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CONTENTS

A NEW PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF RADICALISATION PROCESS TOWARDS VIOLENT EXTREMISM FROM THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The exact process of radicalisation and a framework that could provide a proper grasp of radicalisation process unique to the culture and societal values are still yet to be established especially an input from psychological perspectives. There is a lack of psychological understanding to the process that provides a comprehensive framework of radicalisation process based on Malaysian culture. This paper hopes to introduce a new framework with a focused understanding of radicalisation process for a unique country such as Malaysia. This is a commentary paper presenting a novel viewpoint on how radicalisation process should be understood from psychological perspective in the modern digital world and currently affecting a civilised society with majority Muslim community in Malaysia. Additionally, the paper proposes that the psychological process of radicalisation must be assessed via push and pull risk factors of radicalisation leading to a radical outcome which further varies from both violent and non-violent manifestation.

Keywords:

psychology of radicalisation, violent extremism, Malaysia, push and pull factors, risk factors

Radicalisation is an incremental process of adopting extreme ideologies and beliefs about political, historical, social, and cultural contexts, and the product is violent extremism (Borum, 2011a, 2011b, 2014, 2015). The risk factor of radicalisation refers to identified information through scientific inquiry describing either the characteristics, attributes, and traits of an individual, or the situations, contexts, and environments the individual or groups of individuals likely had encountered that could have a substantial influence on radicalisation process and its outcome (Borum, 2015; Kazdin et al., 1997).

The studies of risk factors provided a progressive understanding of what are the potential variables that could be related to the individual and the environment the individual lives in drawing the individuals towards violent extremism end. The results in turn assist in advancing preventative strategies to counter violent extremism.

Violent extremism in Malaysia is omnipresent since its colonial era. During the British colonisation up until post-independent, the country was threatened by the communist insurgency, between 1948 to 1989 (Talib, 2005). The guerrilla war began when the murders of three European planters in northern Perak and two Chinese businessmen in Johor were linked to the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) back in 1948. The group's main objective was initially to allow Malaysia to be liberated from British colonisation and turn it into a communist ruling government. The group was able to gain enough support from the trade union organisation in several states in Malaysia which enabled them to organise several protests causing social instability in Malaysia. During their lifetime, the insurgency had a total of 365 life casualties involving both the members of the movement and Malaysian security forces.

Fast-forward to the 21st century, Malaysia was threatened with another presence of violent extremist groups, the Jemaah Islamiyyah (JI) and Kumpulan Militan Malaysian (KMM) (Bakashmar, 2008). The formation of the group and its ideology was pre-dated in 1985. However, their existence was brought to national

attention in May 2001. The groups committed murder and attempted robbery at the Southern Bank Branch in the state of Selangor, Malaysia (Mohamad Aslam, 2009). From 1960-2001, Malaysia had recorded 13 militant-based extremist groups. Malaysia is commended for its success in the rehabilitation of convicted violent extremists (Khor, 2013). Around 2012 onwards, during the peak of the Syrian Civil War, there was a high number of supporters of Daesh ideology resulting in high arrests among Malaysians (Azmi & Yusa, 2018). Scholars in Malaysia have attempted to provide a grasp of their understanding and knowledge of the religious extremism phenomenon in the country (Mohamad Aslam, 2009; El-Muhammady, 2020). The exact process of radicalisation and a framework that could provide a proper grasp of the radicalisation process unique to the culture and societal values are still yet to be established especially input from psychological perspectives. At least to the author's knowledge, there is a lack of psychological explanation for the radicalisation process based on Malaysian samples. This paper presents how the radicalisation process should be understood from a psychological perspective in the modern digital world and currently affects a civilised society with a majority Muslim community in Malaysia.

THE PUSH AND PULL RISK FACTORS OF RADICALISATION FROM THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

My thesis research investigated factors that could contribute to the process of radicalisation. The factors are divided into two types, push, and pull risk factors of radicalisation. The push and pull risk factors were initially inspired by the work of Holmer (2013) and Vergani et al. (2020). From their work, I conceptualised that the push risk factors are factors internally embedded and personalised within the individuals or the structural conditions surrounding the individuals that are separated from the extremism yet push them to find significance in the extremist groups. Whereas the pull risk factors refer to factors that make the extremist ideology and their movement attractive or appealing. There is a lack of explanation on how the pull risk factors and how the push risk factors

push individuals towards extremism from their work alone. Therefore, I will outline the definition of the factors and their relative social and psychological elements. Lastly, I will present the outcome of the connection between the push and pull risk factors.

Pull Risk Factors of the Radicalisation Process

Pull risk factors of radicalisation refer to anything that exists outside the individuals themselves which include extremists' ideology, messages, or any attractive elements that the individual, or group of individuals, and their respective ideologies possess. The pull risk factors exist and cause the radicalisation process through an encounter with individuals who are vulnerable to the factor(s). The key element of the pull risk factors is the ability to attract or gain attention from a selected audience. The pull risk factors could be an encounter with members of extremist groups through meeting at the mosque or via social media platforms. The pull risk factors could be as exclusive as a one-to-one personalised encounter or via publicly available disseminated propaganda videos via social media or news platforms.

Future research that aims to investigate the pull risk factors are recommended to dissect the sample materials by looking at the following key elements: (1) the framing narrative; (2) the physical structure; (3) the method of deliverance.

- **Framing narrative**

  The framing narrative, alternatively referred to as the thematic content or the message, is deciphered from available materials formulated and disseminated by extremist groups or individuals. The element refers to the typology of content disseminated by focusing on the stories, the characters, the underlying morals, or messages that become the eventual key narratives of the groups' or individuals' extremist ideology. It is the essential element that provides value to the existence of the ideological movement. Without

The "who" would be the source or origin of the message, and the medium persons who ensure the successful transfer of the message from the deliverer to the target. The "who" could be family members, social peers, entrusted scholars, political leaders, or any individuals capable of either creating the message content, delivering the message or both. The "who" may not be specific to an individual, but it could also refer to established institutions or groups, such as a news broadcasting company or an international violent extremist group.

The element also investigates the "where" the message is transferred through. This would look at types of mediated technology that are used to ensure the deliverance of the message is successful. From my research, I found that the most used platform is WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook. However, it is noteworthy that there are other social media platforms that might be as influential.

Push Risk Factors of the Radicalisation Process

The push risk factors refer to any factors that place individuals vulnerable to the ideology or movement of violent extremism. The push risk factors would be identifiable in the presence of pull risk factors. I initially proposed that the push risk factors are direct predictors of the radical extremist mindset. This was tested in my research. However, it only received partial support in the results. Instead, what I found was that push risk factors could mediate the effect of pull risk factors causing radicalisation to occur. For example, in my research, I found that Muslims who are vulnerable to the message of Daesh online are among those who intend to seek repentance and lack religious knowledge. The push risk factors would be a lack of religious knowledge and feeling remorse or guilt as a Muslim. Meanwhile, the pull risk factors would be the Daesh messages which manipulated Islamic teachings and promised heaven for their followers as they proclaim to be the truest version of Islam. Therefore, as an improvement, in the new theory, the factors proposed have no direct correlation or influence

towards a radicalisation outcome. Substitutionally, the factors are presented as a mediator to the relationship between pull risk factors and outcome.

In its essence, the push risk factors exist, and they may loosely relate to violent extremist ideology and movement. For example, greater association with the religion of Islam may relate to Muslim religious extremism in the scope of practices. Another relevant case is the connection between Evangelical Christians and the Ku Klux Klan in the United States. However, it should not be an immediate expectation that individuals possessing or presenting these risk factors are radicalised. On the contrary, the push risk factors merely exist, allowing an understanding of what may make individuals vulnerable to radicalisation.

The push risk factors paint the complexity of the radicalisation process. There are innumerable factors that could fall under this category as its scope is wide ranging from personal individual factors to subjective living experiences, which further range from the political and economic structure of the globe to small regional societies.

The following are selected push risk factors that have received wide coverage in the literature of radicalisation and violent extremism and were also the focus of my study:

- **Personality**
  Traits reflective of human behaviours and temperament likely formed through combined genetic and environmental factors. Studies have found personality traits as a probable factor that increases vulnerabilities towards extremist narratives and willingness to accept deviant, violent ideologies (Corner et al., 2021; Horgan, 2014; Kalmoe, 2014; Post, 2007). My research found impulsive sensation-seeking as one key personality trait.

- **Youth**

  My study found that young adults who are ignorant of matters of religion are at risk. Past research also found similar patterns, where youths are vulnerable as they seek out meaning and opportunities to have a place where they feel belonged and are known (Harris, 2011; Harris et al., 2011).

- **Religiosity**

  In my research, the extremist convicts may lack truthful knowledge of Islam and are irreligious thus they seek out to extremist movements as means of repentance.

The Outcome of the Radicalisation Process

The radicalisation process eventually will create an outcome, an undesirable one. The connection between the push and pull risk factors leading to radicalisation outcome is illustrated in Figure 1. This theory proposes that once individuals are radicalised, they would show either one or more of the following measurable elements:

- **Support violence**

  Mindset, beliefs, and attitudes that violence is vital if it is committed for a reason or purpose that an individual or a group of individuals perceive as valuable or important

- **Willing to act**

  Mindset, beliefs, and attitudes that one is ready and willing to commit violence for a reason or purpose that an individual or a group of individuals perceive as valuable or important

- **Commit non-violent acts**

  Personally involved in non-violent activities because of the formed mindset

- **Commit violent acts**

  Personally involved in violent activities because of the formed mindset

The first two elements refer to the mindset of the individuals which is the immediate result of a successful radicalisation process. When individuals have gone through a radicalisation process, they may initially perceive that violence is important with the right purpose or reason. The perceived idea, or the perception, itself is at mere cognitive level and it does not necessarily indicate the person would eventually commit the violent action.
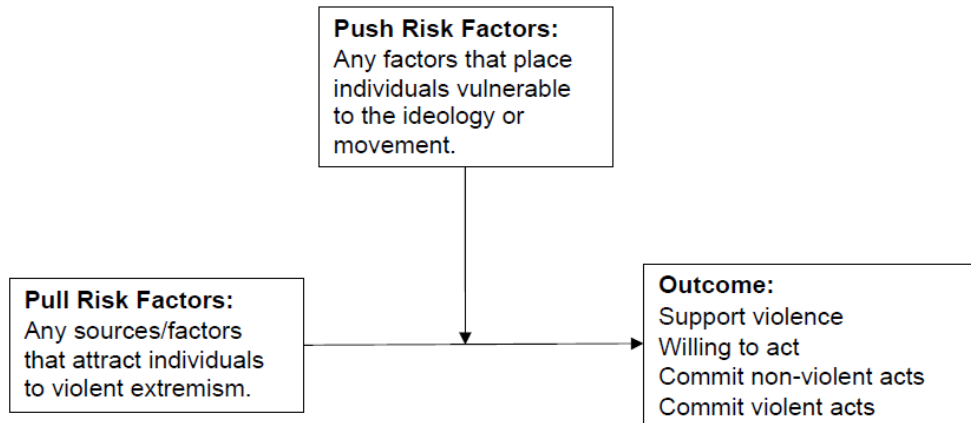
Figure 1. Push and Pull Risk Factors of Radicalisation towards Violent Extremism

The other two elements are more behavioural and thus visible through their actions. The actions are divided into two types, violent and non-violent. The classification is critical to provide a clear distinction that individuals committing violent actions may indicate significantly different personal characteristics compared to non-violent actors. Thus, the push and pull risk factors of the radicalisation process may differ for violent and non-violent outcomes.

LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

In my research, the convicts that were discussed during the interview with authorities and the assessment of the recruited violent-extremist convicts were treated as a homogenous sample despite the variation in reasons of conviction. During the research, the samples were found to be convicted of various offences

under the legal provision act of the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA) Daesh (1) involvement in chat rooms connected to Daesh; (2) having planned an attack in Malaysia; (3) having travelled to Syria and became foreign fighters. These differences were not accounted for in the analysis due to the small number of samples, especially among those who had a history of militant activities in Syria and committed violent attacks in Malaysia.

The variation in the extremist conviction causes may have affected the results, especially, since there might be different risk factors for different convictions. The variation was illustrated in past research, for instance, Borum and Fein (2017) specified there are variations in what motivates foreign fighters themselves and the elements differ compared to individuals who simply indicated support for violent extremism ideologies. Dillon et al. (2020) found that foreign fighters are likely to post content on threats to in-group members, societal grievances, and pursuit for significance while the supporters of violent extremist group posts focus on religion and commitment issues.

To conclude, there may be variations in violent extremism-related behaviours due to individual personal motivations which could lead to variations in risk factors influencing the radicalisation outcome. Future research may need to use a case study design to build a full and complete profile of each sample extremist first. In the case study, all the elements in the theory must be explored using various data collection methods, including interviews, responses on validated tests and case file reports by various authorities and practitioners. The findings generated could be reviewed and further categorised into groups based on the radicalisation outcome process indicator. The data collection process should be longitudinal, and data must be frequently updated to provide the latest information on the push and pull risk factors of radicalisation. The new information may assist in determining how to improve the current theory or increase its reliability across time and settings.

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