

The keys to building resilience against lone wolf attacks

Legal measures aside, families, educators and religious communities all have a part to play in fighting extremism and religious intolerance

Mathew Mathews and Melvin Tay

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The revelation of the nefarious plot by a 16-year-old Christian Singaporean detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) is bound to have shaken many Singaporeans. It would also have caused some serious soul-searching.

Undoubtedly Muslims, especially those who frequent Assyafaah Mosque and Yusof Ishak Mosque, would have been devastated that sanctuaries where they found strength could well have been sites of slaughter.

If not for the robustness of

Singapore's security agencies and multi-pronged strategy in uncovering and foiling potential acts of terror, worshippers and their loved ones could have been victims in this possible attack.

Yet, this will certainly not be the last time the ISA is invoked to avert extremist acts. This incident is a sobering reminder of our enduring vulnerabilities as a hyper-connected, technologically savvy nation.

The growing availability and easy accessibility of problematic content online mean that sensational live streams of bloodshed, captivating propaganda videos, and beguiling messages inciting violence are but several clicks away for impressionable individuals who actively seek them out.

In this regard, there is a need to augment our community efforts to

combat radicalisation, alongside our prevailing state and security apparatuses.

STOPPING LONE WOLVES

The 16-year-old's actions were motivated in part by his desire to copy and commemorate the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings. Both events reinforce the sad truth that Islamophobia continues to rear its ugly head; not just abroad, but even at home.

To deal with Islamophobia and its purveyors, Muslims in tandem with inter-religious groups will need to continue to engage the populace to dispel myths and misinformation created and circulated by insidious actors globally.

For parents, the incident would have prompted an unsettling realisation that adolescents can be enamoured of extremist narratives festering online, and consequently spurred into action right under their noses. The Internal Security Department's investigations of the plans of the 16-year-old indicate that his family was unaware of and not involved in his misguided acts.

While the litany of online commentators has indicted his parents for his actions, this incident could instead illustrate how individuals can succumb to radical ideologies and plot terror attacks, despite having strong familial bonds with loved ones living in close proximity.

It highlights the need for families – in particular, parents or elders – to make an effort to frame their views of and conversations about others more positively and constructively; and to exercise empathy even if they are compelled to air their grievances behind closed doors.

While this is not an answer to the appearance of the lone wolf, it increases the dissonance surrounding an individual treading down the path of self-radicalisation. It is harder to nurse hatred and mull over violence when loved ones see and articulate the best in others.

Among Christians and other non-Muslims, this case of the youngest ISA detainee to date exemplifies how extremist ideologies are not exclusive to any one religion. It is crucial to recognise this against the

backdrop of rising Islamophobia globally, and disabuse individuals of the temptation to conflate Islam, extremism and violence.

Thus far, much focus has been laid squarely on those who have used Islam to condone their misguided acts. However, this latest incident is a salient reminder that enmity and hate, if left unchecked, can motivate adherents of all faiths to act adversely.

For educators and inter-religious advocates, the case should have sparked renewed concerns that the erroneous notion of the Islamic faith calling on its adherents to kill Christians continues to resonate with some despite considerable attempts to dispel such ideas.

While our present educational approach strives to cultivate a general appreciation of religious practices and occasions in students, perhaps we should consider enhancing our pedagogies to underscore the pro-social, peaceful theologies of individual religions.

In the face of global realities where terror attacks are often executed in the name of religion, this would help our young to sensibly reconcile these misguided actions with benign faith.

SUSTAINING INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS

While Singaporeans may be troubled by the recent incident, we can take comfort from the strengths of our prevailing approach to handling such issues.

In many other societies, the awareness of terrorist plots targeting specific religious groups would have caused substantial distrust between faith communities. Members of the targeted group may be wary that other adherents of the perpetrator's faith similarly view them with contempt and anger.

Muslims in Singapore are, however, unlikely to gravitate towards this position.

First, there is significant community ownership in safeguarding harmonious inter-religious relations. The swift communique from the National Council of Churches of Singapore, rejecting violence-inciting

ideologies and reaffirming bonds of amity between Christians and Muslims, will go some way towards assuaging potential concerns of the Muslim community.

The assertion of good inter-religious relations is not mere rhetoric; it is born out of constructive dialogue between senior members of both religious communities and acts of practical cooperation between religious groups.

The IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language, which reached out to a representative sample of 4,000 Singaporean residents and was completed in 2019, shows that 92 per cent and 84 per cent of Protestant Christians are comfortable with Muslims as next-door neighbours and close friends, respectively.

While religious communities in Singapore espouse views built on narratives unique to their faiths, these narratives are careful to portray the "religious other" or the non-religious as equally worthy of respect and love even if their members consider their belief system to be superior.

Amiable relations between people of different faiths are increasingly hard to come by in today's polarised world. Singapore must continue to do its best to ensure religious harmony endures.

LEGISLATION AND THE INEVITABLE

Singapore's aversion to liberalising freedom of extremist speech should assure all local religious communities that this island will not be a breeding ground for messages of animosity and hate directed against any group.

The existence of hard legislation, including the ISA and Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), serves as a vigorous check on those who seek to advance polarising narratives here. Past instances involving the swift censure of foreign preachers deemed inimical to religious harmony attest to the continued relevance of these laws.

In this regard, the allure of advocating freedom of speech and expression has strengthened over the past few decades, and is associated with generational divides.

Another 2019 IPS report based on the International Social Survey Programme on Religion found that over a quarter of Singaporeans believe religious extremists should be allowed to publish their views online or on social media, with the youth far more likely to feel this way compared with older-age cohorts.

Similarly, Singaporeans have indicated a mounting desire for a socio-political compact that can accommodate a plurality of voices. This is in line with the tenets of developed First World societies, which emphasise being able to enounce ideals of civil discussion and debate despite differences.

However, the potential for insidious individuals to abuse these freedoms is, unfortunately, a reality we have to grapple with.

The continued application of the ISA and MRHA in Singapore, alongside manifold examples abroad, suggests that extending freedoms of speech and expression to the fringes of society will have acute implications for social cohesion and our collective security.

With this in mind, one must realise that the pertinent issue at play here is not whether our current approach will continue to thwart lone wolves from carrying out acts of terror on our soil in the future. Rather, the day will come where despite the endeavours of the state, associated security agencies, and the community, the unthinkable will happen.

The very nature of a lone wolf – an unaffiliated, self-radicalised individual moving "under the radar" – suggests that at some point, shrewd persons acting with misplaced passion and singular purpose will eventually circumvent our best efforts.

When this happens, what matters is no longer our ability to resist radicalisation, but rather to remain resilient.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Mathew Mathews is head of the social lab and principal research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), National University of Singapore. Melvin Tay is research associate in the society and culture department at the IPS.