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Radicalisation in the Digital Age

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

Singapore authorities recently arrested three individuals who had been radicalised online by far-right and Islamist extremist religious ideologies. Addressing the growing problem requires a multi-faceted approach, including digital literacy education, early intervention programmes, and community-driven efforts to counter extremist narratives before they take root.

COMMENTARY

On an otherwise ordinary day in Singapore, security officials made a worrisome discovery. An 18-year-old student, Nick Lee Xing Qiu, had been quietly descending into the world of far-right extremism, idolising Brenton Tarrant – the lone-wolf terrorist responsible for the 2019 mosque attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand. What started as online role-playing in a game where Lee “massacred” Muslims in a mosque had escalated into an intent to carry out an attack in real life.

By the time the [Internal Security Department](#) (ISD) intervened in December 2024, Lee had already taken significant steps toward his violent fantasy. He had tattoos and T-shirts featuring neo-Nazi and white supremacist symbols. Investigators found that he had been actively planning an attack, targeting Muslims at a mosque in Singapore.

Lee’s case was not an isolated incident. The ISD also arrested two others – Hamizah Hamzah, a 56-year-old housewife, and Saharuddin Saari, a 34-year-old Malaysian cleaner. Both were radicalised into supporting Islamist terrorist organisations. These cases show a disturbing pattern: radicalisation is thriving in the digital age, affecting people from different backgrounds and driven by different ideologies.

What is even more alarming is that online radicalisation is targeting younger individuals. More teenagers and young adults are being drawn to extremist ideologies

shaped by global events, conspiracy theories, and a sense of personal or religious duty.

The question is, how does someone like Lee, an ordinary student, go from playing a video game to planning a real-world terrorist attack? More importantly, how do we stop this from happening again?

How Radicalisation Happens Online and Beyond

For Lee, the Internet played a crucial role in shaping his beliefs. He was exposed to far-right propaganda, which reinforced his prejudices and pushed him toward extremism. It started with online role-playing, where he pretended to carry out violent acts in a game. Over time, this made violence seem normal. What should have remained a fictional scenario turned into something he wanted to do in real life.

But far-right extremism is not the only growing threat in Singapore. Radicalisation within a fringe faction of the Muslim community is also on the rise, particularly in response to conflicts like the Israel-Hamas war. [The crisis in Gaza](#) has become a rallying point for extremist narratives, with social media amplifying messages of anger and calls for action. Some individuals become obsessed with apocalyptic prophecies, believing that the “[end times](#)” are near and that they must take part in a global holy war.

Radical clerics and extremist groups exploit these emotions, spreading messages that justify violence. In Indonesia, preachers like Ustadz [Zulkifli Muhammad Ali](#) and [Ustadz Rahmat Baekuni](#) manipulate their followers with apocalyptic themes, shifting the focus from traditional teachings on rewards and punishments to contemporary social issues. They frequently [portray non-Muslims as oppressive](#), fostering distrust and division through distorted, racially charged eschatological narratives that vilify other groups and reinforce harmful stereotypes.

To counter ideologies such as the “End of Time” narratives, which have been misconstrued for extremist agendas, religious scholars and leaders must provide contextual interpretations that reject violence and promote peace. Engaging in open discussions with the community, particularly with young people, is crucial in challenging apocalyptic beliefs and fostering a balanced, healthy approach to faith. While the “end of times” narrative is an important element in Islam, it must be properly explained through credible guidance.

To recapitulate, online radicalisation is a worrying trend and is not confined to a single ideology. Whether driven by far-right extremism or religious extremism, the process follows a similar pattern: self-isolation or alienation, exposure to radical content, and, ultimately, acceptance of violence as a justifiable course of action.

What Can Be Done to Stop This?

The first step is to stop the radicalisation process before it begins. Young people need to be taught how to think critically about what they see online. Schools should introduce programmes that help students recognise extremist propaganda and

question the messages they encounter. At the same time, social media companies need to do more to identify and remove harmful content before it spreads.

Beyond education, communities play an important role in preventing extremism. People who feel isolated or alienated are more vulnerable to radicalisation. This is why it is crucial to build a society where people from different backgrounds feel connected and included. Programmes encouraging interfaith dialogue and cultural exchange can help reduce misunderstandings and promote unity.

More targeted interventions are needed, especially for younger individuals. The government and civil society organisations must develop initiatives that reach teenagers before extremist recruiters do. One approach is to involve religious leaders who can counter extremist narratives with messages of peace and tolerance. Another is to create youth engagement programmes that offer mentorship and a sense of purpose beyond extremist causes.

When early signs of radicalisation appear, intervention is key. Families, teachers, and friends should be able to recognise warning signs, such as an obsession with extremist symbols or a growing hostility toward certain groups.

The Singapore Psychological Society ([SPS](#)), the Singapore Association for Mental Health ([SAMH](#)), and [Club Heal](#), among others, offer professional support for individuals experiencing such psychological issues. Communications with online platforms like [Mindline.sg](#) and [Safe Space](#) are treated as confidential.

Religious organisations, including mosques, churches, temples, the Religious Rehabilitation Group ([RRG](#)), Islamic Religious Council of Singapore ([MUIS](#)), Singapore Islamic Scholars & Religious Teachers Association ([Pergas](#)), and even community organisations like the Inter-Agency Aftercare Group ([ACG](#)), offer counselling services and support groups. These can help individuals navigate personal challenges and identity crises, offering them a way out before it is too late. This underscores the critical need for early intervention.

For those who have already been radicalised, rehabilitation is necessary. People like Lee need psychological and social support and structured programmes to help them change their beliefs. Locking them up is not a sufficient solution – without proper intervention, they may remain a danger even after release. They need education, job training, and a way to reintegrate into society.

The family institution plays a crucial role in Singapore's rehabilitation efforts. Families are often the first line of defence against radicalisation, as they can detect early signs and intervene before the problem becomes deeply rooted. They provide emotional support and help create a stable environment for the individual's reintegration into society.

In Singapore, the ACG and the RRG work closely with families to provide comprehensive support. The ACG offers social rehabilitation, helping radicalised individuals and their families reintegrate into the community. The RRG provides religious counselling to counter radical ideologies and promote proper religious teachings.

Families also benefit from community welfare organisations that offer additional support, such as counselling and educational resources. This holistic approach ensures that radicalised individuals receive the necessary support to overcome their extremist beliefs and reintegrate into society successfully.

The Urgency of Action

Lee's case is a warning that radicalisation is no longer limited to underground terrorist cells – it is happening in our homes, in our schools, and on our screens. The fact that a student could go from playing a terrorist in an online game to planning an actual attack shows how powerful digital spaces can be in shaping extremist beliefs.

At the same time, the rising radicalisation within a small segment of Singapore's Muslim community shows how global conflicts can fuel local extremism. The Israel-Hamas war, coupled with apocalyptic religious prophecies, is driving a new wave of radicalisation among young people who see violence as a way to fulfil their ideological or spiritual destiny.

As extremist groups exploit online platforms to amplify hatred and division, the authorities have updated the relevant legislation to deal with such challenges. In February 2025, it introduced the [Maintenance of Racial Harmony Bill](#) to consolidate existing statutes and provide further safeguards for racial harmony. Strengthening interfaith dialogue and ensuring that social media platforms are held accountable for hosting harmful content are crucial steps in this fight.

The battle against radicalisation is no longer just about law enforcement; it is about protecting minds before they are poisoned by extremism. The urgency of action cannot be overstated – society must act decisively to safeguard the next generation from the pull of extremism, ensuring that they grow up in a world where hate and violence hold no power over their future.

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