

Reformed? 'Hard to detect deception'

COMPARED to the Bali bombers who are the subject of Associate Professor Kumar Ramakrishna's research, less has been made public about Jemaah Islamiah (JI) detainees being held by the Internal Security Department here.

Ustaz Mohamed Ali is one among the around 20 Islamic religious teachers here who have some knowledge, as they have been providing religious counselling to them. Having done so for several years now, he knows first-hand

the uphill task required to change the worldviews of these detainees.

For the most part, most started out with the desire to become better Muslims. But they went astray, thanks to extremist teachers who painted Muslims as an oppressed lot, and various conflicts in the South-east Asia region, for example in Maluku and Ambon, as examples of that oppression, in order to argue that armed jihad is a must.

"They really believe in their ideology," says Ustaz Mohamed, 34.

They also interpret the concept of *al wala wal bara* as the need to love fellow believers and hate all disbelievers, including Muslims who are against the JI, when what the concept rightfully urges is love for fellow men and distancing oneself from evil deeds, he adds.

Ustaz Mohamed is one of few Islamic teachers here armed with a degree from the famous Al-Azhar University in Cairo. His father, Ustaz Ali Mohamed, is well-known in local Muslim circles. Ustaz Mohamed is unusual in having both religious and academic credentials. He is an associate research fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

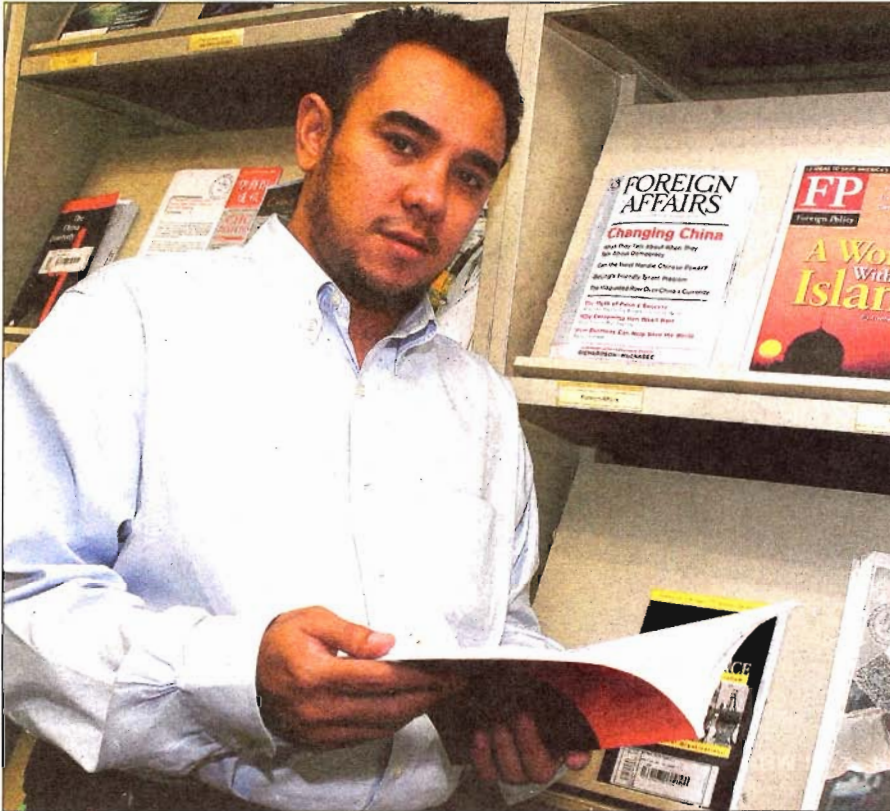
Terrorist detainees tend to have a very limited understanding of Islamic teachings, he says. They believe, for instance, that the only way to solve the problems faced by Muslims is to return to an Islamic state in which syariah law can be applied in its "purest" form.

Given that the way they think is different from that of most other people, it is not easy to know when they have been successfully rehabilitated.

Says Ustaz Mohamed: "If someone says 'I've given up (my radical beliefs)', it's not something you believe easily. There has to be some instinctive feeling that this man is okay. But it's very difficult to detect deception. We're talking about mindset change, and that doesn't happen overnight."

To help him counter arguments made by the radicals, he researches deep into early and classical Quranic commentators and how they interpret certain verses which the radicals like to use. "As a counsellor, I know that at the end of the day, I must win, I cannot let him win."

ZAKIR HUSSAIN



UPHILL TASK: If someone says he has given up his radical beliefs, it's not something you believe easily, says Ustaz Mohamed, 43, one of the religious teachers who have been providing religious counselling to Jemaah Islamiah detainees here.