
Research Note: Singapore’s “Deradicalisation” Model: Revolution – or Evolutions?

Shashi Jayakumar^{a1}

^aSenior Fellow; Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies; Nanyang Technological University

Abstract

The detention in December 2020 by Singapore’s Internal Security Department (ISD) of a “far-right” individual, a 16-year-old Singapore citizen of ethnic Indian background (and of Protestant faith) who planned to murder Muslims at two mosques (imitating Brenton Tarrant’s 2019 attacks in Christ Church) is something of a jolt to those who follow radicalization trends in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Past detentions of radicalized individuals in Singapore have tended to be of ISIS-inspired youths (or, in the earlier phase, members of the Jemaah Islamiah). This research note attempts to trace the likely evolutions of Singapore’s “deradicalisation” model in response to this striking case. More attention will likely have to be paid to “non-ideological factors” especially in cases that involve youths. The research note also considers whether the Religious Rehabilitation Group, the key player in Singapore’s “deradicalization” enterprise, is necessarily the best body equipped to deal with new types of (non-Islamist) radicalization cases. At the wider, whole-of-society level, relevant agencies will likely have to find ways to reinforce aspects of Singapore’s “resilience model” (in particular, the emphasis on tolerance and inter-faith and inter-ethnic harmony) which forms an integral part of Singapore’s holistic counter-radicalisation strategy. Time and resources will also need to be devoted to study other forms of extremism, including types formerly thought to be confined to the West. It is vital that links be forged between researchers across East and West exploring the phenomena of new trends in radicalisation, not least because of the possibility that potential extremists just embarking on their own trajectories across may well be doing the same across the hemispheres.

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Introduction

The news of the detention in late November 2020 by Singapore’s Internal Security Department (ISD) of a Singaporean citizen (of Protestant faith, and Indian by ethnicity) in

¹ Corresponding Author Contact: Shashi Jayakumar, Email: isshashi@ntu.edu.sg, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

December 2020 has come as something of a surprise to some observers – especially to those who chose to associate extremist activity in Southeast Asia solely violent Islamist groups and individuals. The unnamed individual, aged 16 at the time of his detention, was influenced in particular by the thought and actions of Brenton Tarrant, who murdered of 51 Muslims at two mosques on 15 March 2019 in Christ Church. The youth, imitating Tarrant, planned to kill Muslims at two mosques, on the very same day in 2021 – 15 March.²

The youth appeared to be entirely self-radicalised by online media. He is not known to have been part of any milieu or online community either in Asia or the West. A great deal which remains unknown about him, but it is clear that a key facet of his radicalisation trajectory was his viewing of ISIS propaganda and material showing ISIS atrocities. Two incidents that seem to have been particularly germane was material showing execution of Ethiopian Christians in Libya by ISIS militants, and (in particular) the attacks in October 2020 by an ISIS-inspired Tunisian at the Notre-Dame basilica in Nice that left three people dead. The youth formed the view that Islam was an existential threat against Christianity, and that action was needed to protect his faith. In one of the two manifestoes he penned (both not made public, and one unfinished), the youth variously called his planned attacks a “massacre”, an “act of vengeance” and a “call for war” against Islam.

The youth appears to have acted entirely alone: He is not known to have been groomed or encouraged online by others, with his family and those close to him completely unaware of his plans.³ He was not delusional; nor does he appear to suffer from mental health

² Internal Security Department, “Detention of Singaporean Youth Who Intended to Attack Muslims on the Anniversary of Christchurch Attacks in New Zealand”, *Ministry of Home Affairs*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/detention-of-singaporean-youth-who-intended-to-attack-muslims-on-the-anniversary-of-christchurch-attacks-in-new-zealand>. For some thoughts assembling and assessing what is known, see Shashi Jayakumar, “Singapore: The Lure of the Far-Right”, *GNET Insights*, February 2, 2021, <https://gnet-research.org/2021/02/02/singapore-the-lure-of-the-far-right/>. The paragraphs that follow in this introductory section rely on the ISD press statement and on press reporting of a briefing subsequently given by ISD to the media. Relevant individual press reports are given further in the footnotes below as appropriate.

³ It would appear that most of the imbibing of online that contributed the radicalization of the youth took place from late 2019-2020. It is not known if the advent of COVID-19 (which led to a brief lockdown in Singapore in 2020, as well as enforced study-from-home arrangements for some time), contributed further to his immersion in online material and consequent radicalization. For commentary on the phenomenon of COVID-19 accelerating and energizing extremist groups, see Joby Warrick, “Covid-19 pandemic is stoking extremist flames worldwide, analysts warn”, *Washington Post*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/covid-19->

issues. He planned his attacks methodically and in a determined fashion, admitting subsequently that he knew he would likely either be detained before he could execute his plan, or else be successful and killed by the police in the aftermath. He did online reconnaissance the two mosques he had targeted, identified his route of travel, planned to steal his father's credit card in order to procure a car on a local car-sharing service, and watched a online tutorials on how to drive. In addition, he had made preliminary (unsuccessful) efforts to obtain a firearm and also explored making a Triacetone Triperoxide (TATP) bomb. Eventually settling on a machete as his weapon of choice (which he was close to purchasing when he was detained), he also viewed YouTube videos on the most efficient ways to kill with the machete.

This is the first far-right detention in Singapore, and is also the first case of its type in Southeast Asia.⁴

The purpose of this research note is to shed light on the likely evolutions of what has come to be called (with some degree of oversimplification) Singapore's "deradicalization" model in response to this striking case, which has hitherto mainly had to deal with individuals from a radical Islamist background.

Extremism in Singapore: Background

Beginning in late 2001, members of the Singapore cell of Jemaah Islamiah (JI), the key al-Qaeda affiliate in Southeast Asia, began to be detained after their activities (which included several plots that would have caused serious destruction and loss of life) were

pandemic-is-stoking-extremist-flames-worldwide-analysts-warn/2020/07/09/5784af5e-bbd7-11ea-bdaf-a129f921026f_story.html.

⁴ There have been incidents of Christians attacking Muslims in Sulawesi and Maluku, Indonesia, but only in the context of communal conflict with broader structural drivers, during which violent acts were committed by both sides (I thank Cameron Sumpter for enlightenment on this issue). For a brief background, see Keisyah Aprilia, "How a Christian-Muslim Conflict in Eastern Indonesia Birthed the MIT Militant Group", *BenarNews*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/special-reports/id-mit-terrorism-pt2-12032020134008.html>. Violence against the ethnic Rohingya in Myanmar committed by the members of Buddhist majority (with, most observers agree, the government to some degree complicit) in recent years has deep-seated cultural and historical (not simply religious) roots.

discovered and interdicted.⁵ Senior Muslims clerics came together in 2002-3, concerned by the JI arrests, and convinced (in the face of considerable scepticism within the Muslim community) that the Muslim community in Singapore had to take some ownership of the issue.⁶ This became the nucleus of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG). The RRG counsellors attempted to engage with JI individuals and getting to the roots of their radical thought.

A second distinct wave of detentions can be discerned from 2007: self-radicalised individuals influenced by social media. The number of detentions began to accelerate from 2014 when individuals began to be detained for adherence to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

All told, 129 Singaporeans have been issued orders under Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA; which provides for detention without trial) since 2002.⁷ 88 were served with a detention order (DO) and 41 were served with a Restriction Order (RO), which imposes certain restrictions on the individual.⁸ Of the 88 who were detained, 68 have been released on restriction orders (RO) after counselling by the RRG.⁹ Overall, the ISA/RRG approach has been by and large successful particularly for the earlier generation of detainees; the overall "success rate" (those who have been released) for the 40 JI or JI-linked individuals detained is 88%.¹⁰

In recent years, and especially from 2014, the number of detentions of JI members has tailed off. RRG counsellors have attempted to engage with self-radicalised individuals detained by ISD, several of whom attempted to join ISIS in Syria, or who were preparing to

⁵ For background, see Ministry of Home Affairs, "The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism", *Ministry of Home Affairs*, January 7, 2003, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/others/english.pdf>.

⁶ Shashi Jayakumar, *Deradicalisation in Singapore: Past, Present and Future* (London: ICSR, King's College London, 2020), 6-7. <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ICSR-Report-Deradicalisation-in-Singapore-Past-Present-and-Future.pdf>

⁷ This number includes individuals from the JI.

⁸ An individual issued with an RO is not allowed to change his place of residence, employment or travel out of the country without approval; other conditions as determined by the Internal Security Department may be stipulated. If further progress is made post-release, the RO can be allowed to lapse.

⁹ These updated figures given, released recently by the authorities, should be preferred to those given by the author in *Deradicalisation in Singapore*. For the identities of detained individuals, see <https://www.linkedin.com/posts/activity-6704275592663097344-PmuS>.

¹⁰ Seow Bei Yi, "Self-radicalised people harder to rehabilitate: Shanmugam", *Straits Times*, March 14, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/self-radicalised-people-harder-to-rehabilitate-shanmugam>.

commit acts of violence in Singapore.¹¹ Officials have acknowledged that it is in some ways more difficult to reach self-radicalised individuals. The success rate (meaning the number of individuals who have been released) for self-radicalised individuals detained since 2007 stood at 25% in 2018.¹²

The RRG

RRG now has over 40 counsellors, and includes women counsellors as in the age of ISIS, women are for the first time being detained for radicalisation.¹³ It is run – indeed important to be *seen* to be run – as an initiative by the Muslim community, with some government assistance.

It is important for to consider the extent to which RRG needs to evolve – and *whether* in fact it needs to evolve – in the light of the detention of the right-wing youth. The RRG is staffed with Muslim clerics. There is no sign of the RRG being expanded (for example, staffed with Christian religious leaders) to rehabilitate individuals like the youth under consideration.

¹¹ See for example Yvonne Lim, “Self radicalised teens: One detained, another arrested”, *TODAY*, May 24, 2015, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/two-sporean-teens-detained-under-internal-security-act>. Separately, a very small number are known to have made the journey to Syria to join ISIS. None of those who made the journey has returned, and there is reason to believe that most have been killed. Ministry of Home Affairs, “Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2019”, *Ministry of Home Affairs*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/singapore-terrorism-threat-assessment-report-2019>.

¹² Seow, “Self-radicalised people harder to rehabilitate: Shanmugam”. There are only two known cases of recidivism in the history of Singapore’s rehabilitation efforts. Both were self-radicalised individuals. See Jayakumar, *Deradicalisation in Singapore: Past, Present and Future*, 19 & 89.

¹³ Zhaki Abdullah, “ISD adjusts approach to rehabilitation as more young people pick up terrorist ideology”, *Channel NewsAsia*, February 3, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/isd-rehabilitation-approach-adjusted-youth-terrorist-ideology-14102274>. Women counsellors needed (beginning from 2005) to engage the wives and children of JI detainees. (See Nur Irfani Binte Sariپی, “Religious Rehabilitation Group: Female Volunteers Ten Years On”, *RSIS*, May 15, 2015, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/co15118-religious-rehabilitation-group-female-volunteers-ten-years-on/#.YDW44ZMzblw>). In the era of ISIS, with Singaporean women themselves being detained for radicalisation, female counsellors have directly engaged female detainees. Chong Zi Liang, “Women have important role to play in countering radical ideology, say experts”, *Straits Times*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/women-have-important-role-to-play-in-countering-radical-ideology-say-experts>.

Instead, there is some sense of the Christian community needing to take ownership, much like the Muslim community did in 2002-3.¹⁴ For the present case, it is known that the youth will be given counselling by Christian religious leaders.¹⁵ But it is too early to tell whether this will be done on a case by case basis, or whether an RRG analogue staffed by Christian counsellors will need to be set up. RRG counsellors have been quick to make it known that they would be prepared to offer advice.¹⁶ This sharing of experiences may well be needed. The RRG (together with mosques) has in recent years major attempt has been made to reach out to younger, impressionable individuals who might be lured in to radical thinking through ISIS propaganda encountered on social media and chatrooms; it has been recognised that this outreach needs to be done online too in order to reach out to a younger, more-tech savvy generation seeking answers.¹⁷

Psychological Aspects

While considering the present ring-wing youth, it is worth bearing in mind recent trends in radicalisation in Singapore. In the period 2015-2019, seven youths between the ages of 16 and 19 were investigated for Islamist radicalisation. Before 2014, the youngest individual dealt

¹⁴ While it is still early days, it is not altogether clear if *all* leaders within the extremely diverse Christian community in Singapore are prepared to recognise that the potential seriousness of the detention and its implications. See the thought-provoking (and by no means unanimous) remarks of various individuals and Christian leaders in Chua Mui Hoong, “S’pore teen detained under ISA: Wake-up call for Christian community”, *Straits Times*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/wake-up-call-for-christian-community>. One is reminded of the consternation within the Muslim community in Singapore in the early period c.2002-3 following the JI arrests— many Singaporean Muslims had difficulty believing that the JI extremists came from their community.

¹⁵ Fabian Koh, “16-year-old detained under ISA for planning mosque attacks to receive religious, psychological counselling”, *Straits Times*, 27 January, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/16-year-old-detained-under-isa-for-planning-mosque-attacks-to-receive-religious>.

¹⁶ Abdullah, “ISD adjusts approach to rehabilitation as more young people pick up terrorist ideology”.

¹⁷ Ministry of Home Affairs, “16th Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) Seminar – Speech by Mr K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law”, *Ministry of Home Affairs*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/speeches/news/16th-religious-rehabilitation-group-seminar-speech-by-mr-k-shanmugam-minister-for-home-affairs-and-minister-for-law>; Faris Mokhtar, “Essential to engage millennial Muslims online as fewer of them go to mosques, *TODAY*, 7 October, 2017, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/essential-engage-millennial-muslims-online-less-them-go-mosques>.

with was 20 years old.¹⁸ It appears that the recent, pro-ISIS cases are quicker to radicalise compared to the earlier generation of individuals detained. Officials have noted that formerly, it used to take around 22 months for individuals to become radicalised. But in the ISIS era, this has been shortened to nine months.¹⁹

One apparent parallel with the present case under consideration has to do with the right-wing youth's connection to his religious faith. Several of the recent pro-ISIS cases investigated appear to know less about their religion when compared to the earlier generation of JI extremists.²⁰ One knowledgeable source, commenting on recent pro-ISIS youth cases in Singapore, has observed that some of the radicalised youths faced stressors in their lives and that an infatuation with ISIS was in some ways a "substitute activity" that created "new sources of satisfaction" or which distracted from the original stressor. In other cases, involvement with ISIS ideology formed part of a coping strategy that helped the individual avoid facing his/her problems realistically.²¹

While it is unwise to speculate on potential parallels with the right-wing youth, there has not in the information released by the authorities been the suggestion that he was a deeply religious individual *before* the beginning of his radicalisation journey. It is not known if the youth was active in any church. What *is* known is that the youth was fascinated by violence²², sought gory and violent material first in online sites and forums, and that it the course of this

¹⁸ Wong Pei Ting, "ISD adjusts rehab approach to evolving threat landscape as more youths, women among terror suspects", *TODAY*, 3 February, 2021, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/isd-adjusts-rehab-approach-evolving-threat-landscape-more-youths-women-among-terror>.

¹⁹ Valerie Koh, "Time taken for people to be radicalised has been shortened: Shanmugam", *TODAY*, 14 September, 2017, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/time-taken-people-be-radicalised-has-been-shortened-shanmugam>.

²⁰ See the case study of "Daniel" described in Abdullah, "ISD adjusts approach to rehabilitation as more young people pick up terrorist ideology".

²¹ Bridget Robert, "Why Do Youths Join Terrorist Groups? A Psychological Study of At-Risk and Radicalised Youths in Singapore", *Home Team Journal* (9), (February 2020): 78 – 85 at 83, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/ht-journal-no-9.pdf>.

²² One of the manifestos written by the youth evinces this: he notes that that "violence should never be solved with peace", because peace, while "moral", is "nowhere near effective" as violence. Internal Security Department, "Detention of Singaporean Youth Who Intended to Attack Muslims on the Anniversary of Christchurch Attacks in New Zealand".

search that he came across ISIS propaganda in late 2019.²³ The material he viewed and information he imbibed (concerning the Nice attack in 2020 and ISIS atrocities in Libya) appear to have contributed to grievance against Islam, strengthened his identification with his own faith, and identification with historical figures who were glorified by the far-right for defending Christendom against Islam.²⁴

As noted above, counselling by Christian leaders will be attempted. Notwithstanding the youth's Protestant faith, on the basis of what is known and what has been sketched out above, it is not certain that religious-based "deradicalization" should be prioritised. Unsurprisingly, ISD has stated that the youth will undergo psychological counselling that will address his propensity for violence.²⁵ Psychological counselling for radicalised detainees is not new: psychologists from the Ministry of Home Affairs have for some considerable time worked with detainees as part of the overall rehabilitation approach.²⁶

In shedding light on aspects of the proposed rehabilitative approach for the youth, the authorities have also elaborated to an extent on the evolution of the overall framework for rehabilitation. While priority is still given to addressing the ideological misconceptions (presumably including faulty understandings of religious tenets) leading to radicalism, attention is also being paid to "non-ideological factors", in particular for youth.²⁷ Besides attention paid to youths' sense of belonging and identity, emphasis is also being placed on critical-thinking skills. There appears to be a twofold aim in this: these skills will help youths

²³ Aqil Haziq Mahmud, "16-year-old Singaporean detained under ISA after planning to attack Muslims at 2 mosques" *Channel NewsAsia*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/16-year-old-singaporean-detained-isa-planned-attack-2-mosques-14052400>.

²⁴ Several of these figures feature on Brenton Tarrant's rifle. Zakir Hussain, "Teen ISA detention: Rejecting incendiary material a must to avert far-right terror", *Straits Times*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/far-right-isa-detainee-rejecting-incendiary-material-a-must-to-avert-far-right-terror>.

²⁵ Daryl Choo, "16-year-old S'porean who made 'detailed plans' to attack 2 mosques in Woodlands detained under ISA", *TODAY*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/16-year-old-sporean-who-made-detailed-plans-attack-2-mosques-woodlands-detained-under-isa>.

²⁶ Jayakumar, *Deradicalisation in Singapore: Past, Present and Future*, 9-10. The psychological counselling sessions are distinct from RRG sessions with detainees.

²⁷ Abdullah, "ISD adjusts approach to rehabilitation as more young people pick up terrorist ideology".

discern radical rhetoric online, and also help them build mental resilience that will help them cope with life stressors.²⁸

What can be discerned from the above is not a sea-change but a subtle, and already ongoing, shift in emphasis of parts of the rehabilitation process – in particular, the psychological aspect. An important facet of this change in emphasis is helping youth develop pro-social habits, making them realise that they are part of the community, and instilling the understanding that they need to contribute to others' needs. As one knowledgeable commentator has observed in discussing pro-ISIS youth cases, "The end goal is essentially to provide the youth with an opportunity to lead a productive and fulfilling life in the community without the need to engage in extremism."²⁹

Mentoring

Within the range of psychological interventions to be attempted, one aspect stands out. ISD has made it known that, besides assigning a counsellor from the Christian community to the right-wing youth, a mentor will also engage the youth. The disclosure of a mentoring programme focusing on youth cases (which began in 2016) is significant. The aim behind mentoring is to provide a positive influence and role model and keeping the youth focused on pro-social goals, with the hope bring that these can play a role in mitigating the risk of recidivism.³⁰

At least some of the mentors for pro-ISIS detainees have been members of the RRG secretariat.³¹ It must be considered unlikely that the mentor will come from the RRG, which is staffed by Muslim clerics. But whatever the background of the individual or individuals

²⁸ Wong, "ISD adjusts rehab approach to evolving threat landscape as more youths, women among terror suspects".

²⁹ Robert, "Why Do Youths Join Terrorist Groups? A Psychological Study of At-Risk and Radicalised Youths in Singapore": 78 – 85 at 84.

³⁰ Wong, "ISD adjusts rehab approach to evolving threat landscape as more youths, women among terror suspects".

³¹ Hariz Baharudin, "ISD adjusts its approach to rehabilitation as those dealt with for terror-linked conduct gets younger", *Straits Times*, February 3, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/trend-of-younger-people-falling-prey-to-terrorist-ideology-has-isd-adjust-its>.

chosen, the mentoring itself will likely not be purely ad-hoc, but presumably draw on experiences and existing practices from the rehabilitation framework.³² ISD case officers have been known to interact with detainees in order to give offer social interaction and support, with this interaction continuing after release from detention, with the view being that this helps in the reintegration process and reduces the risk of re-radicalisation.³³ Separately, in a different context, case workers from the Inter-Agency Aftercare Group (ACG; on which see below) have in the past acted as mentors (it appears in an informal way) for the children of detainees who lacked a father figure.³⁴

What has been discussed above concerns religious and psychological aspects of rehabilitation and their evolutions. A third plank, which the authorities place just as much emphasis on, is social rehabilitation. For radicalised individuals who are Muslim, some of the social rehabilitation aspect is overseen by the ACG, formed in February 2002, which is a voluntary grouping of organisations from the Muslim community. ACG volunteers have a role in seeing to the needs of family and children of detainees, the group provides counselling and financial support for the families of detainees (and where needed, assists family members in finding employment). Following release, ACG case workers keep in touch with the former detainee and family. This is an important part social reintegration.

The ACG may not be required in the case of the right-wing youth, but aspects of social reintegration and the aftercare approach will be deployed. As part of the rehabilitation

³² Mentoring is of course well-known as forming one plank within diversionary approaches tried elsewhere, particularly in the West. A case in point is what has become known as the “Aarhus Model”, named after the city in Denmark where mentoring (together with other disengagement approaches involving schools, social services and the police) has been used. The approach and variations of it have been used elsewhere in Denmark and further afield. Individuals connected with the Aarhus model, including its mentors, have been to Singapore in recent years and shared their experiences at seminars and workshops. It would be premature, however, to suggest (in the absence of information from the Singapore authorities) that there has been a conscious borrowing. For an example of mentoring already being used in Singapore in another context, at-risk youth in the pre-criminal space, (where learning lessons could well be drawn when attempting to address new forms of extremism), see Ministry of Social and Family Development, “Two New Initiatives for More Effective Guidance And Rehabilitation Of At-Risk Youth”, Ministry of Social and Family Development, August 13, 2020, <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/Pages/Two-New-Initiatives-for-More-Effective-Guidance-and-Rehabilitation-of-At-Risk-Youth.aspx>.

³³ Wong, “ISD adjusts rehab approach to evolving threat landscape as more youths, women among terror suspects”.

³⁴ Zakir Hussain and Abdul Halim bin Kader (eds.), *Inter-Agency Aftercare Group: Fostering Social Reintegration and Building Community Resilience* (Singapore: Tamaan Bacaan, 2015), 15.

process, the youth will be allowed family visits (these were also allowed during the initial investigation period, which is exceptional, as visits are not usually allowed in this phase), and arrangements are being made for him to continue his education.³⁵ This is of course logical, but it should additionally be observed that in some cases involving pro-ISIS youth, where a detained youth has continued his education, this seems to have had the effect of boosting esteem and supports the overall rehabilitation process.³⁶

Despite what might on the surface seem to be alien or startling aspects of the thought of the right-wing youth, the rehabilitative approach likely to be attempted will not necessarily (on the basis of what is known) be a great departure from past practice, and it is unsurprising that authorities have made it known at the same time as news of the detention had broken that adjustments have been made in the rehabilitative approach over the years, to deal especially with youth cases.³⁷ New individuals (away from organisations like the ACG and RRG) may need to be found to engage the right-wing youth, but there may well be certain conceptual strands running through his thought processes which counsellors, mentors and psychologists may better understand when drawing on past lessons from engaging and counselling pro-ISIS youth.

Conclusion

The various facets of the Singapore rehabilitation approach come together to form an approach that is more complex than simple “deradicalization”, although this shorthand has often been used by commentators. The holistic approach for individuals mirrors changes that have been taking place in Singapore’s plural and multi-ethnic society. There have for some time been efforts to reinforce cohesion and resilience, and interfaith dialogue.³⁸ These, when

³⁵ Koh, “16-year-old detained under ISA for planning mosque attacks to receive religious, psychological counselling”.

³⁶ See the case study of “Daniel” described in Abdullah, “ISD adjusts approach to rehabilitation as more young people pick up terrorist ideology”.

³⁷ Abdullah, “ISD adjusts approach to rehabilitation as more young people pick up terrorist ideology”.

³⁸ For an overview, see Centre for Liveable Cities, *Urban Systems Studies: Religious Harmony in Singapore: Spaces, Practices and Communities* (Singapore: CLC Publications, 2020), <https://www.clc.gov.sg/docs/default-source/urban-systems-studies/uss-religious-harmony-in-singapore.pdf>, esp. at 55-72.

taken together, form what might be called Singapore's counter-radicalisation approach. For some considerable time now, this approach has been underpinned by the resilience narrative, and the ability of the diverse groups in Singapore, based on bonds formed, to collectively withstand shocks and not descend into mutual distrust (say, in the aftermath of a terrorist incident carried out by members of one particular ethnic or religious group).³⁹ Under their broad penumbra of these efforts, there appear to be new directions forming that bear mentioning.

There is now a pronounced emphasis on cyber hygiene, social media literacy, critical thinking, and pro-social goals. These have not arisen simply within the context of counter-radicalisation efforts. Disinformation (be it state-sponsored subversion efforts, or other forms of fake news which can also undermine social resilience) have been much-discussed in socio-political circles and in public discourse. The echo-chambers that disinformation can lead to are, conceptually, is not altogether dissimilar from those seen in the trajectory of radicalised individuals. Both can undermine tolerance for other peoples, and of other points of view.⁴⁰

Early intervention means reaching upstream, with schools taking the lead in initiatives in promote critical thinking, information literacy cyber wellness.⁴¹ These initiatives parallel efforts those on the counter-radicalisation track, with ISD working with schools to hold workshops dealing with radicalisation and extremism. Other organisations work cooperatively in this space: the RRG also conducts outreach activities such as seminars aimed at students

³⁹ This is understandable, given the underlying risk of social faultlines breaking out in ways that the authorities might not be able to completely control; but equally it should be noted that the authorities have been keen to emphasise the regional terror threat posed by various ISIS-linked groups in recent years. See Ministry of Home Affairs, "Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2017", *Ministry of Home Affairs*, June 1, 2017, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/singapore-terrorism-threat-assessment-report-2017>.

⁴⁰ As government officials have repeatedly observed : see for example Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Edited Transcript of Opening Address by Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan at the 10th Asia-Pacific Programme for Senior National Security Officers on 11 April 2016, 9am at the Marina Mandarin", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, April, 16, 2016, <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2016/04/Edited-Transcript-of-Opening-Address-by-Minister-for-Foreign-Affairs-Dr-Vivian-Balakrishnan-at-the-1>.

⁴¹ Lianne Chia, "Thriving rather than surviving: Teaching students how to spot fake news", *Channel NewsAsia*, February 25, 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/thriving-rather-than-surviving-teaching-students-how-to-spot-9960656>.

and the youth. Counsellors have attended workshops to spot signs of radicalisation.⁴² While there is presumably a mechanism for reporting of cases of concern, the exact modality is not known. But the overall approach is to keep matters unsecuritised as far as possible.⁴³ It is known that in a small number of cases where Muslim schoolboys who showed radical inclinations, concerned family members approached RRG counsellors who were able to reshape the outlook of the youths. RRG does not report cases like these to the authorities unless there is a serious concern, with ISD also observing that individuals found to be at the early stage of radicalisation may be referred to counselling without the need for detention.⁴⁴ Presumably, this approach is also mirrored in schools.

It remains to sketch out avenues for further inquiry.

Officials in Singapore have been keen to stress that extremism does not emanate solely from one religion. Clearly, researchers and practitioners will need in the coming years to devote time and resources to the study of non-Islamist, and also now non-Christian based forms of extremism, including those which have their roots in exclusivist strands of Hindu and Buddhist thought. These studies of these will necessarily need to encompass not the ideological journeys of radicalised individuals, but extend to broader considerations of exclusivist thought that can provide a conducive backdrop for the perpetration of violence.

Separately, individuals who are not driven by any particular ideology but who engage in meaning-seeking behaviour, and in pursuit of their goals may be prepared to engage in violent acts, may well become more common. In 2016 for example news broke of precisely such an individual, an ethnic Chinese Singapore citizen seeking to escape from personal

⁴² Fabian Koh, "Parliament: Schools and institutes of higher learning among targets of youth outreach to combat radicalisation", *Straits Times*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/parliament-schools-and-institutes-of-higher-learning-among-targets-of-youth>.

⁴³ ISD is not the only actor when it comes to interventions and outreach. NGOs and government agencies concerned with social support and resilience, as well as facilitating inter-racial and inter-religious dialogue, also conduct a range of outreach activities in and out of school settings. Koh, "Parliament: Schools and institutes of higher learning among targets of youth outreach to combat radicalisation".

⁴⁴ Toh Yong Chuan, "Early counselling by Muslim scholars turned two teenage boys away from radicalism", *Straits Times*, June 24, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/early-counselling-by-muslim-scholars-turned-two-teenage-boys-away-from-radicalism>; Ministry of Home Affairs, "Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2019".

difficulties, who attempted to join Kurdish militia to fight against ISIS.⁴⁵ This particular course of action - seeking to take up arms against ISIS – is of course much better known from cases in the West (the Singaporean individual would have been the first Southeast Asian to engage in such an act if he had been successful).

What this may mean is that all concerned with these issues in Singapore (and indeed Southeast Asia) may consider the possibility that modes of extreme thinking and behaviour evident further afield, in the West, could find fertile ground within the minds of impressionable young people in Singapore and Southeast Asia. On the face of it, it might seem inherently likely, given that many of these movements in the West have specific concerns or draw on distinct historical narratives, seemingly sharing little in common with individuals halfway across the world. Still, these possibilities should not be discarded. The youth detained forming the focus of the present study was “right-wing” but of a different make-up to the individual he idolised, Brenton Tarrant. Tarrant was a white supremacist. The detained youth, of Indian ethnicity, would presumably not therefore have shared much in common with Tarrant, but the fact remains they inhabited the same mindspace. The youth subscribed for example to the same ideas Tarrant did, concerning the Great Replacement, and the idea that Muslim fertility rates would eventually mean the displacement of Christians.⁴⁶

Trends when it comes to individuals prepared to engage in violence now being seen in the West - Incels, or individuals with mixed or unstable ideologies to name just two possibilities – may well be mirrored in Asia or Southeast Asia in future. Only time will tell.

There is the possibility that, besides inhabiting a shared mindspace, right wing extremists across East and West seek actively to confer (say, across fora or chatgroups) and share their thinking and ideas, however incongruous (given differences in culture, outlook, and historical narratives that feed grievances) these contacts might seem to be. Such contact does not seem to have been present in the case of the right-wing youth in Singapore, but it cannot be ruled out in future.

⁴⁵ See “From migrant to new citizen and now ISA detainee: Wang Yuandongyi’s unusual journey”, *TODAY*, March 16, 2016, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/migrant-new-citizen-and-now-isa-detainee-wang-yuandongyis-unusual-journey>”,

⁴⁶ Hussain, “Teen ISA detention: Rejecting incendiary material a must to avert far-right terror”.

If indeed time and experience bear out this two theses: that Asia “lags” the west in radicalisation trends, and that “right wing” extremists across East and West may form connections with each other going beyond just a loose set of ideas held in common – then sharing of intellectual capital between researchers across East and West will be extremely important. Fora should be devised experts familiar with the most recent developments when it comes to right wing or other “new” forms of extremism in the West to share their knowledge. Not all might be directly transferable, given differing norms, cultural and religious contexts, but this discourse might at least help both sides understand better avenues for further research. The need for these collaborations is increasingly pressing, given (the contention of the present writer) that all kinds of individuals might in time be radicalised, or radicalise themselves, even in countries with seemingly predictable trends (based on recent history) of radicalisation such as Singapore.

As for Singapore itself: its rehabilitation model will have to continue in its evolutions in order to cope with what may be about to come. And this can only be successful if work done at the larger, whole of society level succeeds. This matters not just for Singapore, but, one suspects, for the future of many other nations confronting the changing nature of extremism.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ My thanks go to my research assistant, Daryl Ong, for assistance in the preparation of this research note. All errors and omissions are my own.

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