

The public must fight too

By Nurul Izzati Kamrulbahri



Policemen and soldiers on patrol at KL Sentral during a terror scare in 2016. Malaysia, as part of the newly formed 'Wilayat Sharq Asiyya', must prepare itself for any eventuality.

THE advent of social media platforms has revolutionised the means of communication as everything is made possible with a single click. You can now have real-time conversation with your mother who lives 5,000km away on Skype, find a long-lost friend on Facebook, or even get a Twitter update on traffic situations from the comfort of your bed.

Undoubtedly, the vast availability and openness of social media platforms have had its fair share of negative consequences. As content is uploaded, disseminated and regulated within a very complex structure of cyberspace, online offences are becoming increasingly invisible and harder to pin down. The expanding public space online allows for exploitation and illicit activities to take place, including cyber bullying, black market trading, and online radicalisation.

Since the terror group Daesh first appeared in 2014, its narratives, recruitment models, as well as operational methods have been compared and contrasted with other terror groups such as Al-Qaeda. The group's success in utilising social media platforms to propagate radical messages and recruitment has undeniably reshaped the way terror groups are perceived and analysed today.

Particularly infamous for their modern approaches in propaganda design and production, Daesh has been able to penetrate the different demographic layers of a community. This is demonstrated by Daesh's venture outside the traditional setup, as it woos not just adults and males, but also women and children to join and take up unconventional roles.

Since Daesh's explosive emergence, its online influence has become a conundrum, despite Malaysia's various counter-narratives and legal provisions introduced to stifle its movement.

Daesh is not an easy enemy to fight. First and foremost, it requires a meaningful whole-of-the-nation cooperation, including active participation and continuous commitment by the public, who are the masses on social media platforms.

Is the online community willing to be part of the cause in fighting terrorism? Technological savviness does not necessarily translate into eagerness to join the fray against extremism.

There are few points to be critically considered.

First, Daesh's radical content online is ambiguous and may not be easy to identify. One needs to have technical knowledge to be able to recognise the red flags. For this reason, the relevant

authorities need to provide Netizens with the right tools to analyse and understand potential radical content.

Second, in today's era of borderless connectivity and greater access to alternative information, online content is hardly taken at face value. Ultimately, the simple "forbidding" narratives such as "Daesh is dangerous" or "terrorism is not Islamic" would no longer work in addressing radicalisation in the long run.

In other instances, the tailoring of online counter-messages has failed to reach Malaysia's diverse demographics. Counter-messages that are agreeable to urban dwellers, for example, might not strike a chord with those in rural areas. Against this backdrop, counter-messages ought to be crafted in a way that is sophisticated and "related" so that they can be effectively passed on to intended targets.

Third, there should be a response system for the community to reach out to for consultation and reporting. More often than not, the public is unsure of who to report to upon learning of radical activities in their area. Others are hesitant to lodge reports because they feel it's a "personal matter". Families would sometimes refrain from lodging reports due to shame and public recrimination.

With that said, Malaysia's terror-related emergency hotlines, if any, should not only exist to respond to terror incidents, but also to provide guidance on how to prevent such an incident in the first place. This would include guidance to family members and friends who report any suspicious behaviour, and psychological support for those who lodge the report.

Given Daesh's recent re-framing of its network of global affiliates, Malaysia, as part of the newly formed "Wilayat Sharq Asiyya", must prepare itself for any eventuality. While the framing in itself may not carry as much weight as the real implementation, sustained counter-messaging efforts, particularly within the cyber domain, should always be observed by all.

The heightened people-power, which brought a new Malaysia, should now be translated into a fight against terrorism. As the agent of change, the public has to realise that the security domain is not, has never been, and will never be exclusive to the authorities or the government.

The time is now for the public to take greater responsibility for countering radicalisation, once and for all.

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