Addressing the Shifting Landscape of Radicalisation in Singapore

By Mohamed Bin Ali and Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan

SYNOPSIS

Far-right extremism based on racial and extremist ideologies is finding resonance among some Singaporean youth, posing a challenge to the country's counter-radicalisation strategies, which had been based on religiously motivated extremism. The Singapore authorities need to review their counter-radicalisation frameworks as they grapple with this emerging threat.

COMMENTARY

Since December 2020, four youths have been dealt with under Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA) for subscribing to far-right extremist ideologies touted online by terrorists like Brenton Tarrant, who killed 51 Muslims in a mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15, 2019.

Singapore has long been vigilant in dealing with religious extremism, particularly the threat posed by radical Islamist ideologies. This focus on religiously motivated radicalisation has dominated the attention of Singapore's security forces for decades. However, in recent years, there has been a shift as cases of far-right extremism tied to racial supremacist ideologies have begun to emerge.

Three Singaporeans of Chinese ethnicity were detained for such far-right racial supremacist beliefs: Nick Lee, a self-radicalised Singaporean who was detained in December 2024, an unnamed 16-year-old youth influenced by far-right online content in 2023, and the recent case of another unnamed 17-year-old student who planned to kill at least 100 Muslims, to double the number killed by Brenton Tarrant, the Christchurch terrorist. These cases highlighted the emergence of new extremist beliefs in the country's social fabric.

The arrests challenged conventional assumptions that associate extremism predominantly with religious motivations. The emergence of far-right extremism rooted in racial supremacy ideologies necessitates a reassessment of the methods used to counter radicalisation. As Singapore grapples with these developments, understanding the radicalised individuals' religious identity (or lack of it) is crucial for designing effective intervention strategies.

Religious Identity and Radicalisation

An analysis of the three cases shows that racial supremacist ideologies primarily influenced their radicalisation. Lee, who identified himself as an "East Asian supremacist", believed in the superiority of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese ethnicities and was inspired by figures like Tarrant. His radicalisation, largely driven by exposure to far-right and Islamophobic content online, illustrates the shift from traditional religious extremism to racial supremacist ideologies in Singapore. Lee's radicalisation journey was shaped by his identification with a racial superiority narrative, propelled by online discourse that fostered hatred against Muslims and other minority groups.

Similarly, the 16-year-old Singaporean was self-radicalised through online white supremacist content. Despite being ethnically Chinese, his ideological beliefs aligned with white supremacist ideologies, emphasising the non-religious nature of his radicalisation. His exposure to extremist material led him to embrace racial hatred and to envision attacks in support of the white supremacist cause.

These radicalisation cases contrasted starkly with previous ones, where religious ideologies were central in their beliefs. Instead of religious doctrines, radicalisation was driven by a hybrid of racial, political, and social grievances.

The recent case of the 17-year-old student further exemplified this shift. His radicalisation was influenced by far-right extremism and militant accelerationism rather than any religious conviction. His plans to acquire weapons for large-scale terror attacks against Muslims in Singapore reflect the growing appeal of non-religious ideologies, often linked to political extremism and societal discontent. The case highlighted how far-right ideologies, blending elements of racial supremacy with violent political activism, are becoming increasingly influential among youth in Singapore.

Implications for Counter-Radicalisation Strategies

The rise of far-right extremism rooted in racial supremacy ideologies presents significant challenges to Singapore's counter-radicalisation framework, which is heavily focused on religiously motivated extremism. As radicalisation takes on new forms, strategies must evolve to address these diverse and usually hybrid ideologies that combine elements of racial hatred, political grievances, and social marginalisation.

Since radicalisation in these cases occurs primarily online, the Singaporean authorities must expand their monitoring capabilities to detect and disrupt the spread of far-right content. This includes countering the digital platforms that serve as

incubators for radicalisation, particularly by focusing on disinformation and hate speech that targets specific racial or ethnic groups.

Educational initiatives that promote racial harmony and critical thinking are crucial in inoculating youth against extremist ideologies. Schools should adapt their curricula to address the dangers of racial supremacy ideologies and reinforce the importance of multiculturalism, which is the cornerstone of Singapore's national identity. Additionally, community-based efforts to engage with youth on issues of identity and belonging can serve as early intervention points, helping to address underlying grievances before they manifest in violent extremism.

Community engagement remains a central pillar in counter-radicalisation efforts. Strengthening networks between families, educators, and community leaders is vital for the early detection of signs of radicalisation. Open discussions about race, identity, and the challenges of living in a multicultural society will help to mitigate feelings of alienation or disenfranchisement. Psychological support systems, which should be incorporated into counter-radicalisation frameworks, can help to address mental health issues that often underlie extremist behaviour, including social isolation or identity crises.

Lastly, while Singapore's religious rehabilitation programmes have been effective in addressing radicalisation linked to religious extremism, they need to adapt. Rehabilitation strategies must broaden to include ideological interventions targeting racial supremacist narratives. This could involve leveraging psychologists, social workers, and racial harmony advocates who can engage with individuals influenced by far-right ideologies. Tailored interventions that acknowledge the role of online radicalisation, identity politics, and social grievances will be critical in the rehabilitation process.

Conclusion

The cases discussed illustrate that far-right extremism is not necessarily based on religious ideologies but is increasingly driven by racial supremacist beliefs and extremist narratives. Singapore's counter-radicalisation strategies must therefore evolve to address the broad spectrum of extremist ideologies that are gaining traction, particularly among the youth.

By expanding digital monitoring, promoting education on racial harmony, and fostering community engagement, Singapore can better equip itself to address the complex and multifaceted nature of contemporary extremism. To safeguard the nation's social cohesion and security, efforts must take a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of radicalisation, including both religious and racially based motivations.

Mohamed Bin Ali is a Senior Fellow, and Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan is an Associate Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Both studied Islamic law at Al-Azhar University, Cairo, and are counsellors with Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG).