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Refining the Definition of Extremism in the Context of Malaysia

By

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Abstract

The discussion on right-wing extremism is generally related to Western forms of extremism, while terrorism has been associated with militant forms of Islam. We argue that right-wing extremist movements should be contextualized, and in the case of Malaysia adding religion is impetus because the majority Malay race is embodied by Islam. Using the investigative actor-based digital ethnographic method, this analysis concludes that Yusuf Azmi through his Semboyan Jihad outfit, an NGO (non-governmental organisation), should categorically be classified as a right-wing extremist group. Additionally the narratives of groups like Semboyan have a lot of similarities with terrorist the narratives of terrorist groups like the Islamic State (IS), it should be rightfully be categorized as right-wing extremists group.

Keywords: radicalization, non-state security threats, right-wing extremism, terrorism, hate speech

Introduction

In discussing "digital politics," this study focuses on digital mobilisation (interest groups and social movements)' (Postill, 2018 p.8). We are particularly interested in the creation of 'connected multitudes,' conceptualised as a new sort of political actor, as well as Castells' concepts of 'the network society' (e.g., Castells 1996) and 'mass self-communication' (Castells 2007). In agreement with Ross Tapsell (2019) that smartphones are weapons of the weak in Malaysia and that 'Facebook and instant-messenger platform WhatsApp are playing a prominent role in shaping political discourse in contemporary Malaysia', it also is a breeding ground for astroturfing (commonly referred to as "cybertrooping" in Malaysia) (Johns & Cheong, 2019).

The debate over states becoming more authoritarian in Southeast Asian countries and their aggressive actions in collaboration with social media sites has been ongoing, especially since COVID-19, which allowed governments to impose lockdowns to combat the spread of the coronavirus. While social media platforms have refuted those claims, claiming that they promote free speech by ensuring a political space free of outside influence, nation states claim that there are socially divisive actors and corporate platforms with a vested interest in promoting hate speech in order to gain support through populist propaganda. The non-interference model of social media sites such as Facebook that has been accused of colluding with corporations and divisive actors has cemented suspicions of nation states not in favour of freedom speech (Frenkel & Kang, 2021). An example of "governance at a distance", in which the state engages the assistance of ordinary individuals and the market to accomplish its

security goals (Nikolas, 1996). Even while Hughey and Daniels (2013) points out that these measures were originally put in place to encourage (or even coerce) more civility online, as some argue that "the rise of surveillance [in] social media has [also] contributed to the shaming of ordinary people for minor transgressions" (Hier, 2019 p.8).

The Malaysian example, is of importance for several reasons. For starters, Malaysia is a multi-ethnic nation, with 70 percent of its 32.6 million inhabitants being bumiputeras (mostly Muslims, with a minority of atheists and Christians from Sabah and Sarawak), and there are over 2 million foreign workers, primarily in the cities (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal, 2022). The state also has a resounding 23 million Facebook users (Muller, 2021) and 80 percent more 'friends' on social networks than the worldwide benchmark, uses Facebook and WhatsApp as a primary medium for communication and information consumption (Kemp, 2012). While Meta (the company that owns, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram) have intentions to protect the libertarian idea of the freedom of ideas in these spaces, these platforms have also been exploited by extremist groups to radicalise people for terrorism. In recent times, a Malaysian guy working in Singapore was radicalised by pro-IS materials and was arrested making plans to travel to Syria in late 2020 (Hariz, 2021). In the Indonesian city of Makassar, a college student and his female partner operated on behalf of Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) to detonate bombs. In Malaysia, a lady was jailed the same month for disseminating IS ideology via WhatsApp groups, mostly made up of Indonesian men debating the aftermath of the Makassar assaults (Arlina, 2021). While living in Syria as a foreign fighter and senior commander of IS's Malay-speaking branch, Katibah Nusantara, the 'Jihadist Celebrity' recruiter, Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi, was the most adept at utilising Facebook to recruit and radicalise Malaysians (Jani, 2016).

To the best of the author's knowledge this would be amongst the first few studies that contributes to the discourse on demarcating the lines between an authoritarian state and the protection of political spaces for a prosperous deliberative democracy. We attempt to contribute to the growing literature on states intervening and cooperating with corporations to protect the rights of minorities and the vulnerable.

Rhetorical Discourse and Right-wing Extremism in Malaysia

There are two distinct approaches in cultural and communication studies: the 'culturalism' of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and E.P. Thompson, and Althusserian structuralism. We choose the former, which takes into account the local sociopolitical context in terms of influence and mobilisation. The structuralist viewpoint contends that the subject is merely "produced within discourse" and "subjected to discourse," which does not allow us to comprehend local polemics concerning right-wing extremism and hate speech (Hall, 1997, p.55). We agree with Thompson that people are rational beings who "think about what is happening to themselves and their world" through experiences such as culture, ideas, and instincts (Thompson, 1978, p.8). The relationship between class and class-consciousness is expressed through one's class's culture, traditions, values, ideas, and institutions (Thompson, 1963, p.10), whereas shared experience and customs are equated with popular culture (Thompson, 1993).

What is the relationship between politics and popular culture? If politics is a struggle for influence between groups, then it is "enacted through the formation of coalitions of influence through the competition between a pluralist range of interests" (Marsh, D., & Stoker, 1995, p.16). Furthermore, we regard politics as a

social process that … is about more than what governments choose to do or not do; it is about the uneven distribution of power in society, how the struggle over power is conducted and its impact on the creation and distribution of resources, life chances and well-being. (Ibid., p.7)

Segregation is unavoidable due to ethnicity, gender, rural-urban divides, and the haves and have-nots. We consider social classes to be a cultural formation (Thompson, 1978). Concerning class, we contend that the dialectical relationship between wage labour and capital occurs via the linkage of the means of production (labour and technology). According to James C. Scott (2008), human beings actualize and internalise modes of production through media, culture, and experience, whereas Tucker writes that "the instruments of production" (Tucker, 1978, p.476) that are constantly changed by the bourgeoisie (Malaysia's political and economic elites) have had productive achievements but have given little thought to the consequences for the average Malaysian, particularly the urban and rural poor as well as the middle classes. The burgeoning role of new media in changing the socioeconomic landscapes of the proletariat has overwhelmed existing economic structures of society, and together with automation and financialisation, contributes to the exacerbation of class struggle in Malaysian daily experiences as a result of globalisation. Such struggles can have an impact on one's worldview and hate projections, potentially leading to extremist behaviour. Thompson puts it well (1978),

it is by means of experience that the mode of production exerts a determining pressure upon other activities . . . classes arise because men and women, in determinate productive relations, identify their antagonistic interests, and come to struggle, to think, and to value in class ways: thus the process of class formation is a process of self-making, although under conditions which are given. (pp.106–7)

The dialogue between Louis Althusser's and Thompson's approaches to the critical theory of communication has influenced approaches to understanding the role of communication in society and capitalism (Fuchs, 2019). Thompson responds to Althusser by stating that experience (often class experience) gives life to culture, values, and thought, determining productive relations and identifying antagonistic interests (Thompson, 1978). We agree with Thompson that:

Class is always objective (a class structure in society) and subjective (lived through communication) at the same time (class objectivity subjectified, class subjectivity objectified), but it is not always politically organised. (Fuchs, 2019, p.16)

Assuming the humanistic approach would not have provided us with a proper understanding of right-wing extremist groups, which work in tandem with global, regional, and state structures within specific cultures. Malaysian politicians' political rhetoric and narratives influence thoughts and interpretations. Rhetoric is defined here as "the use of symbols to induce social action" (Hauser, 2002, p.3), "thus making rhetorical discourse texts aimed at specific audiences for specific reasons in specific situations" (Iversen, 2014, pp. 575–86). Hate speech is defined in this context as,

any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor where narrative elements are weaponised to persuade, convince, unite or motivate people to stigmatise and dehumanise minorities, migrants, refugees, women and any so-called 'other' (United Nations, 2019).

According to Fisher (1984, p.8), we are storytelling animals (homo narrans) in most cases, where individual and social decision-making is heavily reliant on narratives rather than argumentative discourse, and where choosing the right path through life appears to be done through recourse to stories – or simply, "good reasons are the stuff of stories. "He disregards the idea that people are rational and make decisions based on sound arguments. In choosing which stories people identify with and follow, Fisher (1985) argues that there are two factors: (1) narrative probability (the tale that sits together as a good story: being well delivered, believable, credible, and so on); and (2) narrative fidelity (meeting the basics of reason and values, where the story 'resonates' with soundness). For the purpose of this study, we define a story as "a particular sequence of related events that are situated in the past and recounted for rhetorical/ideological purposes" (Halverson, Corman & Goodall, 2011, p.13), while a narrative is a "coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience's expectations according to the known trajectories of its literary and rhetorical form" (p.14).

While we agree with Fisher's arguments on fidelity, we argue that discounting homo narrans' agency of rationality with the coming of new media is counterproductive. While artificial intelligence, algorithms, and social media superstructures have the ability to influence perceptions and shape ideas, we should not discount the fact that people can opt to choose the kinds of news they wish to be exposed to based on existing ideas, due to user-gratification settings. Meanwhile, the narrative paradigm does provide us with the theoretical framework to understand the reasons for 'conspiratorial narratives' through social media and their links to violent extremism (Baele, 2019). Clifford Geertz (1973) demonstrates that political, ideological, and economic lives in all cultures are organised by narrative patterns (the "ideal types") that provide the charismatic, bureaucratic, and legal basis for social order (Hawdon et al., 2019). Geertz's archetypal heroes of society (good over evil) and Fisher's (1984) homo narrans provide us with an understanding of rationality, which is what counts in the public sphere. Powerful narratives provide distinct cultures with their own sense of rationality, which prescribe what is perceived as the 'truth' in the public sphere.

Kenneth Burke describes narratives as a "pentad" of five parts – an agent, an act, a purpose, a scene, and an instrument – and some "trouble" that needs to be redressed to restore balance (Jerome & Bruner, 1990). This study attempts to extend Baele's (2019) "conspiratorial narratives" to the Malaysian context, with its local groups and right-wing extremism. As Robert Dahl puts it, where the state and civil society are not able to address the needs of the lifeworld, movements will emerge in state or trans-state form (as cited in Marsh & Stoker, 1995). We contend that such alignments should not be considered exclusive. With globalisation came diverse 'glocalised' versions of right-wing movements in Malaysia, which tended to turn groups towards violent extremism. This is not a recent phenomenon. In the heavy metal and punk music scenes in the 1990s, the Malay anti-fascist skinhead community clashed with the Neo-Nazi movement, which embodied a form of Malay power, although these groups were not considered a violent threat (Ferrarese, 2019). Meanwhile, the clandestine Halaqah Pakindo (renamed Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia in 1995) was formed in 1986 by members from the madrasah school systems, sponsored by PAS, to go to Pakistan and India in order to further their studies (Zichichi, 2004). Our point remains: that by looking at radicalisation solely from a theological perspective, we get no permanent solutions, not if public discourse on all forms of media (particularly social media) is being exploited as a platform for bigotry.

Conceptual Framework - Yusuf Azmi – Freedom Fighter or Right Wing Extremist?

Research on far-right or right-wing extremism in the Southeast Asian context has been understudied, to say the least, and most of ASEAN's (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) experiences with political violence have centred on left-wing terrorism, communism, and militant Islamism (Munira, 2021). The spread of the Western idea of being "red-pilled" refers to a "mistrust of the mainstream media, recognition of the far-left dominance of Western society, and a bitter contempt for feminism", among others, where there is a belief that "[w]estern civilisation is on the brink of collapse" (Ozalp, 2019). A leading figure within this ideology, the Canadian clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson, has also made direct inflammatory comments about Islam (Ozalp, 2019). The manifestations of being "red-pilled" can be observed in these parts of the world too when the recent terror attacks by Brenton Tarrant inspired a 16-year-old Singaporean Christian Protestant to plan machete attacks on mosques (Liang, 2021). For the purpose of this study, we are take the definition of right-wing extremism which states that it is '[a]nti-democratic hostility to equality... linked with racism, xenophobia, exclusionary nationalism, conspiracy theories, and authoritarianism characterises right-wing extremism' and should be categorically be labelled as right-wing extremists groups in countries like Malaysia (Jupsks & Segers, 2020). We contend that the Malay race is closely associated with Islam, so in the context of Malaysia, the definition of right-wing extremism should include religion.

Yusof was previously the director of another NGO, the Malaysian Muslim Consumers Association (PPIM, Persatuan Pengguna Islam Malaysia). Yusof well-known among the political elite. Not long after he joined PPIM, the then-government awarded large sums of money to the organisation, which was intended to address unlicensed moneylending issues (Malaysiakini, 2017a). When Yusof Azmi and his comrade, Ali Salimin, or 'Abang Ali,' were charged in the Magistrate Court for trespassing on business premises that allegedly defrauded customers, the Parti Se-Islam Malaysia (PAS) youth wing not only offered legal representation but also referred to him as 'Nabi Yusof' (the Prophet Yusof/Joseph), further increasing his social authority (Malaysiakini, 2017b).

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Ingram's (2016) "competitive" system framework and Baele's (2019) "conspiratorial narratives" provide us with the epistemological framework to analyse whether or not: (1) internet-enabled Yusuf Azmi fits the description of right-wing extremism; (2) the normalisation of hate speech and violence towards minorities is happening; and (3) if these groups are "enablers" for IS's grand narratives. We consider a seminal study that suggests people at political extremes are more susceptible to conspiratorial ideas and that people with impaired epistemological views of the world could possibly adhere to their belief system in a rigid manner, thus making them likely to believe that their political ideas are the only solution to ongoing problems (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015).

While there is no substantive evidence of causal relationships between exposure to extremist online content and radicalisation (Cottee & Cunliffe, 2018), continuous exposure to online hate speech and close identification (including interaction) with online communities espousing hate speech are associated with higher tendencies to contribute to such discourse (Hawdon et al., 2019). Halverson, Corman and Goodall (2011) argue that extremist Islamist discourse exploits master narratives—a "transhistorical narrative that is deeply embedded in a particular culture" (p.14)—to craft persuasive narratives. In analysing the narratives used by Sunni Muslims, it is important to note that, in the absence of any single official authority akin to the Vatican, it is typically better to talk about dominant versus minority opinions of interpretation, rather than conclusive positions or answers (p.6).

Ingram's (2016) crisis/solution model of extremist propaganda prescribes the type of communication that supports the intrinsic traits and actions of the in-group and simultaneously buttresses the negative traits and actions of the out-groups. We also agree with Baele (2019, p.712) that people need motives to commit murder; he provides three reasons as to why conspiratorial theories provide grounds for violence: (1) "coherent and complexity-reducing heuristic constructs"; (2) "suggesting that the 'truth' they expose is actively hidden to those who do not know it, which further explains the link between this type of language and violence"; and (3) they are "usually clear about who among the many archetypal actors involved in the plot are most responsible for the adverse social and political events (real or made-up) selected in the narrative, which creates clear blame attribution" (Baele, 2019, p.712).

Conceptual Framework

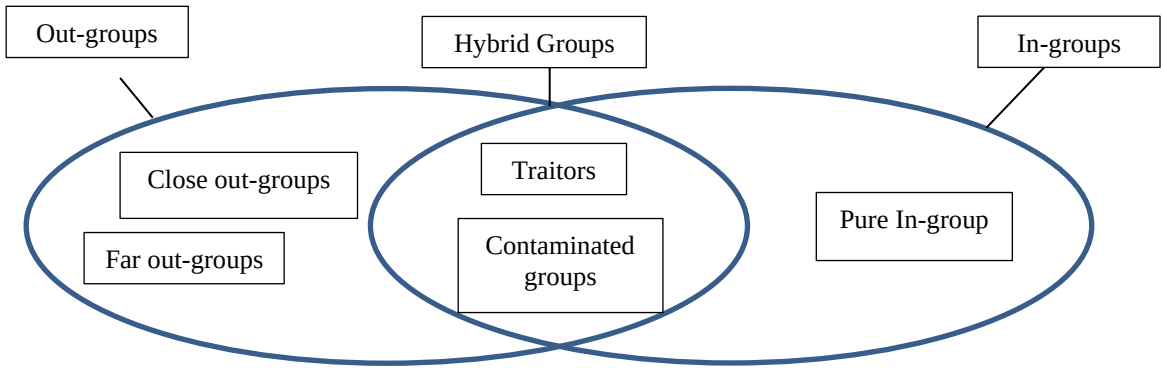

Figure 1. *Archetypal groups in extremist conspiratorial narratives*

Archetypal groups in extremist conspiratorial narratives are diagrammed above and explained below, as adapted from Baele (2019, p.715):

- Far out-groups are those that conspire from a distance to plot against the protagonists and their in-group. Some are guiltier because they intentionally do harm.
- Close out-groups are those working with the far-out groups that are within reach of the in-group, either regionally or through day-to-day encounters. The close-out groups are inferior or subjugated in relation to the far-out groups, in order to maintain their specific situation.
- Hybrid groups are located at the intersection of both groups:
  - The traitors originate from the in-groups, but have intentionally promoted the ideologies or theories of the out-groups. They might directly work for or be friendly with the out-groups.

- The contaminated groups are typically individuals who have converted out of the groups' religion/belief, overtly embracing a new way of life outside their previous belief system (Islam, in this particular context).
- Pure in-groups are ones where "language that produces a positive homogenous in-group is as important as language that negatively portrays out-groups".

Online Ethnography

Ethnography is a qualitative methodology for the study of beliefs, social interactions, and behaviours of small societies, concerning participation and observation over a period of time and the analysis of the data collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Ethnography attempts to systematically study people and cultures, with the aim of understanding and making sense of meanings, customs, rituals, and daily practices. According to Barbour (2007), it aims to give an analytical explanation of other cultures and phenomena, rather than test a hypothesis. Online ethnography, also known as digital ethnography, accommodates ethnographic approaches in the study of communities and cultures created through computer-mediated social relationships. Hine (2000) states that online ethnography has little difference from traditional ethnography, but Wilson (2019) suggests that the ethnographic study of social media must occur online as well as offline, so as to examine the connections between social media and other properties of the social system; these relations are the most significant in comprehending the harmful effects of hate speech aimed at target groups. Understanding ethnography: ethnography is considered as a way of researching (digital) culture with certain epistemological commitments, rather than as a set of procedures (see, for example, Blommaert & Dong 2009).

Researchers now have unprecedented access to and examination of people's communicative repertoires thanks to digitalisation and online communications—the complexities of the "global," "local," and "translocal," as well as the ways in which people incorporate (globally) circulating semiotic materials into their own communicative repertoires, can all be traced online (see e.g. Rymes 2012; Varis & Wang 2011). Skgeby (2011) suggests three main ways to collect data through online ethnography: (1) document collection, (2) online observation, and (3) online interviews. Document collection includes gathering forms of archived interactions that come from asynchronous classifications of communication (e.g., discussion forums, blogs, or mailing lists). Online observation refers to the researchers' real-time, concurrent and simultaneous use and collection of data through the applications or services used in the studied online practice, connecting both the type of observation and the researcher's role. Online interviews use synchronous, micro-synchronous, and asynchronous communication technologies as moderators of interviews. According to Barnes (2003), the prime classes of computer-mediated communication are instant messaging and email (Bampton & Cowton, 2002).

Due to sensitivity issues associated with Facebook, we considered ethical issues such as informed consent and emotional manipulation (Flick, 2016), and worked around this by personally adding ourselves to Yusuf Azmi's "public" Facebook site. This can be considered an observational study for "human subjects research" (Willis, 2019), where our observations are comparable to observational research in a public space, waiving the need for informed consent. The internet offers boundless communication from across the globe and can be considered as "a dataset that can be subject to criminological inspection" (Williams & Burnap 2016, p.215). Facebook's news feed can elicit "ethically important moments".

In this study, online ethnography is used to identify hate speech, both directly and indirectly, on platforms belonging to Yusuf Azmi. For validity purposes, we also take into account real-world issues as reported on other platforms. Online ethnography, by definition,

takes place online as well as offline. An online ethnography of online hate speech, harassment, and threats can be separated into three levels: (1) the regulatory infrastructure of the medium; (2) the social world of interactions among users inside the medium; and (3) the social context outside the medium, as it interacts with the medium.

Goffman (1959) called these levels backstage, onstage, and offstage, respectively. "Backstage" content moderation consists of what kinds of speech are restrained either by law or the terms of service of the platforms and how internal policies unfold. The "onstage" level helps digital ethnographers study the social world of the medium and the interactions of users as they assert the boundaries of a regulatory framework of laws and norms. This study wishes to address the "offstage" by questioning the offline effects of online hate speech in promoting prejudice, segregation, and possible violence. Online ethnography also hints at various methods and even different disciplinary approaches to social media. Given the abundance and accessibility of data pertaining to online interactions (e.g., views, likes, retweets, and comments), it would be self-defeating for anthropologists to deny the qualitative method of analysis.

Data Collection

We adopted the actor-focused data collection method as proposed Brian Friedberg (2020). We first identified Yusof Azmi as a potential socially divisive character that knowingly and unknowingly is promoting right-wing extremism. 'By ascertaining who is creating and amplifying the disinformation in question, you can begin to understand why they are doing it' (Friedberg, 2020 p.5).

We collected data from the official Facebook page of Yusof Azmi between May 1st and May 30th, 2021, as part of a project: analysing the communication strategies of the far-right groups on Facebook. As of June 3rd, 2021, Yusuf Azmi's official public page had 1,120,641 followers. Thus, we can assume that the Semboyan Malaysia Facebook page plays a significant role in shaping the opinions of a little over 3% of the Malaysian population, without considering the multiplier effects of sharing and forwarding this information over the internet.

We analysed Semboyan's most popular postings according to the out-group, hybrid group, and in-group frameworks described above, and sorted that information according to themes. The analysis studied comments from selected Facebook posts to examine the strategies by which Semboyan issued their postings. Burke, Diba and Antonopoulos (2020) conducted a similar study on how the far-right conveys Islamophobic and anti-Semitic propaganda on Facebook by analysing the comments of users. In this study, we extracted information according to the themes identified from the Facebook postings, comments made by end-users, and website postings of Semboyan (found at semboyan1malaysia.com)

Discussions

Far Out-groups

Most of Semboyan's recent postings focused on the recent Israel-Palestinian conflict that killed 250 people (Bartmen, 2021). Around May 2-21, an Israeli aircraft supposedly equipped with intelligence gathering equipment coincidentally flew over Malaysian airspace (MalaysiaNow, 2021). In early May, Putrajaya said that the country was on high alert for possible attacks by Israeli agents targeting officials of the Palestinian resistance group Hamas who were residing in the country. Three years earlier, a Palestinian professor and Hamas

member resident in Malaysia was killed locally by two suspects believed to have ties with a foreign intelligence agency (The Straits Times, 2018).

The conspiracy theory, in which Jews spy on and perhaps assault majority-Muslim regimes, appears to have connected well with real-world occurrences. Examples of some people believing such conspiracies are thematically discussed below. Semboyan is seemingly feeding into IS's anti-semitic conspiracy theory that the Jews are controlling the 'new world order'. Anti-Semitism, briefly, is premised on the belief that the Jews are "engaged in a war against Islam," [which] has been central to Islamist thought since its inception" (Rickenbacher, 2019). Similarly, IS has advocated for violence against Jews in its online messages, suggesting attacking "the Jew with a knife or running over him with a car, poisoning him, bringing back explosives, [... using] explosive belts and IEDs, burning their faces and their houses" (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2015, p.2).The minority viewers who "follow" Semboyan Jihad's Facebook page seem to support these conspiracies by repeatedly posting

Theme 1: The Jews are threatening Malaysia

The comments of three individuals (P1, P2 and P3) are as follows:

- P1: If it was in Indonesia, the fighter jets would immediately follow closely and communicate in order to know the purpose of their being in Indonesia's airspace. If they didn't have a good reason, they'd be told to leave the airspace immediately, or fighter jets would shoot at them...
- P2: The problem is that the aircraft passed through Putrajaya airspace. It's the capital of the country. Even drones are not allowed to be flown around that area, but here's an iR43LL [Israeli] spy aircraft...
- P3: Singapore is indeed a US military partner. It's not impossible that the IDF [Israeli Defence Force] could enter without a solid reason. Where are our fighter jets? Why are we letting them into our airspace without consent?? Where are our advanced satellites?? #Fisabilillah #ElMehdiArmy

Theme 2: Malaysian elites collude with far-out groups of the West

Semboyan Jihad attempts to position the Malaysian state as one that colludes with the West. The audience's rational-and identity-choice decision-making processes are triggered to make a decision that defends the ummah (Ingrid, 2017). According to two other individuals (P4 and P5):

- P4: If it's about using our airspace, the pilot could have just asked permission from the DCA [Department of Civil Aviation] without the need for diplomatic relations. Also, [it is] as if the radar apps are advanced enough to detect if an aircraft enters the airspace with or without permission.
- P5: According to Google, we have trade with Israel. Import/export. Hihihihi, maybe we don't have direct diplomatic relations, but who knows what happens behind the scenes

Theme 3: Islam under threat by the 'elites' and Freemasons

Semboyan believes that the West is attempting to instil hedonistic Western ideals through the state's 'elites.' According to Semboyan's offcial website,

Tun Hussein Onn … explained that the Malaysian government did not intend to ban the organization despite admitting that it contradicted with the Islamic faith. Surprisingly, the movement is now joined by influential Muslims and the 'elites'. (Semboyan, 2021).

Through the use of probability narratives, we see the interplay of conspiracy theories spread by Semboyan: the 'Pharaoh' – the West – is conspiring with traitors to adulterate Islamic values. These narratives resemble the Islamic transhistorical narratives advocated by global extremist groups (Hawdon et al., 2019).

We observe that Semboyan Jihad, like IS, shapes how its audiences perceive and judge the world through "pragmatic factors" like security, stability, and livelihood, as well as "perceptual factors" like identity, crisis, and solution constructs (Ingrid, 2017 p.2-3). The central narrative of Semboyan's narratives is that they are the champions and protectors of Muslims in Malaysia (the pure in-group), and Semboyan's enemies are the evil "others," who in this case are the far out-groups – Jews as well as local and Western elites (including groups such as the Freemasons) – who are responsible for Malay-Muslim economic, religious, and social problems, and Semboyan is the solution.

Close Out-groups

A posting in June 2021 claimed that Muslims were inactive in defending Islam from being disrespected by certain segments of society, including the Democratic Action Party (DAP). A virtual public forum included panellists such as Mohammad Kazim Elias (a popular "YouTube Ustaz" [Islamic teacher/preacher]) and Datuk Nadzim Johan (the chairperson of PPIM), which was viewed over 15,000 times, according to Facebook statistics. The group was posited as an archetypal protagonist against the allegedly "antagonistic" non-Muslim minorities (particularly the Malaysian Chinese). Semboyan then attempted to validate their narrative by quoting the Qur'an in another post stating that Muslims should "defend" their religion if it is being degraded by Malaysia's "other" ethnicities. The normalisation of hate crimes committed by non-Muslims perceived to be directed at Muslims was also discussed on Yusof Azmi's official Facebook page, where he urged his followers to protect the ummah through narrative fidelity, providing "rational" justifications for the call to action.

Yusof Azmi asks for action against the "others" who have offended the majority Malay-Muslims' sensitivities. Semboyan authorities paid a visit to the company site and gave a strong warning to the owner after an ethnic Chinese businessman assaulted his two bodyguards for fasting (Farik, 2021). Yusof Azmi and his companion Abang Ali take the lead once more in order to protect the ummah from being exploited. They also pointed to an incident where a non-Muslim individual used an online nickname "that was worded in a way insulting to Islam", following which the e-hailing food delivery rider tasked with the order decided to inform his other colleagues, leading to a large group of riders manhandling the individual before handing him over to the police (Sadho, 2021). When the police implemented the normal process of the law by apprehending five individuals for assault, PPIM organised an online crowdfunding initiative to bail them out. These narratives are similar to IS's "focus on targeting and destroying Iraq's minorities (especially groups like Yazidis and Yusof Azmi calls for action against the "others" who have harmed the feelings of the majority Malay-Muslims. These narratives are similar to IS's "focus on targeting and destroying Iraq's minorities (especially groups like Yazidis and Christians), the overarching Shiite threat, the claim to universal rule, the emphasis on violent brutality, and the zeal for enforcing morality" (Fernandez, 2015 p.3). The use of conspiracy theories here is, once again, directed at the state, which is ostensibly acting as a protector of the underworld. Christians, the overarching Shiite threat, the claim to universal rule, the emphasis on violent brutality, and the zeal for enforcing morality" (Fernandez, 2015 p.3). The use of conspiracy theories here is, again, aimed at the state, which is supposedly acting as a protector of the underworld.

Hybrid Groups

'Muslim Traitors'

Yusuf Azmi also uses its Facebook site to call out other Muslims that he perceives to be deviant. The author tells the story of fidelity, which is based on the idea that the archetypical hero is protecting the faithful from enemies of the religion who are working from within. A ustazah (female equivalent of the ustaz) was questioned. A few weeks before that posting, Yusuf Azmi discredited an ustaz who allegedly made seditious remarks against the Prophet, continuously calling on the state apparatus to charge the individual. This posting included a Facebook Live confrontation featuring Yusuf Azmi, accompanied by his colleagues, against the ustaz on May 29th 2021, which received 29,000 views and 3,700 comments. Essentially, not much is discussed regarding these conspiracies, except for hearsay.

We see that the perceived reality, constructed of men and women playing their expected behaviours, results in those who are construed as Malays being expected to pray and portray an 'Islamic' demeanour for fear of being labelled as deviants. In this construction, values are seen as a historical narrative, crafted according to socio-historical responses to a specific reality, "reflecting the cognitive role identity constructs tend to play as 'lenses' through which actors and events are perceived, meaning generated and actions legitimised" (Ingram, 2016 p.5).

These incidences above fit into the master narrative of jahiliyyah (ignorance), referring to the period when the people of the Arab world worshipped a wide range of jinn (spirits) and alihat (deities) (Hawdon et al. 2019).

'Contaminated Groups'

During the fasting month, five to six individuals from Semboyan manhandled a foreign worker and uploaded a video of them doing so on to Facebook (Ahmad, 2021). Yusof Azmi and Abang Ali were seen violently manhandling the individual for selling 'rejected' Semboyan T-shirts online, suggestively validating their conspiracy theory through language and violence. In doing so, they also promote xenophobia against foreign workers through their posts.

Semboyan Jihad, shares similar perceptions with IS, in the sense that they have a rigid interpretation of Muslim socialisation that "prioritises empowering messages that tie the in-group to solutions compared to messages that link enemies to crisis" and there is also a "prominence of takfirist (i.e., accusing fellow Muslims of apostasy) narratives in ISIS propaganda" (Ingram, 2017 p.8).

Pure In-groups

The probability and fidelity narratives employed by Semboyan lead them to make assumptions about the characteristics of the "pure in-groups". Firstly, this includes people who donate some money to the cause.

This group will defend their religion at all costs, using violence when necessary. Semboyan Jihad portrays themselves as protagonists, or Geertz's (1973) archetypal heroes, in defending Muslims. It is worrying that many people, particularly ethnic Malays, contribute to or purchase the merchandise sold by Semboyan Jihad, not to mention the high volume of followers that they have on Facebook. Again, the group's messaging stresses exclusionary nationalism and racism, hinting at the need for a Malay authoritarian leader to redress the current predicaments that Malaysia faces (Jupskås & Segers 2020).

Conclusions

Based on our analysis, we found that scholarly work and policy makers understanding of securitisation in the context of Southeast Asia is contextually different compared to the discourses of the West world. Essentially, this paper provides us with a substantive argument that countering violent extremism (CVE) should move away from the framework that squarely associates Islam with terrorism while solely associating non-Islamic forms of Western extremism with right-wing extremism.

It is impetus that civil society actors and civil society organizations that promote racism, xenophobia, exclusionary nationalism, conspiracy theories, and authoritarianism should be rightfully categorised as a right-wing extremist group, and elected political party leaders should make a conscious effort to steer away from endorsing them. We contend, that religion is embedded in the exclusionary narratives dependent on the context of the culture.

The indecisive actions against Semboyan Jihad exhibit the government's inconsistencies. On the one hand, the government of Malaysia uses its ironclad against individuals and groups that are in possession of materials affiliated with IS, like the Dabiq magazine but its rather is less enthusiastic about reprimanding people like Yusuf Azmi and Semboyan, even when he and his followers have expressed hate crimes against foreign workers or incite mob attacks on the minorities within the state.

Thirdly, the shared ideologies between right-wing extremist groups and transnational non-state actors should be quickly addressed and extinguished. Semboyan Jihad is an example of a group that shares some of the same narratives as IS. Enforcement agencies should be quick to act to control and mitigate the effects of these groups, especially those with high levels of online followers and influence.

In addition, we argue states should pass a law or bill against politicians who use right-wing populist language on social media platforms, in parliament, and on both mainstream and alternative media platforms in hopes that it will deter populist narratives that dehumanise vulnerable and minority groups.

Underlying data

Figshare: Refining the Definition of Extremism in the Context of Malaysia. figshare. Dataset available: https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.21399666.v1

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