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An ASEAN Way to Prevent Violent Extremism?

By Cameron Sumpter

Synopsis

Grassroots initiatives to prevent or counter violent extremism (P/CVE) can lose legitimacy through close association with a state's national security structure. Organisation through an institutionalised regional network may both mitigate this problem and produce constructive outcomes.

Commentary

A DIVERSE range of countries has been striving to disrupt pathways towards violent extremism in recent years, with varied results. Criticisms rise from both ends of the political spectrum in the West, while problems exist elsewhere regarding coordination and state control.

As part of its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2018, Singapore is convening a Southeast Asia Counter-Terrorism Symposium from 4-5 October 2018, which will bring together regional thought leaders and emphasise the importance of building a collective approach. What can we learn from the shortcomings of policies to prevent or counter violent extremism (P/CVE) to date, and how can ASEAN develop its aspirational statements of the past into unified practical action moving forward?

From Global to Local

Notions of community engagement and the targeted provision of social services mostly emerged in the counterterrorism policy agenda of western nations following the London transit suicide bombings in July 2005. Similar approaches have long been employed in multilateral conflict resolution programmes in areas inflicted by warfare.

The term Countering Violent Extremism found prominence only in early 2015, however, when the Obama administration invited officials, scholars and practitioners

from around the world to share ideas at a high profile White House CVE Summit. Later that year, The UN General Assembly published its Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which encouraged all nations to devise their own P/CVE strategies attuned to respective contexts.

Both initiatives emphasised a multidisciplinary 'all-of-society' approach to preventing terrorism, whereby national governments provide support for efforts conceptualised and conducted at the local level. Community stakeholders recognise the specific issues faced in their area and will more likely possess the legitimacy required to engage those drifting astray.

Securitised Engagements

Despite recent publicity of white-nationalist violence, media representations of terrorist threats since 9/11 have ingrained the association of violent extremism with Islam in the collective minds of whole societies. Prevention efforts have therefore faltered in several western nations as Muslims feel targeted by CVE programmes, which has eroded trust between communities and governments.

Youth mentoring schemes and neighbourhood engagement events sound like objectively constructive initiatives, but the national security goals driving programmes can render them disingenuous in the eyes of recipients. Critics accuse CVE policies of stigmatising Muslim communities, fuelling Islamophobia and even providing a ruse for intelligence collection.

One problem is that central governments and law enforcement agencies in the West have continued to pull the strings of CVE programming, as radicalisation is considered too critical an issue to cede control of its prevention to local community and civil society. Detractors on the political right argue that grassroots approaches are ultimately futile and that governments must be uncompromising with individuals flirting with extremist ideologies.

This sentiment was recently demonstrated on the world stage by the Russian government, which said it would boycott a United Nations high-level conference on counterterrorism in June 2018 if civil society representatives were allowed to participate. The UN was forced to 'compromise' and non-governmental stakeholders were invited only for the second day of proceedings.

Top Down Trust

For Muslim majority nations the challenges of implementing effective CVE strategies are both similar and different to those in western states. Ostracising whole communities based on their religion is not an issue, though some Imams have been weary of governments sanctioning only 'mainstream' interpretations of the faith.

The primary obstacle is that security agencies tasked with counterterrorism are not accustomed to working with community stakeholders and civil society organisations. Whether due to past allegations from NGOs of human rights abuses, or government agencies simply perceiving themselves more capable, the reluctance to allow local

actors to take control of CVE initiatives in the West is even more pronounced in post-authoritarian nations.

The result has often been a dearth of input from the community level as to how initiatives should be developed, and barriers to information exchange – not only from state to civil society but also between central and local government authorities. A number of promising grassroots CVE programmes have emerged in Indonesia, for example, but a lack of coordination has produced overlaps and impeded their efficacy.

Another issue is funding. Money has certainly not poured from government counterterrorism coffers into community prevention projects. But civil society practitioners are often hesitant to receive state financial backing anyway, as it may diminish their authenticity and independence. Organisations working on CVE initiatives in the US recently declined dedicated funding to avoid association with the politics of President Trump.

From Regional to Local?

A possible way forward in Southeast Asia could be for state governments to channel funds through the ASEAN Foundation's Projects Account, which grants financing for approved social ventures. Community organisations with plans for local extremism prevention strategies could then present their proposals and apply for funding.

ASEAN could also establish a platform for community actors working on CVE initiatives, both from local governments and civil society. Currently, regional specialists gather for occasional conferences, but an institutionalised forum would galvanise efforts and improve coordination. An ideal model already exists in Europe.

The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) was set up and funded by the European Union (EU) Commission in 2011 to connect first-line practitioners with individuals vulnerable to extremism and those already convicted of crimes. The network facilitates sharing of best practice in preventing extremism through nine working groups, covering specific themes such as communication strategies, education, prisons, law enforcement, families and social care.

RAN oversees and manages an extensive online database of insights, which users can draw upon to adapt to their own local context and find counterparts for collaborations. The network's Centre of Excellence operates as a hub for connecting, fostering and dispersing expertise on P/CVE initiatives through frequent dialogue sessions with policymakers, practitioners and the research community.

In recent years, consensus has formed that efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism are most likely to engage their target audience when initiatives are locally designed and delivered. But when community programmes are tagged to national governments' counterterrorism policies they become unhelpfully securitised, which erodes their legitimacy.

Perhaps it would be useful to diminish the influence of the national by directly linking the regional with the local. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN could be the ideal venue.

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