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20 Years of JI: Role of Govt-Community Partnership

By Mohamed Bin Ali

SYNOPSIS

On the 20th anniversary of the discovery of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Singapore, it is timely to recount the learning points in government-community partnership in counter-terrorism rehabilitation.

COMMENTARY

IN DECEMBER 2001, Singapore uncovered the Al-Qaeda-linked regional terrorist organisation, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), operating in the country. Thirteen JI members were arrested for their plan to launch attacks in Singapore, with more arrests made in 2002.

Apart from the objective of immediately curbing JI activities, a softer approach was also undertaken to achieve the longer-term goal of enhancing relations between the Muslim community, the authorities and the wider Singaporean society. Why has this softer approach been taken? And what are the principles behind the government-community initiatives to effect a road map for rehabilitation and counter-extremism?

The JI Plan in Singapore

JI came to the attention of Southeast Asian governments after 9/11. The Singapore JI cell was part of a larger JI network that spanned several countries in Southeast Asia and extending to Australia.

It started out as an informal class on religion in the late 1980s under the leadership of a self-taught teacher Ibrahim Maidin. Gradually, JI evolved into a militant organisation due to the exposure of its leaders, including Ibrahim Maidin, to the jihad environment in Afghanistan during the Soviet-Afghan war.

Jl envisions the establishment of an Islamic state for a system of governance aligned to the tenets of Islam. In line with this ambition, Jl planned to create animosity and distrust between Muslim Malaysians and non-Muslim Singaporeans, thus precipitating communal strife that would unite the Muslims in Singapore and Malaysia. This, in Jl's plan, would ease the path for the establishment of a pan Islamic Caliphate in Southeast Asia.

To facilitate this aspiration, they planned to attack the water pipelines at the Causeway and represent these as acts of aggression by the Malaysian government to create tensions between Singapore and Malaysia.

They also recognised Singapore as allies and supporters of regimes perceived as unfriendly to Islam, particularly the United States and Israel. Towards this end, several sites of US interest were targeted.

For example, Jl planned to use truck bombs to attack the US and Israeli embassies, commercial buildings housing US firms, and a shuttle bus that conveyed US military personnel and their families in the Sembawang area to Yishun MRT station.

Government-Community Partnership

After the first wave of arrests, the Singapore government realised that the deep-seated motivation behind the planned attacks was religious in nature. As such, detention alone would not be enough as long as their radical religious beliefs remained unchallenged.

The government acknowledged that religious issues were sensitive matters. Hence, to effect long-term rehabilitation and disrupt the chain of Jl indoctrination amongst family, friends and the wider Muslim community, their ideology had to be contested by the religious experts.

This was because while operational enforcements came under the government's responsibility, countering Jl's ideology ought to be helmed by Muslim community leaders themselves due to the religious underpinnings.

Muslim leaders and scholars were in the best position to guide and engage their community given their influence and religious authority. When approached by the government, the Muslim religious scholars confirmed the interpretation and concepts espoused by Jl to be out of step with mainstream Islamic teachings.

For example, killing innocent people, including non-Muslims, in the belief that the attackers would die as *syahid* or martyrs was misguided. This was not an act of *jihad* as it would go against the Islamic principle of the sanctity of life and life preservation.

Winning Trust

The government and Muslim leaders knew that to ensure rehabilitation and counter - extremism efforts got off on the right footing, they needed to gain the trust of the community. The first step was to form a collective body of religious experts and eminent local Muslim scholars for authority and authenticity.

Religious leaders like the late Ustaz Syed Ahmad Semait, the late Ustaz Ahmad Sondhaji Mohamad and Ustaz Mohamad Rais, among others, were consulted to guide the process of producing a rehabilitation manual for rehabilitating the JI detainees. The manual would prove to be instrumental in countering the JI ideology.

Secondly, a volunteer body comprising selected religious teachers was formed; it later became known as the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG). The nature of RRG as a voluntary body was crucial as it suggested independence from the government. By appealing to the community to raise funds for its activities, RRG extended a sense of ownership and collective responsibility to the community.

Even with careful deliberation to build trust, these leaders and teachers faced suspicions and doubts about their motivations. For instance, many of the detainees had considered foreign scholars and preachers as superior to their local counterparts.

Nonetheless, the counsellors persevered, equipped with their newly-acquired counselling skills, counselling manual and a Prophetic example to win hearts by modelling good character in the face of resistance. Their efforts to win the confidence and trust was supported by the detainees' case officers and the Aftercare Group (ACG) which gave support to the detainees' family members.

Outcomes of Partnership

Twenty years on, 52 out of 56 detainees have been released and have since reintegrated well into society. Many of them spoke well of their counsellors and case officers, reforming their belief that detention was a negative experience. Their families have also progressed in their lives.

Global counter-terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman of Georgetown University recognised the importance of including the family of detainees in counter-radicalisation programmes. As he put it:

“The path-breaking work of Singapore's RRG provides a model and inspiration for counter-radicalisation efforts everywhere. The RRG's outreach efforts not only to radicals but to their families are a seminal example of the most innovative and novel approaches to addressing this phenomenon.”

The Singapore model of government-community partnership shows that counter-terrorism efforts can be enhanced through underlying principles of trust and synergy. There are at least four related issues.

These include (1) looking at the threat of terrorism as a national problem; (2) customising approaches according to needs, for example, the participation of religious scholars; (3) addressing trust issues as a cornerstone, for example, when secular elements (like government) need to be mixed with sensitive religious issues; and (4) aiming to win hearts by addressing the psychological and physical needs of the detainees and their family members.

Whole-of-Community Approach

In summary, successful prevention of terrorism requires dialogue and cooperation between the government and an array of non-governmental actors — a “whole-of-community” approach. The broader community and the private sector should be seen by government as stakeholders and partners in preventing and countering terrorism of all persuasions.

The emergence of violent religiously-motivated groups is not an excuse to isolate or withdraw the rights of the religious communities in question. Instead, it is an opportunity to enhance and reintegrate such groups into mainstream society.

As Bruce Hoffman added about Singapore’s counter-terrorism approach in the unfolding story of a secular government and the Muslim community in Singapore:

“.....most importantly, it proves that there is no war on Islam, as the radicals often claim, and that communities can indeed co-exist peacefully and harmoniously.”

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