From Threat to Vulnerability: Rethinking Radicalisation in Singapore

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PONDER THE IMPROBABLE

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By Raneeta Mutiara

SYNOPSIS

Singapore's risk of radicalisation remains relatively contained. However, how Singaporeans perceive that risk exposes certain blind spots. Many still view radicalisation as distant, externally driven, and best tackled through punishment. Building resilience requires a more informed public understanding of vulnerability, ideology, and rehabilitation.

COMMENTARY

Singapore is often described as resilient to terrorism. This perception is well-founded. The country has not experienced prolonged large-scale attacks, and its legislative and security frameworks are robust. Compared to regions that have experienced repeated incidents, Singapore remains stable.

However, stability does not equate to the absence of vulnerability. Recent cases involving self-radicalised individuals influenced by overseas conflicts remind us that ideology transcends borders. In Singapore, radicalisation rarely takes the form of organised cells; it is usually more individualised. It develops gradually, often online, through repeated exposure to curated narratives and grievance-based content.

The issue, therefore, is less about whether radicalisation exists and more about how it is understood. Public perception matters because it influences how early warning signs are interpreted and whether rehabilitation is regarded as necessary or dismissed as too soft. It determines how much responsibility communities believe they have in prevention efforts.

One common assumption is that radicalisation remains a distant threat. Many Singaporeans perceive the risk as low because there has not been a major domestic attack in recent years. There is also considerable trust in the state's capacity to manage security threats. In such an environment, radicalisation is often seen as something that authorities will handle. This confidence is understandable. However, it may also decrease public vigilance.

Misreading Radicalisation in a Digital Age

Singapore's digital environment complicates this picture. High connectivity allows global conflicts and extremist narratives to enter the local infosphere swiftly. Social media platforms, short videos, and encrypted channels facilitate the widespread circulation of emotionally charged content. What once might have required physical networks now only needs continuous online exposure. Radicalisation can be subtle in this environment. And by the time it becomes apparent, it may already be entrenched.

There is also something else worth noting. Public discourse frequently attributes radicalisation to foreign extremist groups or overseas political conflicts. While these factors are genuine, they do not fully explain why some individuals are attracted to violent narratives while others are not. Extremist messaging is accessible to many. Susceptibility, however, varies.

Across studies, grievances and identity struggles frequently emerge as common themes. In Singapore, these grievances are unlikely to be mainly rooted in extreme poverty. Instead, they may involve questions of belonging, perceived exclusion, or online communities that reinforce binary worldviews.

If radicalisation is seen solely as an imported problem, the discussion shifts outward. Less attention is paid to how local conditions, however subtle, may influence global narratives.

Punishment Versus Ideological Disengagement

Public attitudes towards response strategies further highlight this gap. There is strong support for punitive measures, with imprisonment often seen as the appropriate response to extremist offences. This reflects Singapore's broader focus on deterrence.

However, radicalisation is not the same as conventional crime. It is rooted in belief systems. Removing a person from society does not automatically free them from the ideology.

Singapore has long employed rehabilitation mechanisms, including religious counselling and structured reintegration efforts. However, public understanding of how these frameworks operate remains limited. Without clarity, rehabilitation may be seen as leniency rather than as part of a security strategy.

Overseas events also shape perception. Conflicts in the Middle East, terrorist attacks abroad, and instances of religious violence often trigger strong reactions locally. These events spread through mainstream news and social media alike. They evoke emotional responses, sometimes intense ones.

Anger and sadness are natural reactions. The question is what happens next. In tightly regulated environments, expressions of political grievance are often moderated. Emotional processing may therefore take place in private settings or online communities. If such emotions are not contextualised through informed discussion, they could reinforce polarised interpretations of global events.

Changes in public perception can influence policy expectations. After major overseas incidents, demands for stricter measures may grow. Over time, repeated exposure to global crises may also lead to fatigue. Both reactions influence how counter-radicalisation policies are perceived.

From State Responsibility to Shared Responsibility

If radicalisation continues to be viewed solely as a matter for security agencies, community involvement remains limited. Families, educators, and grassroots leaders might not see themselves as stakeholders in prevention. Yet early detection often depends on these actors.

Strengthening resilience in Singapore, therefore, necessitates recalibrating public understanding. Structured platforms for informed discussion of global events can reduce misinformation without increasing polarisation. Public education initiatives can clarify how radicalisation differs from dissent and why ideology requires targeted intervention.

Greater transparency regarding rehabilitation frameworks would also help. Understanding how religious counselling functions, how reintegration is monitored, and why ideological disengagement is necessary can foster confidence in balanced approaches.

Grievances, on their own, are not inherently dangerous. However, when ignored or exploited, they become vulnerabilities. Singapore's security structure is robust. Yet, long-term stability depends not only on institutions but also on a public that understands how radicalisation develops, particularly in digital environments. Prevention cannot rest solely with the state. Communities are part of the solution, whether they realise it or not. Ultimately, the challenge is not only to prevent violence but also to reduce vulnerability before it escalates.

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