

VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Gendering Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Initiatives in Malaysia

Malaysian women are no longer harmless nor immune to violent extremism. It is thus imperative for gender perspectives to be included in the design and implementation of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiatives in Malaysia.

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The 2018 arrest of a Malaysian homemaker planning attacks on voters demonstrate the expansion of women's role in violent extremism. Credits: COUNTER TERRORISM DIVISION, SPECIAL BRANCH, MALAYSIA

Introduction

Malaysia is not immune to the dangers of violent extremist groups. This is due to two factors, namely, 1) its geographical location which is surrounded by conflict prone areas such as Southern Thailand, Southern Philippines, and Indonesia that have seen the formation of extremist groups such as *Jamaah Islamiyah* (JI) and *Abu Sayyaf*, and 2) Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country which is at risk of violent, misguided propaganda from religious extremist groups such as *Daesh*, *Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia* (KMM), *Jamaah Islamiyah*, and *Al-Ma'unah* resonating with its citizens. Consequently, the threats of Islamist-based extremist groups loom greater in comparison to other forms of extremism. This does not mean that threats from these other forms are non-existent in Malaysia. Noteworthy, violent extremism was also traditionally perpetuated by Malaysian men. However, as also seen regionally, Malaysian women can no longer be deemed harmless nor immune to it.

Malaysian Women's Expanding Roles in Violent Extremism



masculinity such as dominance and physical strength, women are becoming more susceptible to extremist ideologies, albeit in different ways. There are now more Malaysian women being directly tasked to conduct terrorism in Malaysia than simply supporting their spouses in conducting attacks. Examples include the case of *Kak Nor* who was arrested for plotting a terror attack on voters at a polling station in Puchong and a female Indian National member of a Sikh secessionist group planning attacks on local politicians. It might, thus, be argued

that there is an evolution of Malaysian women's involvement in extremism, from previously playing passive roles to more active roles. Previously, conservative extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda restrict and confine women to private spheres. However, groups such as Daesh have moved beyond mobilising women as supporters as seen in the two prior examples. However, it would be more accurate to deem this phenomenon as an expansion of women's roles as women continue to support the spread of extremist ideologies through their traditional gender roles such as raising their children using extremist group's values and being life partners with extremists. In other words, women's roles are becoming more multifaceted. As such, women's involvements in extremist groups also introduce several feminine traits into these groups especially in recruiting new members and supporters. This is evident from the romanticisation of *jihad* by *Daesh* recruiters as in the case of "The Green Bird of Jannah" and "Diary of *Muhajiran*" in which these online blogs were written by Malaysian and Indonesian females. These blogs recounted their personal journeys and experiences as wives of fighters who were often portrayed in appealing ways to women. These online mini-diaries and autobiographies which strategically emphasize female narratives were part of extremist groups' tactics to attract more women to join their cause.

Lack of Women Voices in Countering Violent Extremism in Malaysia

In February 2020, Malaysia has appointed the first woman to helm the



effort to tackle violent extremism. However, Malaysia is still behind in terms of having a consolidated CVE policy vis-à-vis legislation, rehabilitation and deradicalization programmes, and educational activities. Although this allows flexibility for the authority to thwart attacks, it also leads to two implementation issues.

First is the lack of clear leadership. Violent extremism is a security issue that cuts across geographical and social boundaries. Therefore, concerted efforts from various stakeholders in CVE are required. For example, as educational institutions are breeding grounds for the spread of extremist ideologies in Malaysia, thus, CVE efforts require coordination between security agencies such as the Royal Malaysian Police with the Ministry of Education/Higher Education and relevant religious authorities. Similarly, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development should also be involved in CVE efforts considering that the involvement of women in extremist groups is becoming more pronounced. Despite the need for coordination between different agencies, there has yet to be clear leadership on the implementation of CVE.

The second issue is the top-down approach that Malaysia employs as part of its CVE initiative. This stems from the great power given to the National Security Council through the National Security Council Act (NSCA). This widens the gender gap in the implementation of CVE as Malaysia's top security personnel including the high level political leadership in the NSC are mainly men and the exclusion of prominent women voices is glaring. Civil society especially women's movement has called the government to ensure the inclusion of women's voices in their CVE efforts. This is especially crucial considering the current roles women play in violent extremism which has expanded beyond the private sphere. The threat of women's active roles need to be taken seriously by the authorities as they may pose greater danger to the society due to the dual roles they play in supporting and perpetrating violent extremism.



In the same light that women are playing more active roles in violent extremism, their roles in CVE efforts are also pertinent. There is, thus, a need for the Malaysian government to proactively include gender perspectives in designing and implementing a robust CVE policy. This can be achieved by engaging the relevant government agencies such as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, academics, and civil society organizations to develop CVE modules that address women's needs to ensure that female perspectives are taken into account in every phase of CVE implementation. The role of women

in the community should also not be taken lightly as they can contribute meaningfully to raise awareness of radicalization through monitoring and education. Women often form close-knitted communities which enable them to detect early signs of radicalization around them as well as to provide the necessary support for affected families. Therefore, the inclusion of women groups in CVE efforts should be ensured by the government.

To assist them in such endeavours, women should be given access to training and education that will enable them to develop new skills that can be used to earn an income. This is crucial considering that women are often financially and socially dependent on the male members of their families and therefore, lack the power to make decisions. Contributing financially to their families could trigger a power rebalance enabling them to have a say in decision making.

Lastly, gender perspectives are needed in the process of deradicalization and reintegration of former female members of extremist groups. As women's circumstances in joining extremist groups often differ from men, deradicalization and reintegration programmes need to be gender-sensitive to break the cycle of violence. For this reason, the authorities have to refrain from stereotyping women as victims and start recognising their active roles in extremist groups. We also must identify the gendered aspects of women involvement in violent extremism to develop effective intervention via targeted CVE policies such as increasing the number of female security personnel in CVE and to have



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