



# From Online Play to Solemn Pledge: Youth Radicalisation in Digital Spaces

*Noor Huda Ismail and Ahmad Helmi bin Mohamad Hasbi*



*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at [RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg).*

## From Online Play to Solemn Pledge: Youth Radicalisation in Digital Spaces

*By Noor Huda Ismail and Ahmad Helmi bin Mohamad Hasbi*

### SYNOPSIS

*Recent cases in Singapore and the region reveal how teenagers are increasingly becoming radicalised, not through formal extremist organisations, but via gaming platforms, social media, and loosely moderated online communities. These cases reflect a broad global shift in radicalisation pathways, where identity formation, digital subcultures, and transnational narratives intersect in powerful yet often underestimated ways.*

### COMMENTARY

[In January 2026](#), Singapore's Internal Security Department issued a Restriction Order against a 14-year-old boy who had become self-radicalised through Islamic State (IS)-themed servers on the gaming platform Roblox. Within these digital spaces, he role-played as a militant, pledged allegiance to IS, and produced propaganda videos by overlaying extremist symbols onto gameplay footage.

What began as play gradually developed into ideological commitment, blurring the line between fantasy, identity, and belief. Public reporting offered little insight into the youth's family background – a significant omission, given that the radicalisation process reportedly took place over several years within the home environment.

A parallel case surfaced in Indonesia the following month. [In February 2026](#), a student carried out a Molotov cocktail attack at a school. Although the incident was not officially classified as terrorism, subsequent investigations uncovered troubling ideological undercurrents. The student was reportedly influenced by [True Crime Community](#), a widely circulated online extremist community, and showed affinity with far-right subculture. Symbols and names associated with far-right mass attacks were

found written on his school bag. This incident marked the second [far-right-inspired](#) attack in Indonesia within a four-month period.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate a common regional challenge: Youth radicalisation is increasingly fostered not through formal extremist organisations, but within digital spaces where play, subculture, and identity experimentation are normalised.

### **A Shift in Radicalisation Pathways**

Across Southeast Asia and beyond, pathways to radicalisation are becoming more decentralised, informal, and socially embedded. Extremist ideas now spread through diffuse digital ecosystems – gaming platforms, social media feeds, online forums, and encrypted chat groups – often encountered incidentally rather than through intentional recruitment.

In Indonesia, authorities have uncovered cases where children and teenagers were exposed to IS narratives through online games and messaging apps without ever meeting a recruiter or attending a gathering. Similarly, the Singapore case shows how ideological commitment can develop through sustained online immersion and peer reinforcement, even without direct organisational contact.

The Indonesian case is particularly instructive. Far-right extremism lacks deep historical roots in Indonesia, yet the student's ideological references closely resembled perpetrators of mass violence elsewhere. This has raised concerns about transnational ideological diffusion, where global extremist narratives are absorbed by youth who are detached from local religious or political contexts. In both Singapore and Indonesia, radicalisation gradually developed through exposure, repetition, and identification rather than through recruitment.

### **Why Adolescents Are Especially Vulnerable**

Neuroscience helps explain why adolescents are especially vulnerable to this process. The teenage brain is highly sensitive to reward, novelty, and peer validation, while the neural systems responsible for impulse control and long-term judgment are still developing. Digital platforms are intentionally designed to exploit these vulnerabilities.

Jonathan Haidt, in [The Anxious Generation](#), argues that algorithm-driven platforms amplify emotionally charged and identity-affirming content, creating feedback loops that intensify engagement. Likes, in-game status, peer recognition, and shared symbols provide immediate emotional rewards. In both the Singapore and Indonesian cases, prolonged screen exposure and immersion in online subcultures appear to have displaced offline interactions, physical activity, and moderating social influences.

[Self-identity theory](#) offers further insight. Adolescents are actively negotiating who they are and where they belong. Extremist spaces – whether jihadist or far-right – offer clear identities such as hero, defender, or warrior, accompanied by simplified

moral narratives that divide the world into good and evil. In gaming and online subcultures, role-play can gradually evolve into self-identification. What begins as playacting or simulating may turn into belief when reinforced by peers and repeated exposure, particularly in environments lacking real-world social friction and emotional regulation.

### **Technology as Accelerator**

These vulnerabilities are intensified by contemporary digital infrastructure. Today, the reach of extremist movements is transnational but local in its expression. Narratives, symbols, and grievances circulate across borders through digital media, and are then reinterpreted through personal experience and local frustration.

Artificial intelligence-driven recommendation systems play a critical but under-acknowledged role in this process. While official case accounts often mention [“algorithmic reinforcement”](#), they rarely name AI as a key factor in driving radicalisation. A young person may consume propaganda produced elsewhere, react emotionally to external conflicts, and interpret these events through feelings of injustice, isolation, or anger. Digital platforms compress distance and time, making global grievances appear immediate and personal.

Online ecosystems also excel at moralising emotion. Feelings of loneliness, resentment, or confusion are transformed into action-oriented narratives that legitimise hostility and, in some cases, violence. Encrypted platforms and private groups – whether jihadist or far-right – normalise extreme beliefs while shielding them from challenge, making detection more difficult and radicalisation more covert.

### **Family, Schools, and Community as Frontline Defences**

Both the Singapore and Indonesian cases highlight the critical role of families and schools as frontline defences. In Singapore, the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) plays a vital role by providing religious counselling, engaging families, and offering credible alternative interpretations before extremist ideas become entrenched in identity. In Indonesia, the Ministry of Education worked with psychologists, school counsellors, and the National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) to evaluate ideological exposure, mental health, and online influences.

Indonesia has also expanded digital literacy programmes, strengthened Pancasila-based civic education, and improved collaboration between schools and local authorities to spot early warning signs of violent subcultures. These measures reflect growing recognition that not all forms of violent thinking align with conventional terrorism profiles.

Importantly, many youth cases are detected not only through online surveillance but also via early reports by parents, teachers, peers, or community members who observe behavioural changes – such as withdrawal, fixation on violent content, or obsession with extremist symbols. However, these cases also raise puzzling questions. If families were aware of troubling beliefs but did not raise concerns, did they lack knowledge, confidence, or access to trusted intermediaries?

This points to a shared capacity gap. Families require more than awareness; they need practical skills, a common language, and access to trusted support networks. Strengthening “functional elites” – religious leaders, educators, counsellors, and mentors who are visible, connected, and credible – can provide families with clearer pathways for guidance.

## **Policy Responses and Shared Lessons**

Early detection must be combined with continuous engagement. Radicalisation is a process, not a single event. Protecting young people, therefore, requires reducing harmful digital exposure while revitalising offline socialisation. [Singapore's 2026 policy banning smartphone](#) use during school hours reflects this strategy. Indonesia has similarly encouraged stricter school controls on device use and expanded supervised extracurricular activities.

Restrictions, however, must be combined with positive alternatives: structured physical activities, mentorship programmes, youth religious circles, and community service initiatives that rebuild identity and belonging offline. Digital parenting programmes and child-focused digital wellness initiatives – now emerging in both countries – are promising, but only if they are part of broader ecosystems of trust and community support.

## **Conclusion**

The Singapore Roblox incident and the attack on the Indonesian school illustrate how youth radicalisation has evolved in the digital age. Modern extremism is now decentralised, driven by identity, and rooted in online spaces where play, subculture, and a sense of belonging intertwine with beliefs.

Effective responses must therefore go beyond enforcement alone. Family engagement, stronger school and community ties, renewed face-to-face interactions, and access to trusted religious and civic guidance are essential. Understanding radicalisation as a psychological, technological, and social process is key to preventing online play from becoming a solemn pledge and digital immersion from causing real-world harm.

---

*Noor Huda Ismail is a Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Ahmad Helmi Bin Mohamad Hasbi is a Senior Research Analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at RSIS.*

---

*Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.*

