

Radicalisation and Resilience Case Study

Malaysia

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This case study is part of a series of in-depth reports on religiously motivated violent radicalisation – and resilience to it – in 12 countries. The series examines periods in which religious radicalisation and violence has escalated and analyses relevant policy and political discourses surrounding them. While seeking to identify factors that drove radicalisation and violence in each country, the case studies also critically assess programmes of prevention and resilience-building, identifying good practices.

This series was produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, secularism and religiously inspired radicalisation.

Countries covered in this series:

Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, France, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Tunisia and the United Kingdom.

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The EU-Funded GREASE project looks to Asia for insights on governing religious diversity and preventing radicalisation.

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

While exploring religious governance models in other parts of the world, GREASE also attempts to unravel the European paradox of religious radicalisation despite growing secularisation. We consider the claim that migrant integration in Europe has failed because second generation youth have become marginalised and radicalised, with some turning to jihadist terrorism networks. The researchers aim to deliver innovative academic thinking on secularisation and radicalisation while offering insights for governance of religious diversity.

The project is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr H.A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr Mila Mancheva from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr Egdunas Raciunas from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of the Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia). GREASE is scheduled for completion in 2022.

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GREASE - Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing Together European and Asian Perspectives

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Introduction

The threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia – especially in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines – has continued to rise, reaching a new level of intensity in recent years. While Islamic State (IS, also known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS], Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [ISIL], and Daesh) is currently going through a phase of readaptation and decentralisation after losing almost all its territorial control in Syria and Iraq by 2019, its ideology is still intact and continues to be propagated in cyberspace. Indeed, a recent analysis suggests that '[t]he loss of the territorial caliphate in Syria and Iraq will force the Islamic State – or some reconstituted offshoot – to seek new territory' (Henkin et al. 2020, 140). The groups, networks, personalities, and IS affiliates that operate outside the physical territories of the self-proclaimed caliphate are still active. Some are based in Southeast Asia where they continue to pose a danger. Incidents such as the 2016 Puchong grenade attack in Malaysia, the 2017 Marawi City siege in Philippines, multiple attacks in Indonesia in 2017, and the Mako Brimob siege and Surabaya church bombings in Indonesia in 2018 all seem to confirm the concerns that had been raised by the Singapore prime minister Lee Hsien Loong in May 2015 when he stated that Southeast Asia had emerged as a 'key recruitment centre' for ISIS: 'The threat is no longer over there; it is over here' (Lim 2015; Ramakrishna 2017, 4; see also Temby 2020).

This case study's main purpose is to examine religiously attributed radicalisation and extremism in Malaysia and the state's measures and responses to curb such threats from harming and disrupting social order in the country.

Methodology

Data for this report are drawn from interviews with relevant stakeholders in Malaysia and desk research. Interviews with policymakers, practitioners, faith leaders, members of civil society organisations, security sector specialists, and researchers have been conducted to gather relevant data on the subject. We conducted interviews with members from the following stakeholder groups: Dr Ahmad Farouk Musa (Islamic Renaissance Front), Dr Zulkfli Bakri (Federal Territory mufti), Ustaz Zamihan Mat Zin (JAKIM officer-cum-spiritual adviser for the rehabilitation programme), Dr Danial Yusof (Peacebuilding and Civilisational Development Flagship Project), Dr Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies), Ustaz Abu Hafiz Salleh Hudin (executive council member of Bersatu Youth), and Dr Ahmad El-Muhammady (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation and panel member of the rehabilitation programme committee).

Conceptualisations of radicalisation: radicalism, extremism and terrorism

State institutions

Malaysia has a clear and defined formula of what constitutes terrorism. The National Security Council (NSC, Majlis Keselamatan Negara [MKN]), is the supreme policymaking body in Malaysia for all matters pertaining to national security. It defines terrorism as:

‘unlawful use of threat or the use of force or terror or any other attack by person, group or state regardless of objective or justification aim at other states, its citizens or their properties and its vital services with the intention of creating fear, intimidation and thus forcing governments or organisations to follow their impressed will including those acts in support directly or indirectly’.

Malaysia’s position on terrorism is outlined in Directive No. 18 issued by the NSC and includes ‘denouncing any form of terrorist acts’ (Ahmad Zahid 2016a, 4). However, when it comes to radicalisation and extremism, the official and policy-based definition is not necessarily clear and lacks consensus. Moreover, it differs between different government institutions, with some holding narrower views and others asserting broader, more wide-ranging perspectives. Furthermore, those definitions have often shifted over time. This paper argues that while there are important variants and nuances to how the government conceptualises radicalism and extremism, the unifying element to its approach is the emphasis on the centrality of ideology, particularly religious and political mindsets.

In a speech titled ‘De-rooting Radicalism and Extremism’ delivered at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, the former deputy prime minister and minister of home affairs, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, formulated extremism in religion as something that stands opposite to ‘moderation’ (*wasatiyyah*). However, he also expressed reservations about how the terms ‘Muslim moderates, fundamentalists, extremists, and radicals’ are ‘interpreted mainly from the Western perspective’ in mainstream academic discourses, noting that moderates are largely regarded as ‘those Muslims who reject or challenge many fundamental principles and practices of Islam, and at the same time uncritically accept secular, Western and other non-Islamic moral standards’ (Ahmad Zahid 2016b). This follows the description of ‘another type of extremism and radicalism within the contemporary Muslim community’, comprising a ‘vocal group of Muslims who want to transform and liberate Islam and the Shariah, based on some extreme modern and secular philosophical worldview, and its conception of human rights and obligations, as well as its notion of progress, development, and happiness’ (ibid.). This line

of argument is shared by the former prime minister, Najib Razak, who in public speeches has launched blistering attacks on the ideologies of 'human rights-ism', 'liberalism', 'secularism', 'humanism', and 'pluralism' as growing threats to Islam (Ahmad Fauzi 2016a, 31). In June 2014, Najib also appeared to praise the courage of IS fighters during a United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) function (Chi 2014). Despite the insistence of the Prime Minister's Office that Najib was being quoted out of context (*Malay Mail* 2014), 'the fact that [he] could attribute any positive traits at all to [IS] in the public domain was more revealing about the religious orientation of his advisors-cum-speech writers than a slip of the tongue on his part' (Ahmad Fauzi 2016b, 24).

While it is fair to argue that extremism exists in all sorts of orientations, whether religious or secular, such a tone is extremely concerning as in practice it is used as justification to exert pressure on and silence the voices of some Islamic movements in Malaysia and to dismiss the secular nature of the Federal Constitution. This is particularly evident in the state-sponsored Islamisation policy conducted in an increasingly intolerant, authoritarian, and chauvinist manner to the extent that it directly challenges Malaysian citizens' existing constitutional rights and freedoms, i.e., freedoms of religion, expression, and association. Examples include the banning of books, the prosecution of individuals or groups for their involvement in practising 'deviant' teachings, and the raiding of private premises 'to enforce sharia, including for violations such as indecent dress, ... alcohol consumption, or *khalwat* (close proximity to a nonfamily member of the opposite sex)' (United States Department of State 2019). The state itself, and many leading political parties, have been complicit in this long-term Islamisation process.

Public perceptions

Several surveys conducted over the past few years by the US-based Pew Research Center show a growing appeal of Islamist extremism in Malaysia. While the numbers might still affirm the fact that Malaysian Muslims are generally uninterested in radical notions of Islam, some data pointing in the opposite direction appear staggeringly high when compared to similar numbers for Indonesia. This is shocking since the general impression – in view of the greater number of terrorist attacks in Indonesia – is that Indonesian Islam is much more radical than Malaysian Islam. These figures have in fact been quoted by several commentators as a warning against the possibility of Malaysian Muslims gravitating towards Islamist violence as manifested by the likes of IS (Ahmad Fauzi 2007). Pew surveys, for instance, show that just 8 per cent of Malaysian Muslims are concerned about Islamic extremism, compared to 53 per cent of Indonesia's Muslims. Likewise, 18 per cent of Malaysian Muslims view suicide bombing as justifiable – more than twice the rate of their Indonesian co-religionists, which is at 7 per cent (Pew Research Center 2013; Ahmad Fauzi 2016b, 2018).

The growing influence of intolerant Islamic views among Malaysian Muslims is also reflected in other surveys. A 2011 study of Malaysian youth aged 15 to 25 by the Merdeka Center indicated that more than 70 per cent wanted the Qur'an to replace the Federal Constitution (Merdeka Center 2011). Follow-up research by the Merdeka Center in 2014 showed that 44 per cent of the Malay Muslim community believed that *hudud* (the set of laws and punishments specified by the Qur'an) can be implemented in Malaysia fairly (Merdeka Center 2014). A 2017 survey of Johor residents by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute indicated that 75 per cent of Malay respondents supported *hudud* for Muslims, and that 90 per cent felt that increased Islamic religiosity was a positive development for Malaysia (Norshahril 2017). It is important to recognise that the findings are not conclusive enough to generalise that the majority of Malaysian Muslims are supporters of radical ideas, but these numbers do suggest that mainstream Islamic discourses in Malaysia are heavily coloured by intolerant and exclusivist signifiers, thus creating fertile ground for mainstreaming militant and violent interpretations of Islam within Malaysia's Muslim community.

Country background

According to the Department of Statistics (2020), Malaysia's current population is estimated at 32.7 million, marking an annual growth rate of 0.4 per cent over the previous year. Census figures from 2010 indicate that 61.3 per cent of the population are Muslim; 19.8 per cent embrace Buddhism; 9.2 per cent are Christian; 6.3 per cent practise Hinduism; and the other 1.3 per cent are believers of Confucianism, Taoism, or other traditional Chinese folk religions. Other minority religious groups include animists, Sikhs, and the Baha'i community (Department of Statistics 2010; see Fig. 1).

The number of self-described atheists in Malaysia is unknown as the topic is very sensitive and rarely studied. A global poll released in 2015 by Gallup International, a worldwide network of leading opinion pollsters, found that 3 per cent of Malaysians fall under the category of 'a convinced atheist', while a further 20 per cent are described as 'not a religious person' (Gallup International 2015). Even though there is no law banning atheism, many atheist groups or individuals have experienced immense pressure from the authorities. For example, a casual meeting of 20 Malaysians organised by a local chapter of Atheist Republic in 2017 triggered a huge backlash from members of Najib Razak's government. Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, a deputy minister in charge of Islamic affairs, demanded an investigation to determine if any Muslims were involved in the meeting. Shahidan Kassim, a minister with cabinet status, suggested 'forced education for the atheists' involved (Higginbottom 2017). The repressive measures were justified with references to the first of the five principles of *Rukun Negara* (National Philosophy) that every citizen is expected to believe in God (Interview, Federal Territories

Mufti, April 2019). Such practices resumed under the leadership of Mujahid Yusof, the minister of religious affairs in the previous Pakatan Harapan government (2018–2020) and are also conspicuous in the present Perikatan Nasional government (2020–).

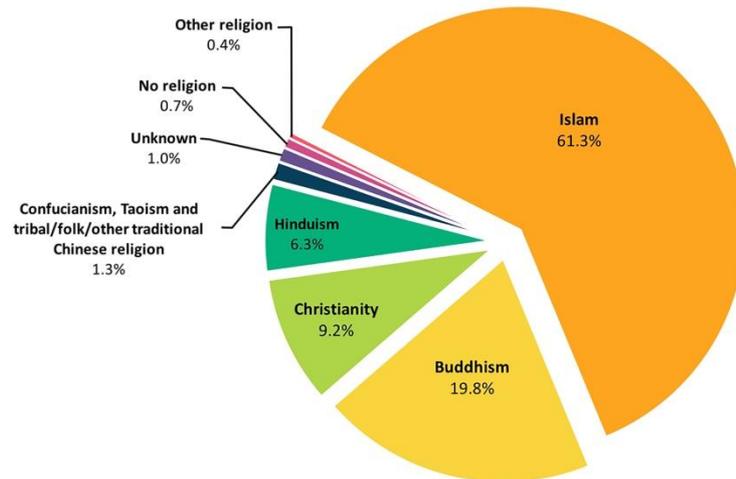


Fig. 1. Religious affiliation in Malaysia, 2010 (*Source: Department of Statistics 2010, 9*)

In Malaysia, as a society known for its multireligious and multiracial attributes, racial and religious characteristics tend to be conflated in the realms of politics, cultural expressions, and everyday social norms. The Muslim population comprises mostly ethnic Malays, who account for approximately 61 per cent of the population (Statista 2018; Table 1). Article 160 of the Federal Constitution determines that all ethnic Malays are Muslim (Malaysia 2010, 151). Only Sunni Islam is recognised, while the Shafi'i school assumes the legal basis for Islamic jurisprudence. Other forms of Islam, especially Shi'ism, are deemed illegal and subject to punitive action by the religious authorities. Some even regard Shi'ism as a religion that promotes violence that must be prosecuted on the grounds of national security (Interview, Federal Territories mufti, April 2019; Interview, JAKIM officer-cum-rehabilitation spiritual adviser, April 2019; Interview, Bersatu Youth executive council member, April 2019).

Buddhism is the second largest religion in Malaysia, after Islam, and its history in the Malay world stretches back before the period of Islamisation in the fourteenth century. The Buddhist religion, specifically the Mahāyāna tradition, is mainly practised by ethnic Chinese. In reality, most Chinese Malaysians follow a combination of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese folk

religion, but when pressed to specify their religion will identify as Buddhists (Tan 1983, 217–219; Jnawali 2009, 31).

As of 2010, Christians comprise 9.2 per cent of Malaysia's total population, of whom 59.2 per cent are non-Malay Bumiputera, 27 per cent Chinese, 4.4 per cent Indian, 0.9 per cent 'others', and 8.6 per cent non-Malaysian citizens (Department of Statistics 2010). Two-thirds of the Christian community live in East Malaysia, in the states of Sabah and Sarawak (Department of Statistics 2010). Rather than an 'ethnic constituency', Malaysian Christianity has instead 'been closely associated ... with the metropolitan English-speaking urban middle class of Chinese and Indian ethnic origin', particularly in academic research (Wong and Ngu 2014, 263). The major Christian denominations include Anglicans, Baptists, Brethren, non-denominational churches, independent Charismatic churches, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Roman Catholics. Catholics comprise the majority of the total Christian population due to its far longer history of missionary work and indigenisation in the region than the Protestant missions (Roxborough 1992, 54–55).

Hinduism is the fourth-largest religion in Malaysia; 92.4 per cent of the total Hindu population is ethnically Indian (Department of Statistics 2010). Many Indians Malaysians worship major deities such as Ganesha, Murugan, Krishna, Rama, and Mariamman, whereas others pray to *kaval deivam* (guardian deities) such as Muneeswarar, Muniyandy, Kaliyamman, and Madurai Veeran, with small shrines being set up in homes and residences, workplaces, and estate borders (Subramaniam 2014, 20).

Religion	Total	Malaysian citizens							Non-Malaysian citizens
		Total	Bumiputera			Chinese	Indian	Others	
			Total Bumiputera	Malay	Other Bumiputera				
Islam	17,375,794	15,762,012	15,538,928	14,191,720	1,347,208	42,048	78,702	102,334	1,613,782
Christianity	2,617,159	2,392,823	1,549,193	—	1,549,193	706,479	114,281	22,870	224,336
Buddhism	5,620,483	5,459,065	33,663	—	33,663	5,341,687	32,441	51,274	161,418
Hinduism	1,777,694	1,666,365	2,941	—	2,941	14,878	1,644,072	4,474	111,329
Confucianism, Taoism and tribal/folk/other traditional Chinese religion	356,718	351,073	131,407	—	131,407	218,261	716	689	5,645
Other religion	111,759	96,378	50,347	—	50,347	8,576	36,599	856	15,381
No religion	202,763	183,808	132,560	—	132,560	49,320	824	1,104	18,955
Unknown	271,765	101,832	84,469	—	84,469	11,387	192	5,784	169,933
Total	28,334,135	26,013,356	17,523,508	14,191,720	3,331,788	6,392,636	1,907,827	189,385	2,320,779

Table 1. Total population by religion, 2010 (*Source: Department of Statistics 2010, 82*)

Drivers of religiously inspired radicalisation and assessment

Some 547 people, including foreign nationals, have been arrested in Malaysia since 2013 on various terrorism-related charges. By August 2015, 121 Malaysians – among them civil servants, educators, and the 70 military personnel – had been arrested in connection with terrorist activities (Ramakrishna 2017, 5), while arrests on similar charges numbered 175 as of 25 March 2016; six suspected terrorists died as suicide bombers while 11 others have been killed (Samuel 2016, 72). In 2017, 300 individuals were arrested for links to IS (Maza 2017). As for Malaysians who went abroad as

foreign fighters, it was reported in 2018 that there were at least 53 – 24 men, 12 women, and 17 children – still in Syria fighting for IS. In the period from May 2018 to May 2019, over 80 people were apprehended with some 25 planned terrorist attacks were foiled (Arianti et al. 2020, 18). In 2019, several terrorist plots involving IS-linked lone wolves and ‘wolf pack’ cells (including militants with no affiliation to terrorist networks) were thwarted by the Royal Malaysian Police’s Special Branch.

While Islamic conservatism’s growing influence described earlier is a relatively new trend, Malaysians’ involvement in militant activities is not a new phenomenon. Malaysia began to encounter the rise of transnational Islamist terrorist groups in the last decades of the twentieth century. The Soviet-Afghan war (1979–1989) and Afghan civil war (1989–2001) triggered the participation of Malaysian students in militancy outside the country. In the 1980s and 1990s, Malaysian police also detected movements of some Malaysian students into Pakistan and Afghanistan to join jihadi movements against the Soviet occupation (Ahmad 2018, 97). When the war ended, the network of Afghan war veterans who returned to Malaysia continued to operate under two groups: Jemaah Islamiyah and Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM). After many KMM leaders were detained without trial under the Internal Security Act for allegedly trying to overthrow the government through violent means in the name of jihad, the group became completely paralysed in the early 2000s. Ongoing surveillance and rehabilitation programmes by the police in collaboration with Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM, Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia) has restricted the movement of the key leaders and gradually lessened their influence.

The rise to global prominence in 2014 of Islamic State renewed the motivation of some of the inactive groups and individuals involved in militant activities in the past. Many Malaysians who joined IS were initially grouped under a special militia called Katibah Nusantara, which was established in September 2014 and based in the town of al-Shaddadah, in the al-Hasakah district of northeast Syria. Through extensive research and interviews conducted with IS sympathisers and supporters in Malaysia, Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman suggests that Malaysian IS affiliates should be categorised in two groups:

‘First of all, it seems to me that we have to recognise that IS groups in Malaysia and the networks of Malaysian foreign fighters in Syria as a separate category with different orientations and motivations. In Malaysia there are generally two groups in place. First, the significant category of IS in Malaysia represents the leadership of the older Malaysian jihadi generation. They were responsible in setting up the networks of jihadis in Malaysia with the aim to launch their operation within the country itself. The second category, also the largest recruitment pool, represents the wider

public audience whose attention was captured by means of the social media and who do not have any ties to former jihadi networks in the region' (Interview, Dr Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, April 2019).

The recent trend also indicates that Malaysian IS operatives are no longer interested in joining the fight in Syria, but in bringing the struggle to Malaysia by establishing their own proactive and independent initiatives (Interview, Dr Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, April 2019; Interview, JAKIM officer-cum-rehabilitation spiritual adviser, April 2019). This led to the formation of various isolated terror cells like Kumpulan Tandzim Al-Qaeda Malaysia, Briged Al Jamaah, Kumpulan Fisabilillah, Kumpulan Daulah Islamiah Malizia, Al Qubro Generation, and Kumpulan Gagak Hitam (Mohamed Nawab and Aida 2018, 5).

State and non-state approaches to religiously inspired radicalisation

Anti-terrorism legislation

Before the introduction of the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (Malaysia 2012, SOSMA) and the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 (Malaysia 2015, POTA), the Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) was the main legislation used by the government to curb terrorist activities in the country. The ISA sanctioned initial detention without trial with unlimited renewals based solely on the will of the home minister. Its predecessor, the Emergency Regulations Ordinance 1948, was introduced to Malaya as a preventive measure against supporters of the insurgency led by the Malayan Communist Party between 1948 and 1989 (Khor 2013, 66–68). The ISA was repeatedly criticised by various civil society organisations including the Malaysian Bar Council, the Malaysian Human Rights Commission, and international human rights groups because its 'provisions violate fundamental international human rights standards, including prohibitions on arbitrary detention and guarantees of the right to due process and the right to a prompt and impartial trial' (Dhanapal and Johan 2018, 50).

After the ISA was repealed in 2011, the government of Najib Razak enacted SOSMA, which was followed by POTA, and Special Measures against Terrorism in Foreign Countries Act (SMATA) in 2015. These laws have been introduced to empower the Malaysian authorities to deal with terrorist threats and provide the necessary procedures for arrest for serious offences under Chapter VI and VIA of the Penal Code, including offences against the state and terrorism-related offences. Under SOSMA, initial police detention is cut to a maximum of 28 days, after which the attorney general must decide whether to prosecute and on what charges.

The enactment of POTA has raised considerable concern among human rights activists. Chronologically, the act was passed by Parliament in a session that lasted until late into the night, after the last motion to amend it was defeated by 79 votes for and 60 votes against (Parliament of Malaysia 2015). POTA has prompted extensive protests and criticisms from those who claim that, in essence, the act contains provisions for detention without trial, similar to the infamous ISA. However, supporters of POTA argue that the ISA contained different aims and elements and that the executive's powers have been removed and placed under the Prevention of Terrorism Board (POTB) elected by the king. It is also argued the 60-day detention without judicial review under the ISA has been amended to require court approval (ibid.)

However, the provision to detain suspects without trial was not the only feature of POTA that came under attack. The provisions immunising decisions of the POTB from judicial review (Section 19) also drew heated criticism. Section 6(1) of POTA, which allows suspects' detention for a maximum of 59 days (including the initial remand period) before being brought to the POTB, and Section 13(1) of POTA, which gives powers for further detention of up to two years and which can be renewed if the POTB decides there are reasonable grounds, were also criticised. These provisions, under which the POTB can detain a suspect without any judicial review for as long as two years, appear to contravene principles of the rule of law, especially the principles of natural justice, the right to a fair hearing, the courts' power to review the way these principles are implemented, and courts' accessibility for all (ibid.).

SOSMA was also criticised by human rights groups and civil society organisations when the act was used in 2016 to arrest 15 prominent civil rights activists who organised the Bersih 5 rally – a peaceful, democratic protest that took place on 19 November 2016 to call for a cleaner electoral system. When asked whether SOSMA had been abused for political gain, one of its drafters, Zamihan Mat Zin, rejected the assertion, saying that the arrests were justified (Interview, JAKIM officer-cum-rehabilitation spiritual adviser, April 2019).

SUARAM, a leading human rights organisation, detailed its criticism that SOSMA violates the right to a fair trial. The group's investigation, published in a 2018 report, found 'that during the 28 days remand period, detainees are kept in solitary confinement; in constantly lit cells and subjected to prolonged interrogation on a daily basis'. There have also been complaints of 'torture and other forms of abuse by investigating officers'. The former inspector-general of police, Khalid Abu Bakar, has also revealed that it was part of police standard operating procedure for detainees to be kept in solitary confinement and not be provided with the basic amenities (SUARAM 2019, 6). In August 2018, 160 detainees reportedly went on hunger strike in Sungai Buloh prison, demanding the abolition of the SOSMA.

	Terrorism	Trafficking/ immigration	Organised crime	Total
SOSMA	73	28	22	123
POCA	—	—	908	908
POTA	1	—	—	1
Total	74	28	930	1032

Table 2. Statistics on detention without trial in 2019 (*Source: SUARAM 2020, 4*)

Rehabilitation programme

Malaysia's deradicalisation programme represents a concerted effort between the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Royal Malaysian Police, and religious institutions such as JAKIM that tend to the spiritual aspects of rehabilitation (Interview, JAKIM officer-cum-rehabilitation spiritual adviser, April 2019). The programme separates 'hardliners' from wavering and less extreme terrorists to minimise radicalisation within the programme and provide greater flexibility in extracting any necessary intelligence from the detainees. The 'soft' approach has become the rehabilitation programme's main driver.

While the programme is a joint effort between various institutions, it is still mainly led by the police and in particular by Special Branch. The role of Special Branch is focused on national security, and in practice it is the programme's main architect. Deradicalisation consists of three stages: the early detainment period, the detainment period, and the post-detainment period. In the first stage, under the provisions of SOSMA and POTA, the individual who commits an offence prejudicial to national security can be detained for a maximum of 60 days for investigative purposes. At this stage, the detainee has already undergone several levels of assessment, and if the authorities are satisfied that the detainee no longer poses a threat then he may be released. If not, he will be sent to the Kamunting detention centre for two years – a period that may be further extended if deemed necessary.

The second stage begins once the detainee is placed at Kamunting, which is under the purview of the Prisons Department. There, a detainee will undergo a rehabilitation programme to 'disengage' him from his past activities. The general nature and tone of the programme are mostly religious, with great emphasis on the principle of re-education and rehabilitation; re-education

focuses on 'correcting political and religious misconceptions of militants', while rehabilitation is employed to carefully monitor militants upon their release (Noor and Hayat 2009, 3).

A detainee's time at Kamunting is built around three distinct phases. The first is an orienting phase, lasting around three months, when the detainee becomes acquainted with the running of the centre and receives, along with religious counselling, an initial exposure to the programme. Once the detainee begins to show some positive responses, he enters the second phase, personality enhancement, where correction of the detainee's radical ideology intensifies (Harrigan 2013, 151). At this stage, a programme conducted by JAKIM was developed to explore and detect detainees' misinterpretations about Islam. During the process of religious counselling, several experts such as *ustaz* (teachers) and *ulama* (scholars) will be invited to clarify the aspects of religious doctrine and detainees' belief system to highlight where they have the wrong perspectives on Islam.

When describing the programme's religious dimension, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (minister of internal affairs under an earlier Barisan Nasional government) declared that 'these deradicalisation programmes are based on the "Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah" approach, an Islamic jurisdiction to counter the extremist interpretations of Islam' (Ahmad Zahid 2016a, 13). Zamihan Mat Zin, a JAKIM official seconded to the Prisons Department to take charge of rehabilitation of Islamist extremists under detention, elaborates further:

'JAKIM's approach is based on Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah framework. This means that we are in opposition to Salafism/Wahhabism ideologies that are responsible for fuelling. For the detainees to be recognised as fully reformed they will be assessed through few components; (a) their behaviour during class, (b) written exams, (c) interviews with their counsellor, religious officers, and the necessary officers in the rehabilitation management... Their movements will still be monitored after their release to ensure that they do not fall back into their previous terrorist-related activities, the terrorist narrative with violent proposals, as well as liberal Islam that represents Western influences of Islamic interpretation. Thus, it is important that our countering violent extremism measures include restricting these narratives in every state' (Interview, JAKIM officer-cum-rehabilitation spiritual adviser, April 2019).

It is interesting to note that Zamihan Mat Zin sees the approach adopted by JAKIM in oppositional terms, by referring to its contrast with Salafism/Wahhabism, on the one hand, and liberal Islam, on the other. Zamihan himself was already infamous in Islamist circles for his vituperative attacks against fellow Islamists identified as being either Wahhabi-Salafi or 'liberal' in

orientation. Among those heavily criticised by Zamihan as the bearer of radical ideologies was Abu Hafiz Salleh Hudin, a young Salafi preacher and executive council member of Bersatu Youth. Abu Hafiz refuted Zamihan's views, claiming that he had conflated the variety of views among Salafis themselves into one homogenous group. In practice, anyone 'who refuses to follow the mainstream understanding of Islam will be labelled as extremist Salafi or Salafi jihadi' (Interview, Bersatu Youth executive council member, April 2019). These contradictory narratives further highlight the polemical elements within the rehabilitation programme and how it has also been politicised and shaped by the clash between two ideological Islamic camps – the neo-conservative group and the neo-Salafis (Interview, Dr Mohamed Nawab, April 2019).

When asked about the sort of Islamic narratives JAKIM brings to rehabilitation, especially with regard to controversial issues such as hudud, the establishment of an Islamic state, and the freedom of religion, Zamihan replied:

'Our narrative of Islam is about peace, kindness and love. Our session involves long hours of dialoguing with the detainees to clear their distorted understanding of Islam. When they told us that Malaysia is not an Islamic state (hence the need for jihad), we told them to refer to Article 3 of the Constitution. The provision clearly shows that Malaysia is an Islamic state. When asked about hudud, we shall tell them that laws fall under the category of *takzir* [punishment for offences at the discretion of the judge or ruler], and this is not necessarily an abandonment of hudud per se. The death penalty in Malaysia is akin to hudud punishment, although it would be much truer to the spirit of hudud if it is changed to beheading instead. Regardless, even if the Malaysian government did not fully embrace hudud laws this does not mean that one can simply kill the political leaders. This won't solve anything. The emphasis is on *da'wah* [proselytising]' (Interview, JAKIM officer-cum-rehabilitation spiritual adviser, April 2019).

Hence it is clear that the hudud components are not abandoned in the Islamic narrative used in the rehabilitation programme. The same view was shared by the Federal Territory mufti, Dr Zulkifli Bakri, when he referred to Brunei as a model for Malaysia to emulate with regard to applying hudud (Interview, Federal Territory mufti, April 2019). This clearly demonstrates that the Islamic narratives proposed by JAKIM and the rehabilitation programme are still divisive, intolerant, exclusionary, and heavily centred on restoring the creed rather than focusing on the environment that creates the grounds for radicalisation in the first place, i.e., the continuous politicisation of Islam by political figures and religious institutions (Interview, Convenor of Peacebuilding and Civilisational Development Flagship Project, April 2019).

The third and final stage of detention at Kamunting focuses on rehabilitation. Detainees continue to be counselled by spiritual advisers as they engage in other programmes aimed at their reintegration into society, including courses on anger management, parenting, emotional management, as well as vocational training and new skills to facilitate their post-release employment (Harrigan 2013, 151). An agricultural programme has also been set up at Kamunting, aimed at the centre's self-sufficiency in the production of vegetables, cattle, and fish (Zuhrin 2014).

While undergoing rehabilitation, a detainee has access to the rights of reassessment and opportunity to appeal to the advisory board, which meets to review the case every six months. To be recognised as fully reformed, a detainee is assessed by (a) behaviour during class, (b) written exams, and (c) interviews with their counsellor, religious officers, and the officers in the rehabilitation management (Interview, JAKIM officer-cum-rehabilitation spiritual adviser, April 2019). Detainees' movements are monitored after release to ensure that they do not fall back into their previous terrorist-related activities. Family also plays an important role in the deradicalisation process. The potential for social marginalisation and indoctrination by extremist groups as families turn to them for support highlights the prominence that families have in the process. A special scheme was therefore developed through the Royal Malaysian Police to provide financial assistance to the families of the detainees to ease their burden since many detainees were the family breadwinners (Ahmad Zahid 2016a, 13). Other government agencies such as Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (Social Welfare Department) and Pusat Zakat (Alms Centre) also assist these families by providing the financial support that they need on a daily basis. Engagement sessions between case officers and ex-detainees are held continuously, even after detainees have been released.

Education

As part of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy against violent extremism and terrorism, the government has set up various programmes and institutions to develop effective communication strategies and counter-narratives against violent extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda, IS, and their affiliates. Institutions such as Special Branch, JAKIM, the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), and the Counter-Messaging Centre (under the jurisdiction of the police) are responsible for coordinating among themselves to produce effective public campaigns aimed at 'winning hearts and minds of the segments of society that are normally targeted by extremist and radical groups for recruitment, support and funding' (quoted in Khor 2013, 65).

One of these initiatives has been the Jihad Concept Explanation Action Committee which was set up by JAKIM in 2015 'to address misconceptions about jihad at different social groups and institutions'. The initiative designed a series of engagements with communities at various levels, including mosques, and *suraus* (community prayer areas) as well as schools, universities, and via the internet (Muhammad Haziq 2017, 7). The spheres of social media have proven to be a very powerful tool for conveying and disseminating radical messages rapidly and convincing users to take a certain course, making social media platforms very strategic for extremist recruitment. According to a study by the Institute for Youth Research (IYRES), 85 per cent of 39 militants in Malaysia cited social media (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Telegram, and WhatsApp) as their main source of information (Institute for Youth Research 2017, 26). In response, the Malaysian government initiated the Regional Digital Counter-Messaging Communication Centre aimed at synchronising efforts to counter radical social media messages and present a more inclusive narrative of Islam in the region.

Crisis case study: Puchong attack

Malaysia experienced its first terrorist attack perpetrated by an Islamist extremist outfit on 28 June 2016. Two men using hand grenades set off an explosion at the Movidia nightclub in Puchong, near Kuala Lumpur, causing fear nationwide. The incident injured 8 people. Fifteen people were later arrested under SOSMA, and the inspector-general of police, Khalid Abu Bakar, confirmed that the attack was conducted under the direct orders of Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi (Akhi Wendy), a Malaysian member of IS in Syria. The most prominent Malaysian in Katibah Nusantara, Wanndy played the role of mediator between the newly recruited members in Malaysia and the central leadership in Iraq until his death in Syria in April 2017. Although he had been living in Raqqa since January 2015, Wanndy set up a Telegram group called 'Gagak Hitam' (Black Crow) to give orders and facilitate the terrorist operations at home. He recruited more than 30 Malaysian youths to support IS. Some gave a pledge of alliance (*bai'ah*) to him personally and to IS (Ahmad 2018, 102; Interview, Dr Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, April 2019).

Wanndy's initial involvement in IS was always been marked as a 'troubling narrative of self-radicalisation' (Muhammad Haziq 2016, 15). He had no prior links to any jihadist organisations, yet found his way into the ranks of IS and made himself into an image of a 'jihadist celebrity' among his followers. Raised in Durian Tunggal, Melaka, Wanndy migrated to Syria in February 2015 and joined the external operations wing of IS. Together with his Malaysian wife, Nor Mahmudah Ahmad, Wanndy lived in Syria planning and preparing attacks in Malaysia. Working with Rafi Udin and other operatives, Wanndy's task was to disseminate propaganda, recruit members, raise funds, and organise

attacks. Wanndy started to draw public attention when a 30-second IS-linked video posted on 22 February 2015 on his Facebook profile went viral. The video contained inflammatory messages accompanied by a gruesome beheading: 'This is punishment for a spy who betrays Islam [*sic*] ... a lesson to all'. Around this time, authorities also detected that Wanndy's Facebook posts were frequently updated with terrorist activities. He attributed his so-called jihad in Syria to a person to whom he talked on Facebook, where he came to learn about jihad (Muhammad Haziq 2017, 17). He used his online and social media presence to recruit members for attacks, actively creating new Facebook accounts after each one was banned, thus adding thousands of online friends.

Wanndy's modus operandi was a good illustration of how IS differs significantly from its predecessors in terms of using social media as a primary tool for recruitment and radicalisation. New media platforms such as YouTube, social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), and chat applications (WhatsApp and Telegram) are used extensively to lure and convince certain segments of society, especially youth and women, to embrace radical IS messages. For instance, 20-year-old Syamimi Faiqah, a former student at the International Islamic University College of Selangor, was lured into IS in October 2014 through Facebook. Another 22-year-old student from the Universiti Malaysia Perlis became an IS sympathiser after watching IS propaganda videos on YouTube (Mohd Mizan 2017, 15). In Singapore, Syaikhah Izzah Zahrah Al Ansari was arrested while planning to travel to Syria in June 2017. After being self-radicalised online, Syaikhah turned to Facebook to search for an IS supporter to marry and settle down with in Syria along with her young child. She aspired to be a 'martyr's widow' and forged networks with foreign online contacts to facilitate her plans to travel to the conflict zone while also frequently sharing and posting pro-IS content (Cheong 2017). Malaysian sources estimate that 75 per cent of IS supporters were radicalised online, indicating how sharing IS propaganda online built a community and promoted terrorism (*Straits Times* 2015). Muhammad Haziq (2016, 16) observes:

'Before Wanndy and other Malaysian militant personalities developed a cult-like following online, they relied on online extremist social media groups such as "Generasi al-Ghuroba" (Generation of the Foreigners) and "Rakyat Malaysia Bersama Revolusi Islam" (Malaysian Citizens For Islamic Revolution) which have existed since 2013. Their social media accounts came to popular attention only in 2014 by which time they had amassed thousands of Facebook followers. Some Facebook accounts had the maximum-allowed number of 5,000 friends. This large following was nourished through the constant updates of news which the fighters provided in the Malay language. Updates on their movements and lifestyle provided a

glimpse of life as terrorists in Syria, and served to contextualise and personalise the predominantly Arab-speaking terrorist groups for their Malaysian online followers. By 2015, the Malaysian online extremist community was predominantly pro-IS, with Wanndy being the most prominent Malaysian IS fighter online’.

As a prominent recruiter working for IS, Wanndy has been known to establish, organise, and communicate with IS-linked cells in Malaysia. His planning and preparations bore fruit in late June 2016 when one of his cells carried out the attack on the Movidia nightclub in Puchong. Initially, the Malaysian authorities ruled out that the incident was an act of terrorism. The Selangor deputy police chief, Abdul Rahim Jaafar, was reported as saying the attack was being investigated ‘as a case of attempted murder’ with investigators determining whether the attack was ‘motivated by business rivalry, vengeance, or if the suspects were targeting specific individuals at the nightspot’ (*Straits Times* 2016a). The Malaysian media and wire services reported the incident as a criminal act until IS claimed responsibility for the attack. In an arrest operation after Puchong, police seized a ready-made improvised explosive device meant for attacking high-ranking police personnel (Ngui and Fernandez 2016; Farik 2016). Police believed the terror suspects had eight more grenades to stage further attacks. Two of the Puchong suspects had received instructions to attack senior Malaysian leaders and police officers as well as judges because these three groups were trying to ‘block’ militant activity. The police revealed that two cell members were waiting for fresh orders to attack a Johor entertainment outlet with an M67 grenade that had been seized. A third man had received orders to attack the police headquarters in Kuala Lumpur and government complexes in Putrajaya (*Straits Times* 2016b).

Best practices and results

The nature of Malaysia’s strategic plan against violent radicalisation can be understood on three fronts: legislation, rehabilitation, and education. Part of the strength of the Malaysian efforts in combatting radicalism is that the initiatives are a collaborative effort between various ministries, including the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Communications and Multimedia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Some government institutions like JAKIM and its forerunners Pusat Islam (Islamic Centre) and Bahagian Hal Ehwal Islam (Islamic Affairs Division) – under the Prime Minister’s Office – Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia (Islamic Dakwah Foundation of Malaysia), and SEARCCT are also actively involved and are vital in executing some of the prevention and countering of violent extremism and counterterrorism measures. Among the many initiatives and programmes developed in the country, it is understandable that some have proved to be fully effective, some are less or partly effective, and

others may be completely ineffective. This section focuses only on two best practices that the Malaysian government has taken.

Rehabilitation programme

As discussed in the previous section, Malaysia's deradicalisation programme is different from that of many other countries in that it separates those detained under POTA and SOSMA from common criminals for several reasons: (1) to minimise radicalisation within prisons; (2) to create greater flexibility in extracting vital intelligence from detainees; and, more importantly, (3) to pursue the belief that detainees who have undergone radicalisation require a different type of rehabilitation.

The rehabilitation programme – or the human development programme as it is sometimes called – owes its success to several important features. First, it provides a multidimensional 'soft' approach to rehabilitation. It comprises discipline development, personality enhancement and development, and training in social skills. The main objective is to enable detainees to return to and reintegrate into mainstream society without much disjuncture since the modules in the programme are designed to gradually 'mould' detainees to the values and practices of the society from which they have 'deviated'. To achieve this aim, the programme approaches rehabilitation from 'a humanist worldview', in the words of the committee member Ahmad El-Muhammady – that is, one that treats those who were radicalised as 'fellow human beings, affected by various factors that have ultimately led them down the wrong path'. He notes that this softer rehabilitative approach is key to countering and preventing violent extremism. It also helps dismiss the stigmatisation that might follow detainees once they are rehabilitated: 'We shouldn't ostracise them as they deserved a second chance ... and if we make an effort to understand them, and what pushed them towards radicalisation, we can go a long way towards preventing future terror attacks' (Interview, Ahmad El-Muhammady, February 2019).

Youth-led campaigns pioneered by SEARCCT

As already noted, social media has proved to be a very powerful tool for conveying radical messages and influencing impressionable users to take a certain course, rendering it strategic for extremist recruitment especially among the youth. As the largest consumers of social media, it is hardly surprising that it is young people who most often succumb to extremist online narratives. Since September 2016, almost 80 per cent of the individuals detained in Malaysia for links to IS were under the age of 40 (Parameswaran 2017). A recent study on the threat of IS in Malaysian universities found that

those under the age of 25 are most susceptible to radical ideology as they are inexperienced and easily influenced (Mohd Mizan 2017).

The government responded by amplifying counter-narrative messaging and presence online and among youth groups via several programmes designed and led by SEARCCT. SEARCCT has been at the forefront of public campaigns against religious extremism among youths and university students since its inception. Formed in 2003 under the purview of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it has been very active organising workshops at the grassroots level and producing educational materials for public consumption, especially for youths. Two initiatives it has run for several years are worth mentioning: Targeting and Preventing Extremism for Youths (TAPESTRY) Workshops and Inisiatif Mahasiswa Muslim Perangi Ancaman Keganasan (IM2PAK, Muslim Student Initiative to Fight the Threat of Terrorism). The former is series of workshops designed to encourage youth participation in countering violent extremism efforts through video production. Participants are supported and encouraged to produce films, videos, or any visual materials that will carry the message of counter-extremist narratives to be shared among their peers, particularly through social media. IM2PAK is another initiative conducted by SEARCCT to reach out to Muslim undergraduates to counter active recruitment efforts at universities. It actively engages university students in hosting discussions, talks, and public campaigns on religious-based extremism, religious narratives used by terrorist organisations, and countering global religious narratives with '*naratif Nusantara*' (narratives from the Southeast Asia region). SEARCCT has also produced extensive research and materials on this issue: 'Youth and Terrorism: A Selection of Articles', 'Don't-Lah Weh: A Peer-to-Peer Resource Guide on Ensuring Your Kawan2 [friends] Never Becomes a Terrorist', 'Reaching the Youth: Countering the Terrorist Narrative', among others. Thomas Koruth Samuel (2016), a former director of research and publications at SEARCCT, summarises the uniqueness of these programmes as delivered by the youth to the youth. He emphasises that previous campaigns' failures were partly due to the inability to package messages in a language and style that appeal to the younger generation. By having youth-led programmes and supporting them with sufficient resources, the messages that the government seeks to deliver will have greater reach with its targeted audiences.

Conclusion

The Malaysian government's three-pronged strategy (legislation, rehabilitation, education) to combat violent radicalisation has been proven quite effective and vital in curbing the spread of terrorism-related activities. The first measure includes putting in place counterterrorism policies and legislative mechanisms to curb terrorism activities in the region, followed by strengthening 'operations of law enforcement, intelligence and security forces'

to carry the necessary security measures more productively (Ahmad Zahid 2016a, 3). The second measure involves devising a multifaceted rehabilitation programme to help deradicalise former militants and IS sympathisers who were detained under the anti-terrorism laws. The aim is to allow detainees to rejoin society with a more inclusive understanding of religions and religious extremism, as well as to help the authorities with necessary intelligence. The third measure is educational in nature and targeted towards the wider public. The aim is to combat the spread of extremist narratives circulating in various online platforms. These three measures form a comprehensive approach that has shaped the Malaysian success story in taming the threat posed by IS and its affiliates.

While Malaysia arguably scored quite well in suppressing radicalisation, it seems to fall short in two other dimensions that became the focus of the project, namely in maintaining its secular practices and pushing for more effective governance of religious diversity. Malaysia was established as a secular state, as guaranteed by the Federal Constitution. However, in recent decades the nature of constitutional arrangements – which include the provision that Islam is the religion of the federation and the scope of judicial power given to states – has become an urgent and divisive area of political and legal controversy, particularly through several well-publicised court cases involving jurisdictional disputes between sharia law and civil law. Over time, the secular basis of the federation has been weakened and the force of Islamisation that began in 1970s is becoming more prominent. Both the ruling Perikatan Nasional coalition (composed of Malay parties including UMNO, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, among others) and the opposition Pakatan Harapan alliance instrumentalise the language of religious politics, with some parties staking their political legitimacy and electoral fortunes on the promise of delivering ‘Islamic’ governance (Interview, Maqasid Institute, May 2019). This further retreat into religion and race discourses that normalise intolerant and divisive views within society will not only disrupt existing initiatives set to combat violent extremism and weaken inclusive and peaceful messages used for the public campaign, but also risks escalating the penetration of radical ideas into the mainstream understanding of religion. Various surveys cited in this report indicate that Malaysia is already heading in that direction. This phenomenon will pose the greatest challenge for maintaining governance over diverse religious groups and curbing the rise of violent extremism.

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