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COUNTER-IDEOLOGY: REMAINING VIGILANT DURING ECONOMIC SLUMP

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Efforts in combating terrorism require the involvement of the general public and the authorities. The current economic downturn may, however, distract public awareness on the need for counter-ideological work.

ON WEDNESDAY 30 July 2008, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, a renowned Muslim scholar, recipient of India's third highest civilian honour and founder of the Centre for Peace and Spirituality, said in a press conference in New Delhi: "Violence begins from the mind and every violence has an ideology. The solution is to counter it by evolving another counter-ideology." In response, a blogger with the pen name Ashok, wrote: "For us in India, such terrorism needs to be combated and eliminated by intensifying all efforts, both at the administrative level by urgently beefing up our intelligence and security apparatus, and the political level by seeking a solution to real or perceived 'injustice' done to some sections". Less than four months later, a group of gunmen attacked Mumbai.

Pivotal Role of the Public

Political will, security forces, and laws are insufficient in the prevention of terror. Ultimately, it is the public that plays a pivotal role. There are three main reasons why the public's role is crucial in combating terrorism:

Firstly, the main target of terrorist ideologies is the innocent public. Hence, the more the public is aware of the danger of radical ideology, the less appealing will such ideology be.

Secondly, the public can act as the eyes and ears of the state to detect terrorism threats and thus help ensure the country's safety. Being highly vigilant against potential threats can mitigate and even prevent such attacks. Security consultants point out that all terrorist operations are preceded by a process of intelligence gathering by their operatives. Citizens therefore are always in an excellent position to recognise threat indicators associated with such target surveillance.

Thirdly, public involvement in combating terrorism is an important contributing factor to the success of counter-ideology work. Personal relationships, be they social, familial or professional, make dissemination of counter-ideology much easier because the source is often more easily accepted than when done by people in authority.

Economic Downturn and Public Vigilance

The current global economic crisis is likely to make people more inward-looking and focused on meeting their basic needs and their families'. Authorities will be in the same dilemma -- to spend decreasing resources on helping people cope, or invest in facing a vague and distant threat posed by violent extremism?

The potentially toxic combination of an inward-looking public and a distracted government opens political space for the extremists. If the downturn deepens, it is only natural for terrorist and extremist groups to exploit the increasing poverty and sense of socio-economic injustice for their own violent ends. People are going to seek simple answers to the complex situation affecting their lives. Extremist groups are adept at this.

In September 2008, the British government warned that the economic slump could result in increasing support for radical groups and in fuelling terrorist recruitment. In a leaked government memo entitled 'Responding to Economic Challenges', it was written that "there is also a risk of a downturn increasing the appeal of far-right extremism and racism, which presents a threat as there is evidence that grievances based on experiencing racism are one of the factors that can lead to people becoming terrorists".

The most effective way to detect, deter and prevent the above is through an intense awareness campaign in collaboration with the grassroots. The prime message should encourage public involvement as it is an important contributing factor to prevent radical ideologies from taking root in the community. An alert and motivated public is the best defence. The obvious question is how can this be built in a world of decreasing resources? Fortunately, it can, and is already taking place.

Across the world there are community leaders fighting extremism. However, the dilemma is that most of these efforts are supported by volunteers, which helps reduce the cost. But volunteers themselves are facing many of the same economic pressures as the general public. Financial constraints may force volunteers to devote less time to the effort, and thus erode the general public commitment.

In Singapore, organisations such as the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) should be aware of the potential negative impact of the economic situation to their counter-extremism work. They need to remain focused on the critical mission of vigilance against extremism and not get distracted by other issues. It is such a waste, if, after years of effort in counter-ideology, the body that is critical to maintaining public's vigilance becomes distracted by the current economic downturn.

Focusing on the economy is vital at this time. But the state needs to remain committed to educating the public on the dangers of terrorism and extremism. The authorities should take the initiative to keep reminding the public and community leaders about the threat of terrorism and educate them with the knowledge of threat indicators. They should do whatever is necessary to ensure that efforts on the ground are at least maintained. Otherwise the impact of the economic downturn could have larger, devastating consequences.

What Can be Done?

Since the discovery of the the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) plot in Singapore, the authorities have been organising briefing sessions for community leaders on developments and updates on the security

situation. More such sessions should be held, especially in the coming months, with a strong emphasis on the potential impact of the economic downturn. It should emphasise the need for public awareness of the terrorism threat that may jeopardise economic recovery and the overall national security.

Community leaders need to play their part at the grassroots levels. They should be advised that campaigns and activities to inculcate such public awareness should not be reduced. Initiatives could be shared with the community leaders, while at the same time encouraging them to be proactive and generate their own programmes. The RRG should intensify its community engagement initiatives with more talks and forums for the community and more articles in the mainstream media.

In his eulogy for the Singaporean victim of the Mumbai attack, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said: “That [ensuring no large scale terrorist attack to Singapore] is the job of our security authorities. But [it is] also the job of every Singaporean to be vigilant.” Singapore does not need a similar tragedy to drive its entire citizenry into vigilance against the threat of terrorism.

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