The Return of Communalism: Singapore Cannot Afford to Ignore Even the Earliest of Warning Signs

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On December 21st, 2025, a mere four days before Christmas, alarm bells replaced the comforting chimes of church bells of St. Joseph's Church in Bukit Timah, upon the discovery of a suspicious item in the church compound.[1] The item, which resembled an improvised explosive device, triggered a full police cordon and a response from the Singapore Armed Forces' Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Explosive Defence Group (CBRE). Weeks earlier, the Masjid Al-Istiqamah Mosque in Serangoon North faced a similar incident when a parcel, later found to contain pork, sparked security concerns.

The symbolism is impossible to ignore. A church. A mosque. Both sacred spaces. Both targets of extremism in an era where religious identity has become weaponised. While neither event resulted in any casualties, they can be interpreted as an unsettling warning of what is to come - the quiet erosion of the taken-for-granted safety that has defined Singapore's post-independence story. These events, though occurring at separate times and in different places of worship, share a troubling commonality: they reflect growing communal sensitivity in Singapore's social fabric.

What we are witnessing is not terrorism, but rather the early re-emergence of communalism; a dangerous dynamic where a strong sense of belonging to a particular community, especially a religious community, can lead to extreme behaviour or violence towards others.[2] Although Singapore has not experienced large-scale communal unrest since the 1960s, race and religion remain the most visceral and dangerous fault lines in our society.[3] Our complacency now will lead to greater carnage down the line if we, as Singaporeans, do not take this matter seriously.

Communalism: Old Dynamics, New Forms

In the wake of the Israel–Hamas war, communalism has shown signs of its return to Singapore and Southeast Asia. These views are driven by globalised identity conflicts, online self-radicalisation, and ideological spillovers that echo early ISIS-era dynamics. Spanning not only religious extremism but also far-right and ethnonationalist movements.

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[1] Fatimah Mujibah. "Man Arrested under Anti-Terrorism Laws after Suspicious Item Found in St Joseph's Church in Bukit Timah." *The Straits Times*, December 22, 2025. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/man-arrested-under-anti-terrorism-laws-after-suspicious-item-found-in-st-josephs-church-in-bukit.

[2] Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, s.v. "communalism," accessed January 15, 2026, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/.

[3] Internal Security Department (Singapore), *Contending with Communalism* (22 September 2025), https://www.isd.gov.sg/our-functions/contending-with-communalism/.

This re-emergence of communalism does not necessarily mean Singapore is on the brink of widespread communal violence, nor does it suggest that our institutions have failed. On the contrary, Singapore remains one of the most resilient and well-governed societies in the region. However, resilience should not be mistaken for immunity. History teaches us that communal tensions rarely announce themselves loudly at first. They re-emerge gradually, through suspicion, silence, and polarisation among individuals, long before they erupt into something visible between communities. For a small city-state like Singapore, our national security rests as much on social cohesion as on military deterrence; the return of counter-communal pressures is a pragmatic concern, not merely a social one.

History Matters: Communalism was Never Defeated, Only Managed

Singapore's modern history offers a sobering reminder of what happens when communal tensions spiral out of control. The 1964 race riots were not an aberration, nor were they the product of a single trigger. They emerged from a volatile mix of political mobilisation, racial anxieties, and external influences. The violence left a deep imprint on the nation's collective memory and shaped the state's post-independence approach to race, religion, and national security.

Many of the institutions Singaporeans now take for granted were forged in response to this trauma. These range from laws safeguarding racial and religious harmony to interfaith dialogue platforms and firm controls on hate speech. Over time, these measures proved effective. Communal violence receded from daily life, and harmony has become normalised to the point where it feels permanent.

Yet history does not disappear simply because it is well managed. It lies dormant, easily awakened by new conditions. Singapore's success in suppressing communal conflict paradoxically makes it harder to recognise its early return. While tensions may no longer be overt, in today's digital age, they tend to surface indirectly and spontaneously in online discourse and imported narratives spread through social media. They exist as isolated incidents that appear unrelated until viewed together in totality and under the lens of communalism.

The lesson from history is not that communalism is inevitable, but that it is persistent. It adapts to new environments, and today's digital, globalised, and emotionally polarised landscape is particularly conducive for its return.

The Israel–Hamas War: A Global Radicalisation Catalyst

The Israel–Hamas conflict has functioned as more than a geopolitical crisis. It has become a catalyst for global identity. For many individuals, the war is not processed through strategic or humanitarian frameworks, but through moral binaries of victim and oppressor; of "us" and "them." These narratives are then filtered through personal grievances, religious identity, political ideology, and social media echo chambers.

This phenomenon is not new, but it is embedded in recent history. During the rise of ISIS[4] in the mid-2010s, Southeast Asia witnessed a wave of self-radicalisation that did

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[4] The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged during the Syrian conflict and distinguished itself from earlier jihadist groups through its sophisticated use of social media and online propaganda.

not depend on direct organisational contact.[5] Individuals consumed propaganda online, internalised grievance narratives, and in some cases attempted to travel or carry out attacks independently. The defining feature of that period was not the strength of ISIS as a group, but the power of its ideas to mobilise individuals remotely.

Since the Israel-Hamas conflict began on October 7th, 2023, the Internal Security Department (ISD) has dealt with six self-radicalised Singaporeans who either supported or prepared to engage in armed violence related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More alarmingly, half of the eight Singaporeans issued orders under the Internal Security Act between July 2024 and June 2025 were youths aged 20 or below. The youngest was 15 years old, a female student who pledged allegiance to ISIS via an online chatbot within weeks of consuming propaganda.[6]

What should terrify policymakers the most is that the threat is no longer unidirectional - it is reciprocal. While some young Muslims are being radicalised by ISIS narratives framing Gaza as an apocalyptic battleground, young non-Muslims are increasingly and simultaneously consuming far-right extremist (FRE) content that portrays Islam as an existential civilisational threat. These ideologies progressively mirror one another in structure; they frame identity as under siege, legitimise hostility towards out-groups, and portray violence or exclusion as defensive acts. For example, two Singaporean youths, aged 17 and 18, were detained in late 2024 and early 2025 for planning mass shootings at five mosques in Singapore, explicitly emulating Christchurch terrorist Brenton Tarrant.[7] They identified themselves as "East Asian supremacists," convinced that the "Great Replacement" theory applied to Singapore, where Malays and Muslims supposedly threatened Chinese demographic dominance.

This is communalism in its modern form; an ideology spreading as a contagion across communal lines, feeding off one another's narratives of existential threat. When one community radicalises, it validates the threat perception of another, which in turn justifies further radicalisation. The cycle accelerates in the algorithmic petri dish of social media, where grievance finds endless amplification and nuance dies in the comment section. Communalism does not require violence to succeed; it only needs suspicion to spread, leaving both Singapore's minority and majority communities vulnerable.

The Dangerous Comfort of Dismissal: The 38% Problem

Highlighting the danger of social media is the previous example of St. Joseph's Church. Over the two days that The Straits Times provided live updates on the suspicious item discovered at St. Joseph's Church, the newspaper's Telegram channel became an unexpected barometer of public sentiment. Across the six news posts documenting the incident, readers responded with 1,253 laughing emojis.[8]

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[5] Internal Security Department (Singapore). *Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism*. Last updated September 22, 2025. https://www.isd.gov.sg/our-functions/countering-terrorism-and-violent-extremism/.

[6] Internal Security Department (Singapore). *Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2025* (Singapore: Internal Security Department, 2025), https://www.isd.gov.sg/news-and-resources/singapore-terrorism-threat-assessment-report-2025/.

[7] Internal Security Department, *Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2025*.

[8] Emoji reaction count observed on The Straits Times Telegram channel at the conclusion of the St Joseph's Church incident coverage (26 December 2025).

Pause on that number. Over a thousand people found the disruption of a church service, the deployment of bomb disposal units, and a suspected terrorism-related arrest sufficiently amusing to react with laughter. This was not nervous laughter born of relief. It was dismissal, the reflexive trivialisation of an incident that our Home Team agencies treated with utmost seriousness.

This response reveals a sentiment far more dangerous than ignorance: the comfortable assumption that "nothing ever really happens here". Singapore's decades without a successful major attack have bred a generation that views terrorism as abstract, theoretical, something that happens elsewhere. Suspicious items become fodder for memes. Evacuations are bureaucratic overreactions. Arrests are curiosities, not warnings.

However, therein lies a statistic that should genuinely haunt policymakers. According to ISD's Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report, a healthy 88% of respondents said they would contact authorities if they spotted suspicious behaviour or items in public spaces. Yet only 38% would do the same if they believed a loved one (a family member, relative, or friend) was displaying signs of radicalisation.[9] This shocking statistic reveals more than hesitation; it signals a deep discomfort with confronting extremism when it becomes personal. What is stopping reporting is fear, stigma, uncertainty, and misplaced loyalty compounded by a dangerous complacency that Singapore's success in curtailing extremism has made terrorism feel like a distant fantasy.

Families worry: Will my child be detained? Will we be stigmatised? Are we overreacting to "just online talk"? These concerns are understandable, but dangerous. ISD's case files reveal that early reporting has prevented multiple attacks and allowed at-risk individuals to receive timely intervention.

Consider the 17-year-old ISIS supporter detained in September 2024, who planned a knife attack near Tampines West Community Club during his school holidays. His parents had noticed that he was watching videos of foreign preachers. They advised him against consuming such materials, but they did not follow up and check on him when he disregarded their advice. He subsequently admitted he would have executed the attack if not for ISD's timely intervention.[10] Family members and friends are best placed to notice changes in behaviour and alert the authorities if they suspect their loved ones have been radicalised. One cannot sit idly and assume that suspicious behaviour will not amount to anything just because we live in Singapore.

The radicalisation timeline has also accelerated dramatically. Algorithms, encrypted communities, and AI chatbots streamline the radicalisation process and compress the window for intervention. The average time from first exposure to extremist content to full ideological commitment has halved over the past decade, falling from 24 months pre-2015 to 12 months between 2021 and 2025 (Koh, 2025). For the 15-year-old female ISIS supporter who was issued a Restriction Order in February 2025, radicalisation took mere weeks. This is why normalising early reporting is a national security imperative. Reporting is not betrayal, it is care. ISD's approach is rehabilitative, not purely punitive. Individuals receive psychological counselling,

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[9] Internal Security Department, *Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2025*.

[10] Internal Security Department, *Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2025*.

religious guidance from RRG volunteers, mentorship programmes, family visits, and educational support. The goal is reintegration, not permanent exclusion.

However, even the most robust rehabilitation programs can only succeed if they are activated in time; the path to rehabilitation must first be paved by those closest to the person at risk. National security in today's digital age begins at the dinner table, in the classroom, in the Kopitiam conversation where someone says, "I'm worried about my nephew". These are not threats to privacy; they are expressions of communal responsibility that enable early intervention before ideology hardens into violence.

Conclusion: History as a Warning, Not a Comfort

Singapore's history teaches us that communal harmony is fragile, peace is constructed, not inherited, and external conflicts can fracture internal cohesion with terrifying speed. The 1964 riots demonstrated what happens when imported grievances find local fault lines. Six decades of institution-building have made communal tension less visible, but today's threats are more psychological, faster-moving, and technologically amplified, often invisibly singling out vulnerable individuals or small groups at a time.

Communalism is returning not because Singapore has failed, but because the global information environment has shifted tremendously. Algorithmic radicalisation, ideological hybridisation, and the erosion of gatekeepers mean that vulnerable individuals can encounter extremist content accidentally, adopt it rapidly, and prepare for violence independently. The incidents at St. Joseph's Church and Masjid Al-Istiqamah are warnings. So are the eight self-radicalised Singaporeans dealt with under the ISA in the past year. So are the 1,253 laughing emojis that treat terrorism as entertainment rather than an existential threat. So is the 38% gap in willingness to report loved ones showing signs of radicalisation. These are early signals, not definitive proof of collapse, but early signals ignored become crises.

History shaped Singapore's present by teaching us the cost of communal fracture. Whether it shapes our future depends on whether we choose to act early, together, and without fear.

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