who had undergone military training in Afghanistan. This *ustad* systematically manipulated the beliefs of both Zeke and Saleh's families. Zeke contemplated migrating to Syria but influenced by the *ustad*, who discouraged suicide bombings in Indonesia, citing it as an unsuitable ground for jihad, Zeke sold his house to fund a move to the Philippines.

The misinformation that played a pivotal role in the radicalisation of Zeke and Saleh was deeply rooted in the misinterpretation of Quranic verses, which reinforced their distorted understanding of Islam and drove them towards a path of extremism and violence. The narrative underscores the perilous consequences of misinformation, particularly when it emanates from religious figures who exploit their authority to propagate extremist ideologies.

The Radicalisation of the Children

The consequences of misinformation that drastically changed the lives of Zeke and Saleh extended to their children, adding a complex layer to the issue of transnational terrorism.

The first son, Yusuf, went to Turkey to fight alongside ISIS. His current whereabouts is unknown. The elder daughter, Cici, remained in Sabah, Malaysia, with her husband who was an Abu Sayyaf bomb maker. They later entered Indonesia and went on to Sulu in South Philippines under the protection of the Sawajdan Group, which was affiliated with ISIS and Abu Sayyaf. Cici's husband died in a gun battle in 2020.

The younger daughter, Ainun Pretty Amelia, stayed with the family in Makassar and was affiliated to Jamaah Anshorut Daulah (JAD). Ahmad Ibrahim, the younger son was radicalised by his parents and joined the Sawadjan Group in Sulu in 2018.

Another daughter, Aisyah Rullie Ryan, attempted to move to Syria with her parents when she was eight. She was forced into marriage with a militant fighter from Abu Sayyaf. Captured in a gun battle in 2021, she is undergoing de-radicalisation.

Zaenab Khairunnisa Idham, the youngest daughter at one year old, was kept at Sentra Handayani, a rehabilitation centre, underscoring the challenges faced in deradicalisation efforts and the need for a clearer understanding of the activities of the radicalised.

Countering Extremist Narratives

In the face of the growing transnational threat of terrorism and the alarming spread of extremist ideologies, the narrative of the Zeke family highlights the immediate need for collaborative efforts within ASEAN. To build a secure and people-centred ASEAN Community, regional leaders must give priority to a unified response; recognising the significance of engaging diverse stakeholders, including women and youth, as emphasised by the relevant ASEAN Plan of Action (2018-2025).

One critical aspect of this regional collaboration could involve challenging extremist narratives through collaborative counter-narrative campaigns. These campaigns should leverage diverse communication channels to challenge extremist views and to promote inclusivity, tolerance, and other values against radicalisation. Engaging with various segments of society, especially women and youth, these campaigns should aim to reshape the narrative landscape and foster a collective rejection of extremist ideologies.

In responding to this imperative, strategic communication workshops have been curated and conducted in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia by the author of this paper. These workshops, which are supported by the European Union's Strive Asia Project and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), aim to empower governments and civil society activists involved in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) initiatives. The goal of these workshops is to equip participants with the tools to counter extremist narratives effectively and to promote alternative perspectives that resonate with the shared values of the ASEAN Community.

Ensuring the sustainability of the networks established through these workshops is paramount. The incorporation of these networks into the framework of Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) mechanisms within ASEAN countries enhances their effectiveness. This proactive approach enables timely responses to emerging threats,

emphasising the importance of information-sharing and collaborative efforts in preventing the spread of extremist ideologies.

Global NGO Collaboration

Collaboration with global non-governmental organisations (NGOs) further amplifies the impact of regional initiatives. Nonviolent Peaceforce, a pioneering organisation in the field, leads in the "From Silo to Synergy" campaign. This initiative emphasises various projects, including "Border to Border Together" (Sabah and Sulu initiatives), "From Central to Peripheral: Supporting Communities at the Border", and mapping women in violent extremism.

At the heart of this collaborative effort is the core concept of human values. Rooted in the principles of tolerance, empathy, and shared humanity, these values serve as a unifying force against extremist ideologies. By emphasising the importance of human values, the initiative seeks to fortify and extend the influence of EWER efforts across the region.

The success of these collaborative endeavours hinges on the commitment of ASEAN Member States to close collaboration, resource sharing, and collective action. As the ASEAN Community faces the multifaceted challenges posed by terrorism, the imperative for regional collaboration becomes increasingly clear. It is a collective call to action – a commitment to build a safer, more resilient ASEAN that stands united against all forms of extremism.

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