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## **Examining the Ulu Tiram Attack Through the Lens of Collective Action Theory**

*By Raneeta Mutiara*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The attack on the police station in Ulu Tiram, Johor Bahru, on 17 May 2024 has woken us from our complacency concerning terrorist activities in the region. The evidence collected from the attack is congruent with analyses in ongoing research about collective action theory and violent extremism.*

### **COMMENTARY**

About a month after the attack on a police station in Ulu Tiram, Johor Bahru, on 17 May 2024, the parents and three siblings of the attacker, 21-year-old Radin Luqman, were charged at the Johor Bahru Sessions Court for their involvement in terrorism-related activities. Radin's father was charged with the propagation of violent ideology (associated with Islamic State) to family members. His mother and two sisters were charged with concealing information about the family's subscription to violent extremism.

This case underscores the psychological appeal of radical ideology that leads to violent extremism. Scholars from various disciplines studying ideology-driven terrorism have developed frameworks to comprehend radicalisation in individuals and groups, including the motivating factors, catalysts, and inhibitors. Notwithstanding their multiple efforts, no single scientific model can explain all cases of radicalisation.

This is complicated by the fact that radicalisation, which occurs inside the human mind, is not the only impetus for terrorism. For instance, the level of empowerment and the time involved are among the essential requirements for violent thoughts to progress to terror attacks. Since violent extremism and its intersection with terrorism transcend the psychological boundary, employing models that integrate interdisciplinary angles is needed in the study of radicalisation.

## Collective Action Theory and Terrorism

The *collective action* model is examined to find plausible explanations for the Ulu Tiram attack. This model incorporates psychology, sociology, economy, and political science disciplines to portray human behaviours, mainly the ones that are collectively shared. The Ulu Tiram attack involves the sharing, within the context of family, the collective attitudes of pro-Islamic caliphate ideology inherent in Islamic State (IS) teachings.

Emeritus Professor in Sociology, Anthony Oberschall, has previously correlated acts of terrorism with the four forces of collective action: dissatisfaction, frustration, the ability to organise, and political opportunity. In other words, there should be elements of discontentment, unaddressed grievances, capacity to organise, and the right political mood for violent thoughts to transpire into violent actions.

Recognising that terrorism can be fueled by ideology provides room to detach these four variables from a person and attach them to the entity from which the ideology is born. Hence, examining the violent extremism in the Ulu Tiram case can be done by positioning IS as an active actor who propels such collective action among the terrorist suspects.

The ideology of IS has played a significant role in inciting dissatisfaction among different groups of people by taking advantage of socioeconomic concerns. It was reported that Radin Luqman and his siblings did not complete their education, and the family lived in isolation from the community. Perceived marginalisation and exclusion allow IS radical ideology to penetrate with its enticing notions of fraternity and belonging.

IS then feeds on such dissatisfaction and grows it into frustration. The process is usually marked by an inclination toward othering others and is fortified by IS teaching of *tauhid* versus *shirk*, which refers to believers versus nonbelievers. These two concepts have proven influential in creating polarising views among IS followers, giving them justification to exclude, judge, and hurt those whom they deem as deviants.

A book on *tauhid* and *shirk* written by an Indonesian radical cleric was found in Radin Luqman's home and is believed to serve as a guide on IS philosophy for his family. The book promotes the establishment of pan-Islamism as an alternative to the current secular Malaysian government, which is perceived to be discriminating and corrupt. The frustration from the perceived injustice and the utopian image of an Islamic state likely caused the Luqman family's animosity toward the incumbent government and its state apparatus.

It is also evident that IS had assisted Radin Luqman and his family in building their capacity to conduct terrorism. Armed with a machete and a bulletproof vest, Radin Luqman killed two policemen at the Ulu Tiram police station. His family also kept several weapons at home and an external hard disk containing materials related to the IS movement, typically covering topics such as the making of improvised explosive devices, handling of firearms, and execution of various kinds of attacks.

Last, but not least, Israel's destruction of Gaza which has been ongoing since October 2023, might have generated a conducive space for IS to manipulate the political mood in Radin Luqman's family, by framing the Malaysian authorities' non-violent and diplomatic approach to the matter as indifference. This might have helped to justify the use of terrorism.

### **Recommendations for Singapore's Security**

Following the arrest of Radin and his family, Malaysian authorities took into custody eight individuals to prevent the possibility of terrorist threats against the country's King and Prime Minister. In his response to the Ulu Tiram attack, Singapore's Home Affairs and Law Minister, K. Shanmugam, mentioned the fact that IS' violent ideology echoes well in the region and is propagated primarily by its online audience. He also expressed concern about how the recent incident may impact Singapore's security landscape, given the proximity between the two countries.

A pressing question that arises is: what makes IS' violent ideology so attractive in this part of Southeast Asia? Discerning the application of collective action theory on how IS creates dissatisfaction, frustration, capacity, and access among its followers is insufficient to explain its resonance in the region. Is there an overlooked feature underpinning IS' strategies?

The collective action *problem*, which is concomitant with the collective action theory, may shed some light on the issue. This idea was introduced in the 1960s by an American political scientist, Mancur Olson, who argued that there must be *incentives* to sustain human collective behaviours and actions. The incentives may take the form of rewards or penalties imposed on everyone in a group.

Based on this premise, it is important to understand the typology of incentives provided by IS and the nature of the rewards it provides, and the penalties it enforces. Understanding the present psychological state of the local communities, including their collective standpoints and desirable objectives, is therefore critical in safeguarding Singapore's security.

Applying these approaches would help Singapore authorities to identify IS strategies and potentially block the transfer of their incentives to the local communities. It is also crucial to build community resilience through education, socialisation, and partnerships as part of the effort to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE). Finally, community-centred policies that benefit and empower people in political and socioeconomic domains would nullify the lure of radical ideologies, strengthening P/CVE efforts in the nation and the region.

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*Raneeta Mutiara is an Associate Faculty member in the Public Safety and Security (PSS) Programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS). Her research interests include religiopolitical movements and countering violent extremism in Southeast Asia.*

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