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## **Youth and Women Radicalisation in Singapore: Case of Syaikhah Izzah**

*By Remy Mahzam*

### **Synopsis**

*Syaikhah Izzah Zahrah Al Ansari is believed to be the first Singaporean woman to be detained for radicalisation. It marks a troubling shift in how young people including females have been co-opted in extremist propaganda strategy. Online radicalisation will continue to be the principal purveyor of extremism in highly digitized societies with strong anti-terrorism laws like Singapore. Family-centered counter-radicalisation initiatives are needed to address youth vulnerability in radicalisation that can lead to terrorism.*

### **Commentary**

EXTREMIST PROPAGANDA and radicalisation efforts are often targeted at young people around the world -- and Singapore has not been spared. There have also been visible instances of women's radicalisation and active roles in terrorism. The detention of the first female Singaporean, Syaikhah Izzah Zahrah Al Ansari, for radicalisation serves as a timely reminder that more pro-active measures are needed to counter the threat of radical extremism, especially strategies to address problematic youth interactions online.

With digital technology and social media, extremist narratives are easily made available across mobile Internet platforms and accessible to all age groups. Youths, being the most active media consumers, are the most vulnerable as they are exposed to a myriad of influences including religious extremism. The rise in extremist rhetoric on social media and encrypted mobile-messaging platforms indicates that the virtual domain has become a prized choice for extremist communication.

### **Radicalisation of Youth and Women in the Age of ISIS**

The case of the radicalisation of 22-year-old Syaikhah Izzah is worrying and goes to show that Singaporeans too are susceptible to radical teachings propagated online. Previously, Singapore authorities have detained or placed a total of 13 people under Restriction Orders (RO).

These include two teenagers; 19-year-old M. Arifil Azim Putra Norja'i, who was detained in May 2015, became the first known youth to harbour the intention to carry out violent attacks in Singapore. Another radicalised teenager, 18-year-old Muhammad Harith Jailani detained in August 2015, was even prepared to be trained with the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group and die as a martyr in Syria.

For all of the cases mentioned, radicalisation of these youths deepened over time after being substantially exposed to terrorist propaganda online. Youths navigate an online environment, where they explore their identity, interact with peers, and develop relationships through social network sites, online chats, multiplayer online games and blogs.

While the Internet can be a positive influence in their lives, there is also growing concern about the risks of online interactions. The problem in radicalisation lies not only in the misinterpretation of sensitive religious texts or issues, but also how the interaction with other online contacts in the youths' virtual network would trigger unhealthy emotional responses and reactions.

Since 2013, Syaikhah Izzah has developed a wide network of foreign online contacts which include militants and supporters of the IS terror group. The virtual peer influence and everyday engagement with her network of extremist friends contributed towards framing her personal aspiration to marry an IS advocate and start a new life with her young child in Syria.

The appeal of redemption and belief in reaping "heavenly rewards" if she marries an IS militant who died in battle is very much the same form of attraction used in IS communication strategy in luring women into migrating to Syria to purportedly fulfill their religious responsibility in an idealised, utopian existence in an Islamic Caliphate.

### **Terrorism Propaganda Targeted at Young Women**

IS propaganda magazines such as *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* often underline the role of women in jihad through the promises that the terror group makes to young women. They are showered with promises of being liberated through the fulfilment of their divine responsibility in becoming important state builders, forming a meaningful sense of belonging and sisterhood as well as achieving true romance through leading adventurous lifestyles.

For extremist groups, the young generation and especially women represent the future as they will become the next generation of stakeholders to champion the extremist ideology and radical beliefs.

Counter-narratives to fight IS propaganda that offers women a shot at creating a

utopian lifestyle through adventure and romance are very much lacking and are a conundrum to many. Syaikhah Izzah is one of the many young ladies, in search of a sense of belonging, purpose and identity, who are vulnerable to violent extremism and terrorist radicalisation. Extremist groups would definitely exploit these vulnerabilities and portray themselves as providers of justice and safety, pressuring young women into taking sides.

### **Family-Centric Counter Radicalisation Initiatives**

Syaikhah Izzah's parents' unwillingness to report their daughter's radicalisation tendencies to the authorities, though they are themselves not supportive of her beliefs, indicates a dire need to educate parents on the role of families in preventing and countering radicalisation that can lead to violent extremism.

While the Singapore authorities take a stern view against anyone who supports, promotes or makes preparation to undertake armed violence, the ministry stressed that early reporting of an individual's case of radicalisation would enable the person to receive proper guidance and counselling. Syaikhah Izzah's arrest could have been unnecessary if her radicalisation had been reported to the authorities earlier.

Family members and especially parents play the most crucial part in counter-extremism through the shaping of the young minds' outlook and perceptions in life. They are the front-line actors who form the first line of defence against extremism. To prevent radicalisation, teachers, community leaders and asatizah (religious tutors) too need to play a concerted effort in providing religious guidance and moral support to refute extremist teachings both in the offline and online realms.

Toolkits such as "Resilient Families – Safeguarding against Radicalisation" released by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) coupled with community outreach programmes can help illustrate the circumstances that lead young people to become radicalised.

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