Youth Radicalisation in Singapore:
A Growing Threat in the Digital Age

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

How can a nation celebrated for its progress and connectivity face a rising threat from within its young population? In Singapore, a city-state known for its public security and educational excellence, the menace of youth radicalisation is taking place through online channels. This was illustrated by a recent case involving a self-radicalised 17-year-old, arrested under its Internal Security Act just weeks before he could execute a planned terror attack. How do online platforms turn seemingly ordinary youth into supporters of extremist ideologies?

COMMENTARY

Singapore, a global hub of progress, connectivity, and education, faces a challenge: youth radicalisation through online platforms. A recent report by Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) highlighted the increasing vulnerability of young people to extremist ideologies. A 17-year-old self-radicalised Singaporean student was arrested just weeks before he could carry out a planned terror attack in the public housing heartlands.

Described in a press release by the ISD on 18 October as a "staunch" supporter of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the student had intended to use a kitchen knife or a pair of scissors from his home as a weapon. Despite not having a deeply religious background, he became captivated by ISIS propaganda, ultimately pledging allegiance to the group and expressing a willingness to die for its cause.

To be clear, however, pointing fingers at religion, in this case Islam, as the root cause of radicalisation is to bark up the wrong tree. With over two billion adherents worldwide, Islam has made significant contributions to civilisation, including advancements in science, art, and philosophy. Those who become radicalised often have a shallow

understanding of Islamic teachings and are misled by distorted and fragmented online sources.

Radicalisation involves fundamentally [psychological mechanisms](#), not just religious ones. Under the right conditions, it can affect anyone, regardless of background. For example, the Israel-Palestine conflict shows how a sense of injustice, loss, and identity crisis can drive radicalisation on both sides, with young Palestinians and Israelis alike adopting extremist views out of frustration or fear.

Similarly, groups like Hezbollah and countries like Iran exploit historical and geopolitical grievances to draw people into extremist ideologies. The real issue is the misuse of digital platforms, which amplify these distorted narratives and intensify radical views.

Navigating the Digital Terrain of Radicalisation

To understand the dynamics of [online radicalisation](#), we need to consider concepts like filter bubbles, algorithms, echo chambers, and confirmation bias. These digital phenomena help explain how extremist narratives can take root.

As articulated by [Eli Pariser](#), filter bubbles describe the personalised information environments created by algorithms that narrow a person's exposure to diverse viewpoints, resulting in a state of intellectual isolation. This isolation makes it easier for extremist content to reach vulnerable users. [Echo chambers](#), where beliefs are reinforced through hearing the same perspectives and opinions over and over again within like-minded communities, further validate and perpetuate radical narratives.

[Confirmation bias](#) aggravates the problem, as individuals gravitate toward information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, dismissing evidence that does not.

Together, these dynamics create an environment where radicalisation can flourish, especially among youth seeking purpose or belonging.

The radicalisation of the 17-year-old mentioned above involved the consumption of a stream of violent jihadist content glorifying violence and martyrdom. This created a filter bubble, isolating him from differing perspectives and viewpoints. Within this bubble, extremist narratives went unchallenged, leading him to see ISIS' violent ideology as justifiable.

A Nuanced Perspective on Global Conflicts

The challenge of radicalisation in Singapore has evolved, particularly as global conflicts increasingly shape the narratives that influence vulnerable youth. The Hamas attack on Israel on October 7 and the ensuing Israel-Hamas war have increased the risks, as social media is inundated with emotionally charged, polarising content. For some, this type of messaging provides a sense of moral clarity and purpose – albeit one rooted in misinformation and extremism.

The situation highlights a broader issue: the need to navigate global conflicts with a nuanced perspective. The Palestinian issue from the time of the Nakba, for example,

transcends religious boundaries and is fundamentally a humanitarian concern. Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Singapore's Foreign Minister, has emphasised Singapore's balanced and principled stance on global conflicts, including the Israel-Hamas war. Speaking in Parliament, he underscored Singapore's advocacy for a two-state solution – an approach that seeks peace, justice, and stability for both Israelis and Palestinians. This stance serves as a crucial reminder of the value of nuanced thinking when addressing sensitive geopolitical matters.

Building a Resilient Society: Lessons from the Past

In 1979, then Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam outlined a vision for Singapore's future in his speech, *Political Developments Towards The Year 2000*. He drew on the work of 14th-century philosopher Ibn Khaldoun, emphasising the importance of *asabiyya*, or group solidarity, as a crucial element for the survival and prosperity of civilisations.

This idea aligns closely with the modern concept of *identity fusion*, which describes the deep unity that individuals feel with a group – where personal and group identities become inseparable. Both *asabiyya* and *identity fusion* highlight the power of a shared sense of belonging in strengthening social cohesion and collective resilience.

The rise of AI further complicates matters, creating echo chambers that reinforce radical beliefs and amplify polarising content. This can isolate youths in distorted worldviews, making it harder for them to access balanced perspectives.

Countering Online Radicalisation: The Need for Critical Thinking and Geopolitical Literacy

Several key strategies must be implemented to effectively combat the rising threat of youth radicalisation in Singapore.

Firstly, instilling critical thinking and digital literacy among the youth is essential. Schools and community programmes should educate young people about social media's manipulative algorithms, helping them recognise filter bubbles and confirmation bias while encouraging them to seek diverse perspectives and adopt a critical and sceptical frame of mind. Given the current climate, where radicalisation is a clear and present danger, fostering these skills is increasingly urgent.

Secondly, parental involvement in preventing youth radicalisation is crucial. Parents can make a significant difference by creating an open and supportive environment where discussions about global issues and religious beliefs can take place freely. This is particularly important in an age where digital content can influence young minds, and parents must proactively monitor their children's online activities.

The case of the radicalised youth highlights the challenges parents face. Despite noticing their child's exposure to harmful content, their concerns did not lead to effective intervention. The youth's secrecy, as shown by his use of codewords and VPNs, shows a deep engagement with radical ideologies. This underscores the point that even with parental awareness, youths can become isolated in their beliefs. It suggests that monitoring alone is insufficient; parents must build trust, engage in

meaningful dialogue, and encourage critical thinking to help their children resist radicalisation.

If in doubt or in need of advice, parents should consult knowledgeable and accredited sources, such as local *asatizah* (Islamic religious teachers), MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore), RRG (Religious Rehabilitation Group), Pergas (Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association), and mosque officials. They are well-equipped to provide guidance on issues related to self-radicalisation.

Finally, government and tech regulation are necessary to control the spread of extremist content online. Social media companies must take responsibility for the content they promote, while the government should collaborate with tech platforms to regulate extremist narratives and prevent algorithm-driven radicalisation.

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