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Reimagining Solutions: Southeast Asia's Cultural Wisdom in the Global Fight Against Radicalism

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

*Southeast Asia's rich cultural traditions can enhance global efforts to address issues such as radicalism, polarisation, and social cohesion. By integrating local wisdom and practices – like Singapore's "rojak" culture, which celebrates diversity, and Indonesia's *musyawarah* (deliberation and consensus) – the region offers valuable frameworks for fostering community resilience and harmony. This approach calls for more inclusive dialogue and collaboration, demonstrating that progress lies in embracing the diverse insights and strengths of Southeast Asian societies alongside Western methodologies.*

COMMENTARY

Ever since US President George W. Bush coined the term "[war on terrorism](#)" on 16 September 2001, Southeast Asian countries have often adhered to Western directives, frequently overlooking local wisdom better suited to their unique contexts. This raises an important question: What if the solutions to pressing global challenges – such as radicalism, polarisation, and social cohesion – are realisable not only in Western establishments but also in Southeast Asia's rich and diverse traditions?

To tackle these complex issues effectively, we must move beyond a one-sided narrative pursued by the West and embrace a nuanced, inclusive dialogue that respects the multiplicity of perspectives, histories, and cultures shaping our world. Such comprehensive analyses can bring solutions tailored to various contexts, fostering genuine engagement and paving the way for a more harmonious society.

Rethinking Western Narratives

Edward Said's seminal work, [Orientalism \(1978\)](#), critiques how the West has historically constructed the "Orient" as an exotic and monolithic entity that inherently

needs guidance. This distorted perspective, steeped in colonialism, imposes Western values, norms, and solutions on non-Western societies, often disregarding their cultural and historical complexities.

When applied to countering radicalisation and polarisation, this prescriptive approach can alienate communities and perpetuate the cycles of resentment that fuel radical ideologies. Moving beyond this unidirectional flow of prescriptive knowledge requires a genuine exchange where all voices are valued in the discourse.

Kishore Mahbubani's [Can Asians Think? \(1998\)](#) challenges the assumption that Western perspectives represent the pinnacle of rational thought and modernity. He argues that Asian societies possess rich traditions capable of addressing global challenges. Asia's successes in poverty reduction, economic development, and social cohesion demonstrate the potential of non-Western solutions. By asking, "Can Asians think?" Mahbubani posed a rhetorical question and encouraged recognition of Asia's valuable contributions to governance, development, and social harmony.

Dominique Moisi's [The Geopolitics of Emotion \(2009\)](#) provides a framework for understanding current global dynamics. He posits that while the West is increasingly defined by fear – manifesting in xenophobia and nationalism – Asia embodies a sense of hope. This hope, stemming from rapid economic growth and social cohesion, can counterbalance the fear and division pervasive in many parts of the world. By positioning Asia as a source of hope, we can embrace more inclusive approaches to global problem-solving.

Embracing Singapore's "Rojak" Culture

Singapore's concept of ["rojak" culture](#) – meaning mixed culture in Malay – exemplifies the potential for social cohesion and multiculturalism. Derived from a popular local dish that blends diverse ingredients, this metaphor illustrates the nation's commitment to integrating various ethnicities, religions, and traditions into a unified national identity.

Led by [the Internal Security Department \(ISD\)](#), Singapore's success in reintegrating former members of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and other radical groups highlights the effectiveness of its soft approach to counter-radicalisation. By collaborating with community organisations like the [Religious Rehabilitation Group \(RRG\)](#) and [Inter-Agency Aftercare Group \(ACG\)](#), Singapore authorities demonstrate how community-driven strategies can aid rehabilitation and integration. This enlightened and courageous stance contrasts sharply with the then-dominant Western framework, which often avoided engaging with "terrorists" and their families.

By treating diversity as a source of strength and fostering dialogue, Singapore provides valuable insights for policymakers seeking to combat radicalisation and promote social harmony through inclusive, culturally sensitive interventions.

Harnessing Pan-Asian Emotional Intelligence for Sustainable Solutions

Southeast Asia's cultural wisdom, grounded in emotional intelligence, offers adaptable solutions to global challenges, often challenging more rational Western approaches. While it may cause discomfort, this inclusive, emotionally attuned perspective

emphasises communal well-being over rigid logic. Its resilience will be tested over time, proving effective in addressing evolving challenges.

Indonesia's *musyawarah* (deliberation) is a compelling example crucial in deradicalisation efforts. Indonesia's Detachment 88 – a counter-terrorism establishment – facilitated the [self-disbandment of JI](#) on 30 June 2024, after the group demonstrated an eleven-year commitment to non-violence within Indonesia. This progress was achieved through community engagements, where incarcerated JI leaders participated in virtual dialogues with supporters via Zoom, showcasing *musyawarah's* transformative power in fostering peace and resilience.

The Filipino tradition of *bayanihan* also offers a powerful model for addressing violent extremism through its emphasis on communal unity and cooperation. This aligns with the Philippines' National Action Plan, which incorporates the *bayanihan* spirit into its Whole of Nation Approach, ensuring that all stakeholders are engaged in responding to violent extremism.

Promoting *bayanihan* allows local Filipino leaders to instil a strong sense of belonging, motivating youth to contribute positively to their communities rather than turning to extremist paths. A prime example is the transformation of the [Moro Islamic Liberation Front \(MILF\)](#), which shifted from armed struggle to becoming a formal political force through engagement and dialogue. This shift underscores the potential of communal practices like *bayanihan* to foster sustainable peace and resilience against extremism.

Educational curricula should integrate local philosophies promoting harmony, respect for diversity, and interfaith dialogue throughout the region, particularly in Thailand's deep South, where ongoing conflicts have created social tensions. Thailand's [Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy](#), introduced by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej, advocates moderation, resilience, and mindfulness. Implementing this philosophy in schools and communities can promote shared responsibility and counter extremist narratives that exploit disenfranchisement. Addressing specific regional challenges – like poverty and cultural misunderstandings – can foster peace and stability in a region striving for cohesion.

In Malaysia, [a restorative justice approach](#) is vital for addressing conflicts within multicultural communities, often contrasting with rigid Western perspectives. This approach emphasises mutual respect, cooperation, and communal harmony, prioritising reconciliation over punitive measures. The repatriation of extremist Malaysians from Syrian camps exemplifies this approach, emphasising reintegration and support while understanding the individuals' experiences.

Furthermore, former JI members have become peace advocates, sharing their stories to promote dialogue and awareness of extremism's dangers, encouraging youth to choose peaceful paths. By leveraging local wisdom, Malaysia navigates complex issues of conflict and extremism, recognising the nuances of human behaviour that rigid Western frameworks often overlook.

A Call to Action

The approach advocated is not anti-Western; rather, it enriches Western methodologies with the profound wisdom of Southeast Asian societies. While Western strategies often rely on data-driven policies to combat radicalism, Southeast Asian practices emphasise community engagement and empathy, effectively addressing root causes.

By integrating local insights with Western strategies, we can forge holistic solutions to challenges like polarisation and radicalism. Regional frameworks, such as the [ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism](#), underscore the need for collective action against these issues, acknowledging their transnational nature.

Regional collaboration is essential in our interconnected but fragmented world – exacerbated by social media. Sharing knowledge and resources across borders allows all nations to devise comprehensive strategies that tackle the roots of extremism and foster enduring peace. As highlighted by the [UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism \(2016\)](#), a collaborative approach that embraces diverse perspectives is vital for building resilient societies.

Preventing and countering violent extremism efforts are most effective when they incorporate local wisdom and tailor approaches to unique cultural contexts rather than relying solely on Western models. Extremism's root causes often stem from local issues, making [community-based solutions](#) essential. Programmes should harness local knowledge, with strong regional support, to ensure relevance and sustainability. Policymakers must prioritise culturally-aligned strategies for more effective and lasting impact.

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