

May 10, 2009 Sunday

Inside the mind of Mas Selamat and his ilk

Driven by misguided sentiments, he likely sees himself as a hero fighting an 'evil system': Experts
By Zakir Hussain



Neither his years in detention nor life on the run quenched his zeal for his cause.

When Mas Selamat Kastari was arrested in Johor on April 1, he was still plotting attacks on Singapore, a mark of the hardcore extremism that characterised him.

In Jemaah Islamiah (JI) circles, the regional leader of the terrorist group was admired for being ambitious and ruthless.

Friends of his family, however, thought less of him.

They were upset that the former bus mechanic, who joined JI around 1990, was often out of a job. As a result, his wife and five children often went hungry.

He spent time in Indonesian prisons before being handed over to the Singapore authorities in 2006.

He was detained for two years in the Whitley Road Detention Centre prior to his escape in February last year.

Unlike other JI detainees, he was not put on a programme of religious rehabilitation because the Ministry of Home Affairs judged that he was not ready.

It was an indication of how firmly he clung to his extremist views.

Ustaz Ali Haji Mohamed, the co-chairman of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), said a radical like Mas Selamat would have been so deeply indoctrinated that his grievances would have crystallised into beliefs that he would be willing to pursue, regardless of the cost.

Such extremists also believe that all other Muslims are wrong, and that only those who walk their path of violence are true believers.

The feeling of hatred against non-Muslims and Muslims who work against him is also deeply embedded, said Ustaz Ali.

Singapore aims to rehabilitate as many of its security detainees as possible.

To date, two-thirds of the 60 detainees arrested here since 2001 for terrorist activities have been released after rehabilitation.

So far, none has strayed back. Some have returned to society for four years or more.

However, another 20 remain in detention, including 'hardcore' JI members who have not renounced their views.

As Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew noted last year in a book by the RRG marking its fifth anniversary: 'You cannot keep the detainees locked up. That is not the solution. The solution is to put them right, and so they become normal Muslims again and their families lead normal lives.'

He noted that some 26 of those arrested in the first two sweeps in 2001 and 2002 have been released.

'But six have still not been convinced. They have stuck to their guns, especially the leader of the JI group (Ibrahim Maidin). They are just standing firm.

'They are convinced that they are right. Nothing seems to be able to change their beliefs. So, we have to live with this problem, and they just have to stay detained,' he added.

Given the difficulties of rehabilitating a hardcore terrorist like Mas Selamat, it is likely that he will be detained indefinitely.

His conversion to extremism took place around 1990, after he heard Indonesian cleric Abu Jibril preach in Johor.

In 1992, he joined the Singapore JI cell. Over the next five years, he visited Afghanistan twice.

In 1999, he was hand-picked by JI operations chief Hambali - now in United States custody in Guantanamo Bay - to lead the Singapore cell.

Two years later, Mas Selamat fled Singapore when the Government began cracking down on JI members for plotting attacks against Western embassies and military personnel here.

Dr Kumar Ramakrishna, who heads the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, explains why the current mechanisms for rehabilitation are unlikely to work in Mas Selamat's case.

'In my own view, he would likely and sadly consider the Muslim scholars who attempt to counsel him as sold-out hypocrites who should be totally ignored,' he said.

However, if a JI leader who is more senior were to renounce violence, there is a chance that Mas Selamat may be willing to listen.

'If Hambali actually does turn, this would be show-stopping and make him, potentially, a most influential person for both individual rehabilitation and community counter-radicalisation efforts in South-east Asia,' Dr Kumar said.

Several years ago, when Mas Selamat was in prison in Indonesia, reformed JI leader Nasir Abas tried to meet him to persuade him to mend his ways.

But Mas Selamat refused to meet Mr Nasir.

Dr Kumar has not had a chance to view any documents on the deep background of Mas Selamat and finds it hard to pin down his path to radicalisation.

But based on what is known about the JI leader, he said it was possible that Mas Selamat was driven by fear that the group he most closely identifies with, in this case Muslims, is under threat.

Psychological studies show that when individuals perceive, rightly or wrongly, that their group is under threat, they tend to strike back, often resulting in ethnic cleansing, war or terrorism, Dr Kumar said.

He said Mas Selamat seems to define himself primarily as a Muslim first and last, and likely hates Singapore because he perceives 'that his Muslim 'group tent' is under existential threat both in Singapore and globally'.

'He may have experienced some form of personal setback or setbacks in his life which prompted him to seek greater refuge in religion, and this is where at some point he perceived some form of religious marginalisation that rendered him vulnerable to JI ideology,' he added.

Dr Kumar explained that the JI ideology, with its strong us-

versus-them world view, would have reinforced Mas Selamat's desire to right perceived wrongs and 'religiously legitimised the hate he feels toward Singapore and its close international friends, particularly the US and Israel'.

'It is important to realise that in his own mind, Mas Selamat thinks he is a hero standing up against the 'evil system' that 'oppresses' Muslims in Singapore and worldwide,' he said.

RRG member Ustadz Mohd Ibrahim Mohd Kassim notes that such misdirected sentiments are not held by the majority of Muslim Singaporeans.

And many of the JI detainees who held this view have come around to see where they have been misled by JI teachings.

But Mas Selamat has not been moved.

Said Dr Kumar: 'He probably really is convinced he is one of the 'good guys' whose 'eyes have been opened' to the actual plight of his Muslim brothers. This is why he seems so motivated.'

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