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The Arrest of Mas Selamat Kastari: Why the Silence?

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The Malay and Bahasa Indonesia extremist websites and forums are notorious for their relentless glorification of those whom they regard as their mujahid, regardless the situation. Narratives are spun to either elevate the status of terrorists as martyrs or depict the authorities as oppressing the ummah. Why then the silence over the arrest of Mas Selamat Kastari this time?

MAS SELAMAT KASTARI received the usual veneration in the extremist websites when he escaped the Singapore Internal Security Department Whitley Road Detention Centre on Feb 27, 2008. Spurred by the event, forum participants were engaged in a heated debate, a rare occurrence in the usually closed echo chamber of the jihadi Internet. The salafi forums deployed their standard narrative; Mas Selamat's escape was divinely blessed, simultaneously creating justification for their glorification of Mas Selamat. A more interesting line developed, highlighting the possibility of the fugitive being a part of a conspiracy generated by the Singapore government to garner intelligence for the purpose of disrupting the remains of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network. The stir lasted for about two weeks, and then there was silence.

Contrary to expectations, this mute persisted even after the recent arrest of Mas Selamat reported by the media on May 8, 2009. The norm of the extremist online community is to comment on any high profile arrest, and offer a relentless defence and glorification of those whom they regard as their mujahid or holy warriors. The glorification narrative is consistent irrespective of the outcome of an action. The point is the message of a victorious fight and fueling the flames of enmity, propelling further the spirit of waging violence.

The arrests of JI leaders Abu Dujana and the Bali bombers illustrate this. Narratives for each case spun two perspectives: elevation of the status of terrorists as soldiers and martyrs, sacrificing their lives for the ummah, and messages which underscore the malevolence of the authorities for their oppression against the ummah. Given the nature of Mas Selamat's recapture, one has to ask: why is the Internet mum at the arrest of Mas Selamat this time? Not only was there an absence of forum discussion on the issue, reports on the case too were non-existent.

Was the conspiracy theory correct?

First is the idea that the escape was just a ruse to disrupt JI. If this claim were true, one would expect the reaction on the net to be one of “I told you so”. The comments should have been fast and furious in the condemnation of those who praised the escape. It would highlight the news that a plot was disrupted as evidence of the conspiracy. How does a skilled and dangerous terrorist live within easy reach of his former captors, and fail to launch an attack of any scale? The entire conspiracy theory is difficult to support. However, conspiracy theories do not have to be factually true to trigger extensive discussions in online forums.

A circle of protection

The second possible answer is security. Forum users are mindful that the security services are monitoring the forums. Thus, downplaying the case of Mas Selamat by remaining silent reduces the chance of exposing information, including possible morale problems resulting from the arrest.

Tradecraft materials found over the last five months tend to support this view. Forums have been actively distributing what appear to be at least items discussing counter-intelligence tradecraft. Of particular interest is one describing detailed ways to meet with an escapee without the risk of being detected. There was commentary on this, including several who commented they had received emails on this subject. As the title and details of the document remain obscure, perhaps remaining silent on the recapture is an effort to further conceal methods discussed in the document.

The cordon of a particular topic amidst the continuation of a smooth-sailing forum needs an attentive administrator monitoring all forum traffic rigorously. If indeed the exclusion of news on the arrest of Mas Selamat was intended, then perhaps, it must have been especially the forum administrators who have played the crucial role of selective publishing of participants’ comments. This absence of any form of reporting on the issue has been constant throughout prominent websites and forums. This is probably because of the close affiliations they have, as seen in their online activities. Nonetheless, with the absence of concrete evidence, this remains as a mere conjecture.

The Indonesian elections

The mainstream media is at times overwhelmed by news; websites and forums are no exception. One or two stories may dominate a new cycle to the exclusion of the other, even important, stories. During the period 1 April to 9 May 2009, the main regional media was dominated by the pending Indonesian elections. The extremist websites were no different. Apart from their regular updates on Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine, the extremist websites condemned democracy and the elections as forbidden in Islam. It is thus possible that there were too many topics to talk about so Mas Selamat was kept out of the discussion forums.

Is he a Celebrity?

It is not clear what status Mas Selamat had within the wider jihadi movement. Until his escape, his public profile was quite low, and while he is a significant operative, he was not a “face” of JI like Abu Dujana or the Bali bombers. The escape was the event that catapulted him to fame. The fact that he was recaptured before he went operational diminished any possibility of him becoming a legend. There was therefore little demand for comment from the extremists on the web, only a resounding silence.

Lessons from the Internet

One can learn a lot about the extremist’s perspectives by following them on the Internet. Ideology,

strategy, and tactics are freely discussed. The influence of individual thinkers and operatives can be measured by the amount of discussion they generate from the wider jihadi community. Some of this is clearly driven by the mainstream media and their perception of individuals and events. But critically, the topics that permeate the extremist web offer powerful clues about who and what is important to them.

Given his operational and escape history, one would expect that Mas Selamat would have a higher profile in the wider community. The resounding silence would suggest his celebrity status is as shallow as Britney Spears's husband.

The region is clearly safer with the recapture of this skilled terrorist; his public seems to have already lost interest. As it is unlikely Mas Selamat will be free for many years, one can hopefully say, "Your 15 minutes are now up." The extremists seem to be saying, "So long Mas Selamat, we hardly knew you." Thankfully both may be right.

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