

Berita Harian (Saturday, 22 March 2008)

Extremist Websites

Who would have thought that educated individuals living in a modern country like Singapore will turn radical? However, since last June, four local youths had been self-radicalised and plotted terror due to influence from extremist websites. Just what are the content of the websites? **NAZRI HADI SAPARIN** (mhadi@sph.com.sg) reports.

Bomb-Making Manuals in Malay, Indonesian Language Translation widens the influence of Arabic language website

Arabic language extremist websites have expanded its influence with more of its contents translated and posted onto Malay and Indonesian language websites. In fact, bomb manuals found on Indonesian language extremist website was found to have been downloaded from an Arabic website. Sharing the trend with Berita Harian (NH), Senior Analyst of International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), Miss Rebecca Givner-Forbes stressed that the trend is something is worrying.

Miss Givner-Forbes monitors Arabic language websites. She and other analysts in ICPVTR then compare them to extremist websites in other languages.

According to Miss Givner-Forbes, till recently, the Arabic-language and Malay and Indonesian extremist websites operate separately. However, the trend of sharing materials between the websites using different languages is becoming more pronounced. Explaining the implication of such trend, Miss Givner-Forbes said that the increasing convergence means that the extremist websites are able to operate in unison and become more systematic in operation.

“This can aid their efforts and goals in spreading propaganda and recruiting new members,” she said when interviewed recently.

Another ICPVTR analyst, Miss Jennifer Yang Hui Widjaya, commented that she observed a few individuals using the same name to participate in different forums- in Arabic language websites and Malay and Indonesian websites. She commented from her experience that it is very possible that the individuals are links between the websites using different languages.

Miss Givner-Forbes added that although the Arabic language websites are anti-West, especially the US, in nature, most of them are hosted in the US because the liberal laws of the country ensured freedom of speech. She added that there are many websites but there are a few which have strong influence in the Arab countries.

“Now, it appears that the extremist websites are able to spread its influence to this region. It is difficult for the global society to handle this issue but it seems that it can be controlled and reduced with monitoring from the ruling authorities. Stricter laws for the Internet can also help,” she said.

However, when asked to comment, terrorism expert Dr. Rohan Gunaratna said that laws alone is not sufficient to deal with the issue of the influence of the extremist websites. “What is equally important is the effort to monitor and investigation that will weaken the extremist websites,” he said.

Extremist Websites: Twisting of the Al-Quran, Hadis

“The only place for the Muslim and Jewish community to meet is at the battlefield.”

Such is an excerpt from one of the extremist website, proselytizing about an excerpt from the Al-Quran and Hadis. However, an investigation by Berita Harian (BH) uncovered the reality that the radical websites do not simply twist the contents of the Islamic holy texts.

In fact, the Malay and Indonesian language websites also have videos and audios of extremist individuals, including those who possess ties to Al-Qaeda and other extremists. Even more frightening is the fact that visitors can download bomb-making manuals and attack strategies on some strategic areas in the region.

The extremist websites are also determined to reject the views of the moderate Muslims, which has been called “of the same category as the infidels” by a website. For instance, one of the Indonesian language website attempted to refute the view that Islam is a peaceful religion.

“Is Islam a religion of peace? No, not in the least! Allah has firmly explained to us to fight the Infidels till Islam dominates the world and the Infidel stops colonising our country and till they pay the *jizyah*,” wrote the website, quoting the verse from the letter of At-Taubah that calls Muslims to fight whatever that is not Islamic.

Analyst from the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), Miss Jennifer Yang Hui Widjaya, said that the extremist websites are dynamic and often refute the message of simplicity that is being disseminated by the moderate Muslims. Her center in the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) monitors extremist websites in various languages. Miss Widjaya stressed that the websites are important vehicles for terror organisations such as the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) to spread their twisted propaganda and to recruit new members.

In January, three local individuals, all of whom are 26 years old, were arrested by the authorities after being self-radicalised through the Internet and then plotted terror. This followed the arrest of a 28 year-old law graduate last June, who was also influenced by the extremist websites.

Terrorism expert and head of ICPVTR, Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, said that besides being the vehicle for recruitment and mobilising individuals to conduct acts of terror, the extremist websites has another important role in attracting supporters and sympathizers. “It is like a pyramid with three corners. The leader and members of the organisation are at the top. But they are unable to keep the struggle going without the two levels below, which are the supporters and sympathizers. We must not neglect the role of the two groups in the entire framework of terrorism,” he said.

According to Miss Widjaya, the Malay and Indonesian language extremist websites are hosted in Malaysia and Indonesia and based on forum conversations, they have few but loyal supporters.

The websites are also extremely concerned about who they let in to participate in their forums. In fact, besides asking for the name of the users and email, one of the websites also asked users to provide the reason for joining the forum, how they come to know about the website and their views regarding some Islamic issues.

“These websites are very professional. In fact, one of websites operates as an online newspaper. From the way it was written, it is clear that the group of writers is of writing background,” she said.

Dr. Rohan added that the extremist websites need to be monitored closely as they have the potential to be more than the vehicle of propaganda. He explained that if disseminated, the bomb-making manuals as well as attack manuals that can be found on the extremist websites can become training materials for new members. “There is no need for them to go to Afghanistan or other places to train. By using the websites, they can train themselves,” he said.