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## Reclaiming *Asabiya* to Counter Extremism and Foster Unity

*By Noor Huda Ismail*

### SYNOPSIS

*The concept of asabiyya – group solidarity – originally articulated by Ibn Khaldun, has been hijacked by extremist groups in Southeast Asia to create division and promote radical ideologies. Reclaiming asabiya is crucial, redefining it as a tool for social cohesion and unity by drawing on cultural values that foster mutual respect and collective responsibility. Regional cooperation and digital counter-narratives are essential in countering extremism and fostering long-term peace in the region.*

### COMMENTARY

The spread of extremist ideologies in Southeast Asia is a growing concern, with extremist groups manipulating social cohesion concepts such as [asabiya](#), a term coined by Ibn Khaldun, a well-known 14th-century historian, economist and sociologist. While *asabiya* – a concept of group solidarity with an emphasis on unity, group consciousness, and a sense of shared purpose and social cohesion – traditionally fosters unity within societies, extremists exploit it to create divisions and promote radical ideologies.

Understanding and reshaping *asabiya* into a tool for peace and unity could be key to countering these harmful narratives. This requires recognising both local and regional dynamics and crafting innovative counter-narratives that resonate culturally.

Ibn Khaldun's concept of *asabiya* highlights the importance of group solidarity, which can be a foundation for a flourishing society. However, when manipulated for divisive purposes, it becomes a force that drives fragmentation.

In Southeast Asia, extremist groups use *asabiya* to unite people around grievances, transforming them into polarised identities that oppose others. The digital age

amplifies this process, with extremist content easily spread through social media, deepening societal divisions.

In Indonesia, groups like [Jamaah Ansharut Daulah](#) (JAD) have capitalised on prevalent frustrations about issues such as moral decay and corruption. By aligning these grievances with jihadist ideologies, they create a sense of solidarity that transcends national borders. This use of *asabiya* binds individuals in opposition to perceived threats, whether from the government or foreign influences.

In Malaysia, extremist groups have adopted a defensive form of *asabiya* that emphasises [protecting Islam from Western values or liberalism](#). They use historical narratives of colonialism and present struggles to frame their cause as part of a larger battle for religious survival. By doing so, they create a unified front against external threats, deepening societal divisions.

Similarly, in the southern Philippines, groups like [Abu Sayyaf](#) exploit historical grievances related to economic marginalisation and political neglect. They manipulate *asabiya* to unite followers around a shared sense of victimhood, portraying their struggle as one of cultural and political survival. This narrative further polarises the society, positioning the government and outsiders as enemies to their cause.

Even in more cohesive nations like Singapore and Thailand, extremist narratives exploit existing ethnic and religious tensions. In [Thailand's southern provinces](#), separatist movements use *asabiya* to rally support for their cause, focusing on the preservation of the Patani Malay identity.

[In Singapore](#), transnational extremist groups target ethnic divides to promote a divisive agenda. These examples demonstrate how extremists use *asabiya* to widen societal fault lines, presenting complex issues as simple, binary conflicts.

## **Reclaiming Asabiya for Social Cohesion**

To counter the divisive use of *asabiya*, it is essential to redefine it in a way that promotes inclusivity, unity, and resilience. Ibn Khaldun's teachings suggest that *asabiya* can be the bedrock of stable societies, but this requires a broader, more inclusive interpretation. Instead of fostering an "us versus them" mentality, *asabiya* should be reframed to build solidarity around shared values, mutual respect, and collective responsibility.

This shift requires framing social cohesion in terms that resonate with local cultures. In Southeast Asia, Islamic principles such as [balaghah](#) (eloquence) and [rahmatan lil alamin](#) (mercy to all creation) offer compelling alternatives to the exclusionary rhetoric of extremists. These values emphasise compassion, respect for others, and the protection of all people, directly countering the narrative of division promoted by extremist ideologies.

Organisations like [Muhammadiyah](#) in Indonesia provide a useful model for framing *asabiya* inclusively. Their concept of [darul ahdi wa shahadah](#) (a state of covenant and testimony) promotes a shared vision of community grounded in mutual respect and collective responsibility. This inclusive approach to *asabiya* fosters a sense of

belonging that transcends narrow, exclusionary identities, promoting national unity and social cohesion.

The effort to reclaim *asabiya* mustn't be seen as a Muslim issue alone. Extremism, in all its forms, thrives on division and narrow identity politics. Whether religious, political, or social, extremism feeds off the fragmentation of society. Addressing this challenge requires an approach that includes all communities, ensuring that counter-narratives resonate with diverse groups and promote a broader, more inclusive vision of social cohesion.

## **Regional Cooperation and Digital Counter-narratives**

Regional cooperation plays a crucial role in countering extremist narratives. Southeast Asia is a diverse region with a complex interplay of local, national, and transnational factors that fuel extremism. Collaborative efforts among regional organisations like ASEAN can strengthen the collective response to these challenges. By sharing resources, expertise, and best practices, Southeast Asian countries can work together to build resilient societies that are less susceptible to extremist manipulation.

Singapore's experience in countering extremism offers valuable insights into regional cooperation. The country has long invested in deradicalisation efforts through institutions like the Religious Rehabilitation Group ([RRG](#)) and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore ([MUIS](#)), which guide religious leaders to promote inclusive religious narratives. By incorporating these efforts into regional campaigns, ASEAN can foster a shared commitment to combating extremism and promoting peace.

The digital landscape is another critical battleground in the fight against extremism. Social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube enable extremist groups to spread their messages rapidly, reaching large, often vulnerable audiences. However, these platforms also offer opportunities for positive counter-narratives. Governments, civil society organisations, and tech companies can work together to promote stories of interfaith collaboration, social justice, and shared community values.

To be effective, digital counter-narratives must be culturally sensitive, factually accurate, and tailored to resonate with the target audience. Digital literacy programmes can equip communities with the tools to assess online content and counter extremist messages critically. These initiatives help build resilience against radical ideologies and contribute to a broader sense of social cohesion.

## **Conclusion**

Reclaiming *asabiya* as a force for unity and resilience in Southeast Asia requires a multifaceted approach. By redefining solidarity in inclusive, culturally resonant terms, societies can counteract the divisive narratives of extremists and build a foundation for long-term peace. This effort must be grounded in both local cultural values and regional cooperation, recognising the interconnected nature of extremism in the digital age.

Governments, civil society organisations, and regional bodies like ASEAN must work

together to foster an inclusive understanding of *asabiya*, one that transcends narrow identities and focuses on shared values and mutual respect. Through this approach, Southeast Asia can build a united front against extremism, one that promotes tolerance, resilience, and social cohesion.

As Theodore Roosevelt once said, “The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again”. This [quote](#) underscores the importance of confronting extremism with courage, unity, and the collective strength of communities.

In Southeast Asia, the reclamation of *asabiya* as a force for good can be a powerful tool in overcoming the divisive forces of extremism and creating a more peaceful and inclusive future for all.

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