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The Rise of the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM)

Suicide Terrorism in the Philippines

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ON 29-30 June 2006, the Philippine National Police (PNP) conducted a series of high profile anti-terrorism drills in Metro Manila due to the reported threats emanating from various terrorist groups. Among the groups that purportedly planned to wreak havoc, the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM), caught the vigilant ire of law enforcement authorities because of its intent to pursue suicide terrorism. Based on his Tactical Interrogation Report, Ahmad Santos (Hilarion del Rosario Santos III) confessed that the RSM has trained hard core suicide terrorists aiming not only to bomb business centers, government buildings, shopping malls, transportation facilities and the American embassy in Manila but also to allegedly assassinate President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and some American nationals.

The Genesis of the RSM

Some writers have traced the origin of the RSM to the Balik Islam (Return to Islam) movement. While founding members of the RSM have associated themselves with the Balik Islam, it is careless to associate Balik Islam with RSM – it is like associating Islam with terrorism.

Started in the 1970s, Balik Islam is a legitimate organisation of at least 200,000 Christian converts to the Islamic faith. Followers prefer to be called reverts based on the belief that Islam was the original religion of the Philippines. The RSM, organized only in 2001, represents a very minuscule fraction of reverts.

Though Santos was the known RSM commander, the group was founded with the leading role of Sheik Omar Lavilla (Rueben Lavilla). With the arrest of Santos on 26 October 2005, Lavilla is now believed to be running the daily operation of the RSM. Lavilla has called RSM members as “Urban Mujahideens”.

During his interrogation, Santos admitted to have organized in 2001 a group of 20 radical Muslim reverts to undergo “*jihad* trainings” in a camp in Anda, Pangasinan of Central Luzon. Santos and Lavilla originally called this group *Haraka* or *Harakat*, which literally means “the movement”. General Rodolfo “Boogie” Mendoza, the father of counter-terrorism investigation in the Philippines, says that “the name Rajah Solaiman Movement was initially suggested by Ahmad Santos as a joke but it was eventually adopted”. The RSM was used in honour of the first Muslim ruler of Manila. RSM aims for the Islamisation of the entire

Philippines.

The RSM was estimated to have a membership of 50-100 “hard core activists”. If we define “hard core activists” to mean individuals who have the intent and capability to wage terrorism, RSM membership is not more than 30 members. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) identifies only 27 active members of the RSM to date. These active members are reported to have been conducting recruitment drives in Luzon and in the Visayas. Though small at present, the RSM draws its strength from its alleged continuing collaboration with like-minded terrorist groups like the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and the Al Qaeda.

RSM links with ASG, JI and Al Qaeda

The RSM has established ties with the ASG. At the time of his arrest in October 2005, Santos served as the Chief of the ASG Media Bureau. Prior to that, ASG leader Khadafy Janjalani reportedly gave the RSM the equivalent of about US\$200,000 for its initial operational activities in Manila. The RSM collaborated with the ASG in the 2004 Superferry 14 bombing and the 2005 Valentine’s Day bombings, which were reportedly planned as suicide missions.

The RSM also established links with JI. Santos confessed that he collaborated with Omar Patek, one of the key suspects in the 2002 Bali bombings, while hiding in Mindanao in early 2004. Patek allegedly gave the RSM an amount of P250,000 (US\$5,000) to be used in the foiled Ermita Plot. Ermita is a place in Manila frequented by foreign tourists. Santos admitted to having used this money to conduct surveillance operations in Ermita and to rent a house in Quezon City where he hid 600 kilos of explosive materials discovered by police and military authorities on 23 March 2005.

During its embryonic stage, the RSM reportedly established links with Al Qaeda. Santos confessed that the RSM “aided in training and giving shelter to the terrorists responsible in the September 11 terrorist attack”. General Mendoza’s paper on the RSM states: “The Al Qaeda pilots got their first training in Angeles City, Pampanga...But before leaving for the US, the pilots were said to have gone to the RSM training camp established by Ahmad Santos in their family property in Barangay Mal-Ong, Anda, Pangasinan.”

Jihad in the City: RSM and Suicide Terrorism

Santos stressed that though an RSM member was involved in the 2005 Valentine’s Day bombing, he strongly denied his personal involvement. He also denied his participation in the 2004 Superferry 14 bombing. But he admitted to having trained potential suicide bombers from the ranks of RSM hard core jihadists.

Santos and Lavilla started the training of suicide bombers as early as February 2002. Trainees were indoctrinated on the belief that “the greatest sacrifice is giving one’s life for Allah and Islam”. After a month of training, five RSM members reportedly took the *Shaheed* (Martyrdom Pledge) to undergo a suicide mission scheduled in May 2002. This mission allegedly aimed to assassinate President Arroyo with the use of a “truck bomb”. But the raid of RSM hideouts in Central Luzon that year halted the mission. The raid resulted in the death of one and the arrest of four potential suicide bombers.

In April 2004, the RSM revived the mission after seven different potential suicide bombers

took another *Shaheed*. But the mission was pre-empted as a result of the series of counter-terrorism operations conducted between May to June 2004. Out of the seven potential suicide bombers, two were arrested while another two were reportedly declared “inactive” because of intensified intelligence operations of the Philippine government. But the remaining three potential suicide bombers remain allegedly at large.

Countering the RSM: Ideological and Structural Strategies

Though the RSM may be the smallest among the terrorist groups operating in the Philippines, it has trained some suicide bombers to become “martyrs of the Islamic faith”, making the group a serious security challenge. The RSM has also penetrated some legitimate Balik Islam organizations to radicalise some of their members. Though Islam is undoubtedly a religion of peace, RSM’s radical interpretation of Islam makes the group an instrument of political violence .

Countering the radical and violent interpretation of Islam that romanticises suicide terrorism needs a strong counter-ideology. Though military and police approaches can effectively prevent political violence as a short-term remedy, a coherent counter-ideological strategy is imperative to provide a long-term cure to the misguided few who continuously venerate violence and terrorism. There is also a need to seriously address the structural root of discontent that produces individuals willing to offer their lives through violent means. Unless the Philippine government pays attention to structural factors that perpetuate the disillusionment and frustration of some people, there will be more individuals who will regrettably be lured by violent options.

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