

**Perspectives on Countering Extremist Narratives:
Integrated Efforts and Approaches within ASEAN**

Countering Extremist Narratives: An Overview

Countering Extremist Narratives from its infancy stage is critical to deter various extremist elements from being deeply imbedded within any individuals, groups, society and prevent serious implications that would affect the nation and the region. Although the term or concept of extremist narratives have always been loosely defined, what remains clear is it aims to influence, exploit and recruit vulnerable individuals and groups for an extreme or violent cause. This in turn makes individuals and groups to break away from accepted social norms as it normalises act of violence.

It is unfortunate that most extremist narrative cases are immediately link with Islam. As such, it must be stressed that any terrorist, violent and extremist acts should not be associated to any religion, culture, nationality and civilisation.¹

This paper aims to briefly share what extremist narratives means from Brunei’s perspectives, the underlying concerns and various counter-measures that have been put in place to address the matter as well as the current realities of the use of cyberspace in the spread of extremist narratives as the fastest growing security challenge to the region.

Brunei Darussalam’s perspective on Extremist Narratives

Extremist narratives to Brunei Darussalam is perceived as any acts that would threaten Brunei’s core values of being loyal to the Sultan and the State and ensuring social harmony and traditional practices of friendship and neighbourliness as espoused in the national philosophy and any acts of any form that would deviate from the belief in Islamic values that is in line with the akidah of Ahli Sunnah wal Jamaah and Mazhab Shafi’e.

Concerns on Extremist Narratives

Although the overall threats from extremist narratives in Brunei remains low, the country remains equally vulnerable to the exposure and potential dangers posed by the spread of extremist narratives and infiltration of any extremist elements. This could be through various platforms namely contacts of extremist individuals using Brunei as alternative transit point, online radicalisation and recruitment due to high access and usage of the Internet in Brunei and prospects of indirectly assisting in terrorism funding such as through charities. As such, Brunei must remain vigilant and sensitive of changes in its surroundings and the potential implications of incidences in its neighbouring countries.

These three platforms are a continuous concern in view of Brunei’s social make up that constitutes a young population of 109,500 (26% out of a total population of 417,200) are aged between 15 to 29 years old. The country also face high numbers of unemployment where out of 10,446 unemployed, about 25.3% are among the youth. Coupled with this, the high and easy access to the Internet with an estimated 82% active internet users in the country, in which, the highest internet user dominated by the youth from 18 to 34 years old at around 63%. This meant many are potentially at risk to being easily influenced by extremist elements or vulnerable of being exploited by extremist individuals or groups. Additionally, with an increasing number of converts with an average of 500 people per year, they also may be at risk to be easily swayed and deviate away from the Islamic values Brunei holds close.

Counter Measures to Extremism

Brunei has heavily emphasised on preventive measures to ensure peace and stability for the whole nation and country including countering extremist narratives. The counter measures focuses on a comprehensive whole of government and nation approach through various forms of preventive measures, enforcement and monitoring initiatives and establishment as well as deradicalisation platforms.

Counter Measures		
PREVENTIVE		ENFORCEMENT / MONITORING
LEGAL FRAMEWORKS Restriction Orders Section 3(1)(b) Laws of Brunei, Chp 196 , Electronics Transaction Act, 2008 Undesirable Publication Act Anti-Terrorism Act 2011 Anti- Terrorist (Terrorism Financing) Regulation, 2013	EDUCATION Religious Order Act 2012 (First formal education: Religious school) Education Order 2011 SOCIAL PKBN or Brunei National Service (Malay Islamic Monarchy Philosophy) Community Outreach Programmes (Roadshows for overseas students, Belia Cinta Masjid)	
OTHERS Online platform for religious queries Hotline to report any suspicious activities Brunei National Computer Emergency Response Team (BruCERT)	RELIGIOUS Central authority on religious-related affairs Standardised sermons Screening of religious preachers, both Muslims and Non-Muslim Committee to study religious practices Religious guidance programme for converts	INTELLIGENCE Cooperation on local, bilateral and multilateral Intelligence Exchange Information from the public ORGANISATION Sub-committee on Cyber Security under NSC Set up cybersecurity units in ministries
		DERADICALISE Readily available platform to rehabilitate (No known cases)

Source: Compiled by SHHBIDSS

Most of the counter measures are observed to be centered among the youth. Through strong religious and formal education foundation and various community outreach programmes, it aims to instill values promoting a way of life based on universally accepted values to ensure justice, harmony, respect of differences and help one another. These values are also in line with the country’s national philosophy of Malay Islamic Monarchy. The *Program Khidmat Bakti*

Negara (PKBN) for example, is a non-conscription national service programme available for the youth between the ages of 16 to 21 years old. It was introduced in 2011 that aims to enhance patriotism, build resilience among youth and further strengthen their understanding of the constitution and the national philosophy.

Brunei also has a strong centralised authority on religious-related affairs. This includes regulate a standardised religious education curriculum, preparation of a standardised text in sermons, and screening of both muslim and non-muslim religious preachers to avoid misinterpretation of religious values and deter the spread of deviant ideology among the society. In addition to all these, community plays an important proactive role to alert any suspicious activities to the authorities’ attention as both preventive and enforcement measures.

However, irrespective of the counter measures that have been put in place, Brunei view that countering extremist narratives remains a growing challenge at a regional and global level due to the challenges posed by the cyberspace.

Realities of Cyberspace

Fastest Growing Security Challenge

Globalisation and rapid advancement in ICT has made the world today closely interconnected and interdependent. The Internet and social media is now a norm to source information and disseminate information. Societies today are highly dependent on ICT for quick information, point of reference and are exposed to different train of thoughts and ideas.

At the same time, such advancements in ICT clearly expose societies to various social ills and exploitation by opportunists and malicious groups. It is the same platform that is heavily capitalised by extremists to spread its various extremist ideology and narratives.

One of the main dangers of the cyberspace is the readily available extremist views where *“what has increasingly become disconcerting is the increasing number of radical websites that are not only in Arabic but also in English, Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Melayu. There are more than 200 Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Melayu radical sites that can be easily accessed by citizens in the Nusantara, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines”*.²

The dark side of the cyberspace is, *“Aggravating the challenge for the national security agencies is the emergence of multiple social networks that appear harmless and innocuous but on further probing, can reveal different levels of radicalisation that can influence the readers as the messages are about how to view a particular problem and issue, often laced with religious justifications and theories...”*.³

Hence, the cyberspace is rapidly becoming the region’s biggest challenge today due to the current realities on the misuse of cyberspace. There is also a potentially higher chance that impacts of cyberattacks will spill over and infiltrate into other countries.

Further Considerations for Closer Cooperation on Cyberspace

There is a growing sense of urgency that requires many countries and region to reassess and re-strategise its approach in addressing security challenges including extremist narratives. ASEAN member states for instance have been involved in setting up their own cyber-security infrastructure and domestic initiatives.

It is observed that in 2016, there has been prominence and recognition of countries in the region on the need to respond to the growing challenge of the cyberspace at national and regional level. At the regional level, Singapore as the region’s cybersecurity hub has recently set up an ASEAN Cyber Capacity Program (ACCP) to help nations build the necessary infrastructure needed to combat cyber threats. The ASEAN Ministerial Conference in Singapore held in October 2016, also emphasised on the region’s need for an ASEAN cyber capacity-building, securing a safer common cyberspace, and facilitate exchanges on cyber norms. Malaysia too has established a Counter-Messaging Centre in 2016 with the aim to counter the growing extremist narratives in the region.

Under the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM), an Expert Working Group on Cyber Security has also been created in 2016 to address the rising challenges posed by the internet where the new cycle of coordinatorship for the latest EWG will take effect from 2018 to 2020. Looking at the trends in defence cooperation, this may include preparing a list of focal points, sharing experiences and information and look into multilateral table top and field exercises. These are practical yet it may only look at the response or reactive end of cooperation.

As a way forward to counter extremist narratives, there is an increasing need for the region to focus on the preventive measures to enable defence and security enforcement alike to take many steps ahead in countering extremist narratives. It is recommended that ASEAN in particular the ADMM to explore further into learning and sharing of best practices of national preventive measures and work towards promoting preventive cooperation at regional level through utilisation of existing platforms.

¹ Langkawi Declaration on the Global Movement of Moderates on the 27th April 2015, and East Asia Summit Declaration on the Global Movement of Moderates on the 22nd November 2015

² Youth Self-Radicalisation: Lessons from the Singapore Narrative, online accessed: <http://www.searcct.gov.my/publications/our-publications?id=66>

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