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That Million-Dollar MSK Bounty: Some Pointers from the Past

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Any assessment of the impact of the recently announced million-dollar bounty on JI fugitive Mas Selamat Kastari must answer two key questions: Would such a policy be effective; would it be ethical? There are possible answers from the rewards policy during the Malayan Emergency of the 1950s.

THE RECENT announcement that a cash reward of \$1 million would be offered to anyone who provides information leading to the capture of escaped Jemaah Islamiyah fugitive Mas Selamat Kastari (MSK) has generated mixed reactions. The bounty offer – apparently originating from two unnamed businessmen – has been praised by some as a bold attempt to rekindle public assistance in locating the fugitive.

Conversely, skeptics warn that this initiative could ultimately erode the public spiritedness that is crucial to any healthy society. There are two key questions that come to mind in evaluating the million-dollar MSK bounty: First, are such rewards effective? Second, are they ethical? Possible answers to both questions can be inferred from the counter-terrorist campaign against the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) in the 1950s, better known as the Malayan Emergency.

Rewards as Psywar

While rewards for information were not unknown before the Emergency, it was in fact future BBC Director-General Hugh Carleton Greene (brother of the famous novelist Graham Greene), who, as Head Emergency Information Services in Malaya, was responsible for putting in place a comprehensive psychological warfare or “psywar” approach that included a rewards policy. Greene, who served in Malaya between 1950 and 1951, believed that psywar was not a silver bullet that could magically compel the CPM guerrillas to surrender. Psywar – of which rewards policy was only one component – would work only if the government was clearly winning – and was seen to be winning by both the Malayan public and the CPM leadership and rank and file.

Building on this, Greene developed his psywar philosophy of which two key components stood out:

the “fair treatment” of surrendered enemy personnel (SEPs) and rewards. Greene supported the idea that CPM guerrillas who *voluntarily* surrendered should not be prosecuted but rather “fairly treated” – while being milked for information on their former comrades. This was rather brave as at the time sentiment both within and outside government circles was that *all* guerrillas should be prosecuted. Nevertheless Greene stood his ground.

Hence while throughout the Emergency the government did not actually declare that SEPs would never be prosecuted, in effect none ever were. Furthermore, Greene ensured that leaflets containing photographs of apparently fairly treated, happy and healthy-looking SEPs were dropped on the jungle so as to reassure potential CPM waverers that the government could be trusted to treat them well if they surrendered too. The SEP “fair treatment” policy was to prove very important in building the image of the government as firm, but reasonable and trustworthy.

Bounty on Chin Peng

Against this wider policy backdrop, Greene revamped the old ad hoc rewards policy then in existence. Hence as an *added* inducement to surrender and become “fairly treated” SEPs, Greene secured large increases in the scale of rewards for information leading to the capture of guerrillas. In June 1951, for instance, the bounty on the head of Chin Peng, the CPM leader, was set at \$80,000 (eighty thousand Malayan dollars) for information or action leading to his capture, while the figures for ranking Communists and the rank and file were fixed at \$65,000 and \$2,500 respectively.

Shrewdly, Greene also sought to directly target the minds of the CPM rank and file and split them from the Communist leadership. Thus *half* the rates of rewards aimed at the public were offered to guerrillas who could bring in, or provide information leading to the capture of other Communists. The legendary High Commissioner General Sir Gerald Templer, after assuming power in February 1952, and flush with revenues from the Korean war rubber and tin boom, further raised the bounty on Chin Peng’s head to an astonishing \$250,000 if he was taken alive and \$125,000 if he was brought in dead.

As the 1950s progressed, against the wider backdrop of steadily and inexorably declining CPM operational fortunes, as well as the continuing and well-publicized “fair treatment-of-SEPs” policy, the rewards policy began to prove markedly effective. A well-known case was that of ‘Shorty’ Kuk, a senior CPM leader, who in Pahang in April 1953, was set upon by *his own bodyguards* after they had read Government reward leaflets.

By 1958, moreover, following the announcement of the liberal *Merdeka* Amnesty by the newly independent Malayan government under Tunku Abdul Rahman, the rewards policy played a key role in the two climactic mass CPM surrenders that fateful year. In south Perak, Chow Fong, a senior CPM official, helped secure the surrender of 118 guerrillas, earning a cool \$ 240,000. Then in South Johore, Hor Lung, a very senior CPM official, fearing the fate of Shorty Kuk, helped arrange 160 surrenders. Hor Lung not only earned \$247,000, he even used the money to fund a successful business in Singapore!

By the end of the 1950s it became clear that rewards policy - within a favourable political and strategic context and in tandem with other policy instruments – proved a potent psywar weapon in Malaya. But was this approach *ethical*? Certainly, many contemporary observers expressed significant uneasiness that CPM guerrillas who were caught were treated like murderers, while those who surrendered voluntarily were “treated like kings”.

One critic even scoffed that the Emergency was won by “‘bribing’ the Reds to give up”. Conversely, Greene’s view was always strictly utilitarian: whatever brought the Emergency to a swift end was ethically justifiable. Later the affable but shrewd Tunku, conceding that “on principle, of course Hor Lung should be hanged”, argued nevertheless that the government cannot always “stick strongly to principles”, and if “money can buy the end, we must use it”.

Implications

The key lesson of the Emergency is that rewards policy is unlikely to work in isolation – but in tandem with a favourable political and operational context and in conjunction with other policy instruments. What does this imply for the MSK case today? Two points suggest themselves.

First, in Singapore and for that matter Indonesia, the political and operational context is certainly favourable. The wider Muslim community in both countries remains dead set against the virulent Islamist ideology MSK stands for. Hence whether in Singapore or Indonesia, MSK is likely being sheltered by a small network of radical Islamist supporters. In this respect, a clearly articulated and publicized policy, on what will happen to those MSK supporters who may now decide to turn him in, must be developed by both governments.

In any collection of apparently hard-core supporters, it should be noted, there is always a chance that there will be those who are less ideologically committed than the rest - and hence susceptible to material blandishments like the lure of a cool million dollars. Human nature – as the CPM found out – is such. The question is whether such susceptible individuals will be given an updated version of “fair treatment” or amnesty? In short, the lure of the bounty aside, how else can they be “incentivized” to sell MSK out, bluntly speaking?

Second, creative and sensitive ways need to be found to enable such defecting supporters to be counselled, rehabilitated and convinced that they should devote at least part of the bounty for the wider good. This would be one way to mitigate the ethical concerns surrounding the latest reward announcement – a tried and proven psywar tactic that frankly should be given a chance to work.

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