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By Sabariah Hussin

SYNOPSIS

The evolving nature of online self-radicalisation in Singapore raises pressing concerns that go beyond traditional counterterrorism frameworks. While Singapore's preventive strategies are largely effective, emerging digital dynamics and psychosocial vulnerabilities call for more spiritually grounded, trauma-informed, and community-empowered approaches.

COMMENTARY

The issue of youth radicalisation is gaining attention in Singapore. During a speech by Acting Minister for Muslim Affairs, Faishal Ibrahim, at the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) retreat on 24 June 2025, he noted that the availability of extremist content and the emergence of ideologically themed online communities have contributed to a gradual increase in radicalisation among young people. Given that many of these individuals are still developing their identities and critical thinking skills, they may be more susceptible to these influences.

It is concerning that a 17-year-old supporter of far-right ideology was reportedly planning a mass shooting of worshippers attending Friday prayers, while a 15-year-old girl expressed a desire to marry an ISIS fighter and engage in combat overseas. Both cases illustrate the phenomenon of self-radicalisation occurring entirely through online platforms.

These developments highlight a significant and rapid evolution in the patterns and scope of radicalisation, necessitating a thorough reassessment of Singapore's CVE (countering violent extremism) strategies.

Twofold Concern: Speed and Disaffection

Two central concerns shape today's radicalism landscape. First is the speed and opacity of radicalisation in the digital age. Increasingly, youth are becoming ideologically immersed within days, often through exposure to unregulated short-form content on platforms such as TikTok, YouTube Shorts, or encrypted messaging apps. This rapid immersion bypasses traditional forms of recruitment and community detection, making prevention much more challenging.

Second is the emotional disaffection and moral fatigue among youth. Conflicts such as that between Israel and Palestine evoke strong identification with distant injustices. In the absence of spiritual literacy, guidance, and sound reasoning, young individuals may interpret these events through binary moral lenses. This leads to the adoption of simplistic narratives that frame religious identity around grievance, outrage, and victimhood, often divorced from the broader Islamic ethos of mercy and ethical restraint.

Current Trends and Emerging Threats

There has not been an exponential increase in radicalisation cases in Singapore, but a steady threat is evident. The trends indicate that a younger demographic is becoming vulnerable, with many still in their teens. As highlighted by Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) through the Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2024, several recent cases involve adolescents radicalised entirely online, without external influence or physical contact.

Future threats are expected to be marked by greater decentralisation of ideology, where radicalisation is no longer linked to organised groups but arises from self-curated content and ideological hybrids. These may combine religion with conspiracy theories, anti-state sentiments, and global grievances. The use of artificial intelligence and deepfake technologies may further complicate detection by mimicking credible religious authorities or producing highly personalised ideological content.

The Impact of Social Media

Social media remains the primary medium for radicalisation. It reduces geographic and emotional distances, transforming distant geopolitical conflicts into personal and moral imperatives. Algorithmic engines amplify emotionally charged and ideologically extreme content. Individuals seeking meaning in life are funnelled into online echo chambers that reinforce or demonise grievance-based narratives.

Moreover, social media platforms often provide radical content in non-confrontational formats, such as memes, commentary reels, and "pseudo-intellectual" or influencer content, which are easily internalised and harder to flag. Such content accelerates radicalisation by normalising extremist rhetoric under the guise of moral concern or religious duty.

Psychosocial Drivers

Online radicalisation does not occur in a vacuum. It intersects with underlying

psychosocial vulnerabilities. Individuals with limited religious knowledge, unresolved trauma, mental health challenges, socio-economic precarity, or who are socially isolated are more susceptible to ideological manipulation. These vulnerabilities are not always visible, but they can create fertile ground for radical narratives to take root.

In the Singaporean context, radicalisation is usually an individual phenomenon, not a communal one. It stems from a confluence of transnational ideological influences and domestic psychosocial dynamics. Many radicalised individuals are not responding to local grievances but to perceived global injustices. Without structured theological guidance or communal belonging, their emotional outrage becomes religiously encoded and ideologically channelled.

Gaps and Constraints in Existing Measures

Singapore's approach to CVE is commended for its early intervention model, strong legislative tools, and community partnerships. Initiatives such as the RRG and the Inter-Agency Aftercare Group (ACG) offer compassionate and personalised theological counselling and social support, playing a vital role in rehabilitation and post-detention reintegration efforts. Content regulation by the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) further enhances digital oversight.

Several gaps still exist in addressing radicalisation and extremist behaviour. The use of encrypted and decentralised digital spaces complicates surveillance and early detection efforts. Additionally, a lack of religious literacy among youth allows simplified extremist messages to spread unchecked. Mental health and trauma issues are not adequately integrated into current rehabilitation frameworks, which limits their effectiveness. Furthermore, women's pathways to radicalisation require additional attention, as their motivations and methods often differ from those of men.

To be truly holistic, rehabilitation must go beyond ideological correction. Trauma-informed care, emotional regulation, and spiritual rehabilitation must be incorporated into the CVE process.

The Role of Communities: Prevention Through Compassion

Communities are not merely observers; they are key agents of prevention. In the RRG outreach, members emphasise that educators, families, and peers must be equipped to spot early signs of ideological drift and respond with compassion. Reporting should be framed not as punitive but as part of a collective ethic of care.

Communities can play a vital role by providing non-judgmental religious education that encourages inquiry and growth for youth exploring faith online. They can foster spiritual resilience by emphasising mercy, ethical reflection, and a contextual understanding of scripture. Additionally, communities can support families of at-risk individuals by avoiding shame and promoting collaborative rehabilitation rather than exclusion. They should also encourage peer-led CVE efforts, where youth can engage others with critical thinking and faith-based ethics in online spaces.

Recommendations to Enhance Singapore's Approach

To future-proof Singapore's CVE framework, five key recommendations are proposed.

Firstly, there should be an expansion of digital literacy in schools and mosques to equip young people with the skills needed to engage with online religious content critically. This includes the ability to identify unreliable sources, understand context, and to resist binary narratives.

Secondly, there is a need to empower digitally fluent Asatizah by developing a group of scholars trained in both theology and digital engagement, capable of effectively intervening in online spaces.

Thirdly, mental health and trauma services should be integrated into deradicalisation efforts, especially for individuals facing unresolved grief, histories of abuse, emotional wounds, or unmet psychological needs.

Fourthly, stronger public-private collaboration should be established by involving technology companies in proactive algorithmic interventions, CVE messaging, and ensuring platform accountability.

Fifthly, Singapore can do more in regional CVE capacity building by bringing together Southeast Asian actors in a collaborative platform for training, resource sharing, and digital counter-extremism research.

Conclusion: A Values-Driven Strategy for the Future

The challenge of online self-radicalisation cannot be dealt with by surveillance or suppression only. With rapid digitalisation and easier access to new technologies, a multi-faceted values-driven strategy, grounded in empathy, ethical responsibility, spiritual integrity, and inclusive engagement must be implemented. The best antidote to extremism is not only vigorous law enforcement but a society that embodies care, justice, and compassion online as well as in person.

Singapore, with its robust institutional infrastructure and substantial social capital, is uniquely placed to lead in this direction. To do so, however, CVE efforts must evolve to embrace not only technological agility but also spiritual depth and ethical care on screen as well as in person.

Sabariah Hussin holds a PhD from the Department of Religion at Rice University in the USA. She focuses on the history of religious studies with an emphasis on Islamic Studies and Thought. She is an alumnus of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, and a member of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) Singapore.

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