

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Mr Yang Razali Kassim.

Religious Rehabilitation Group: Female Volunteers Ten Years On

By Nur Irfani Saripi

Synopsis

This year marks a decade of the Religious Rehabilitation Group's work in religious counselling for women. Over the years, the number of female Muslim religious counsellors volunteering with the RRG has grown, and so have their challenges.

Commentary

WHEN THE Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) was officially formed in April 2003, it had only 11 members. All of its volunteers were male *asatizah* (religious teachers, advisers and counsellors) as the rehabilitation work at that nascent stage was concentrated on understanding and countering the radical ideology of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) detainees.

As religious counselling for the detainees and those under Restriction Order (RO) progressed, there was a realisation that their wives should be offered religious counselling as well. Acknowledging the religious and cultural sensitivities -- as counselling is usually conducted one-to-one in a private setting -- female religious advisers were invited to join the RRG in 2005.

Emergence of the *ustazaat*

Despite the lack of religious counselling for the wives in the early years, the welfare of the detainees' families was not neglected. Understanding that these families might experience emotional trauma and financial difficulties, the Aftercare Group (ACG) was swiftly formed in February 2002, shortly after the first wave of the JI members' arrest. The ACG comprised voluntary Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) which provided a range of services including counselling, financial assistance, looking for employment for detainees' spouses and educational assistance for school-going children.

The assistance began from the period of detention and, if necessary, would continue even after the detainees are released. While the ACG provides material welfare support, the RRG focuses on the religious aspect of the rehabilitation programme.

In February 2005, five *ustazaat* (*ustazaat* is the Arabic plural term for female religious advisers, teachers and counsellors; the singular noun is *ustazah*) joined the RRG. Their role is to provide

emotional support and religious counselling to the wives of both JI detainees and former JI detainees under RO. Four more *ustazaat* have since joined the RRG, which currently has a total of 36 religious clerics among its members.

Importance of religious counselling and aftercare for wives

Although the JI members' wives were not detained, they should be equipped with a rightful understanding of the religion as they might have been influenced ideologically by their husbands. With religious guidance, they will then impart the right teachings to their children and help to minimise the latter's resentment.

Engaging the families by effectively challenging the radical ideology and replacing it with the true understanding of Islam that teaches peace and moderation will also undermine their sympathy towards and support for extremism. The counselling process has yielded positive results over the years. Some of the wives have themselves requested for religious counselling from the RRG.

The religious rehabilitation and aftercare programmes offered are evidence that the community embraces the families as part of their own, neither discriminating against them nor stigmatising them. Most importantly, it is an effort to prevent a regeneration of extremists.

The role of the *ustazaat* of the RRG is not only confined to giving counselling. As part and parcel of the RRG's effort in countering radicalisation, they are also involved in giving talks at seminars, forums and various other platforms on the work of the RRG and the threat of radical ideology. The RRG *ustazaat* play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion in Singapore's multi-racial and multi-religious society.

Challenges facing RRG

There are three key challenges confronting the RRG. Firstly, the group needs to keep abreast of the changing terrorism landscape. After the two waves of arrests in 2001 and 2002, the JI network in Singapore had been dismantled. Out of the 66 that have been detained since 2001, more than four-fifths have been released. As years go by, the threat of terrorism has changed from being al-Qaeda/JI-centric to one focused on the self-styled Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS).

In Singapore, two families had travelled to Syria to join the conflict. Several Singaporeans had also intended to travel to Syria or expressed interest to join the fight. The RRG has been observing the ISIS phenomenon and studying its ideology so as to be able to counter it effectively.

The RRG has in fact produced two public education pamphlets, *The Syrian Conflict* and *The Fallacies of ISIS Islamic Caliphate* to raise awareness of the ISIS threat and to debunk the ISIS' self-proclaimed caliphate. The second pamphlet comes in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil versions and these have been distributed to the mosques. Several educational institutions have also requested them. In addition the RRG has produced short video clips and posted them online to counter the ISIS narratives.

Secondly, it is important to recruit young *ustazaat* as the RRG prepares for the next generation of clerics to continue counselling people radicalised by narratives such as that of ISIS. Thirdly, a small segment of the community remains sceptical of the RRG. To address this, it tirelessly conducts community outreach programmes to raise awareness of its work.

RRG's motivations

In spite of the challenges, the RRG has not allowed the spirit of altruism of the group to wane. On the contrary, members have been even more motivated to carry on the voluntary work. The *ustazaat* find the counselling sessions rewarding, especially when they witness a positive change in the behaviour and thinking of the ladies they have counselled.

They perceive their work with the RRG fulfilling on both the spiritual and patriotic levels. Spiritually, it is a form of *da'wah* (missionary work) and *ibadah* (act of worship). They are also aware that the

RRG's voluntary service contributes to preserving Singapore's national harmony, stability and security. The inclusion of the *ustazaat* has strengthened the role and contribution of the RRG.

Today, as the world faces the threat from ISIS, the RRG feels that it must continue its efforts to help counter its extremist narrative and inoculate Singaporean society just as the RRG has done in the wake of JI.

Nur Irfani Saripi is an Associate Research Fellow of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore and also a volunteer of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG).

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg