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PERSPECTIVE

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Rethinking Extremism Beyond Physical Violence: Anti-Shia Hostility in Malaysia

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Malaysia has been referred to as a "moderate" Muslim country for a long time. However, it is now no longer a stranger to religious extremism. In this picture, Muslim devotees exercise social distancing, as a preventive measure to combat the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus, on the first Friday of the holy month of Ramadan at the Putra Mosque in Putrajaya on April 16, 2021. Photo: Mohd RASFAN / AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Academic studies on extremism have tended to view the issue through a security lens. Recent attacks on churches in Indonesia and Malaysia would have reinforced the popularity of this approach.

- However, violent extremism does not exist in a vacuum. Acts of terror are driven by ideas and discourse that motivate and justify terrorist acts.

- This article examines the impact of non-physically violent extremism on Muslims. Drawing on the case of the Shi'as in Malaysia, it explores how extreme ideas are espoused by some people in power, including popular preachers, religious elites, and bureaucrats.

- It analyses the Malaysian experience and demonstrates how labels such as "deviant" or "liberal" can lead to distress among Muslims advocating different points of view and inhibit their constructive participation in society at large.

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INTRODUCTION

For a long time, Malaysia has been referred to as a "moderate" Muslim country. However, it is no longer stranger to religious extremism. On 19 November 1985, police stormed a village in the state of Kedah, where Ibrahim Mahmood (also known as Ibrahim Libya), a PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) member, was resisting arrest. According to the government, Ibrahim had planned to overthrow the government by force, deeming it an un-Islamic government.[1] Known as the Kampung Memali incident, that action resulted in 14 villagers and four policemen losing their lives. Fifteen years later, members of an organisation by the name of Al-Ma'unah disguised themselves as military personnel and entered a military camp in the state of Perak, seizing weapons and threatening to overthrow the government and wage a holy war.[2] Lives were lost, and the standoff between security forces and Al-Ma'unah lasted for five days.

Both these groups condoned the use of violence in the name of Islam against what they deemed an infidel enemy.

Malaysia has faced other terrorist threats, early ones including those arising from movements such as Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM), Jemaah Islamiah (JI) and the Abu Sayyaf group. In 2014, it was reported that at least 30 Malaysians had left the country to join the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria, and that a number of alleged ISIS members in Malaysia had been arrested for attempting to launch an attack in the country. Reports on Malaysians being recruited by ISIS, and possible infiltration into the military continued to surface over the years.[3] What was also of concern was that in a survey conducted by the Malaysia-based Merdeka Centre in 2018, it was found that 5.2% of the respondents supported ISIS, while 18.1% supported JI.[4] Malaysia scored the highest in this context in comparison to Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Organisations such as JI and ISIS are driven by a train of thought that justifies violent means or the use of physical force to cause harm and casualties, and establish an Islamic polity in the form of a caliphate or Islamic state. This is distinct from non-violent extremism, which does not resort to the use of physical force, but which nevertheless has extremist ideas.

However, the differentiation between "violent" and "non-violent" in the literature of extremism is becoming increasingly blurred. The binary masks the fundamental problem that extremist ideologies, whether entertained by violent or non-violent groups, do threaten a country's social and political stability and can be violent in other ways. Non-violent extremist groups are not often seen to be inflicting visible physical harm, and the impact of their ideas on society has not been sufficiently studied. Instead, studies on extremism continue to be dominated by security concerns. Counteracting extremism—more easily considered counter-terrorism—is a growing field of study. Interestingly, in recent years, policymakers, researchers, and security forces have started paying greater attention to non-violent extremism and its impact, particularly how it can eventually lead to physical violence.[5]

This article highlights two limitations of the violent and non-violent binary and proposes that extremism be understood more broadly. We will also illustrate that non-violent extremism may not be as "non-violent" as it claims. We carry out a case study of extremist ideology aimed against intra-religious minorities in Malaysia to examine the various

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manifestations of extremism that are not physically violent and their impact on individuals in diverse societies. It will conclude that non-(physically) violent extremism should be of equal concern to security experts as physically violent extremism.

LIMITATIONS OF THE BINARY

Any attempt to define extremism has to immediately consider the issue of objectivity. Indeed, someone categorised as extreme by one group can be deemed a hero or a moderate by another. Rather than getting entangled in claims and counter-claims of being biased and objective, we seek guidance from what scholars have already agreed to consider basic human rights. Any deviation from these can be determined to be extreme. Muslims agree that basic rights such as freedom of expression, the sanctity of human life, democracy, and freedom of choice, align with their religious values. Moreover, gauging extremism must go beyond abstractions or broad definitions, and should also examine its impact on human life and societies at the day-to-day level.[6]

In terrorism studies, violent extremism is often differentiated from non-violent extremism. While violent extremists "embrace offensive violence as an instrument to advance towards their version of utopia",[7] non-violent extremism is generally understood as the rejection of the use of physical force in pursuing a cause. There are two limitations in distinguishing non-violent extremism from violent extremism.

First, the problem does not lie with the binary itself but in the highlighting of violent extremism as the main issue to be tackled. Strategies to tackle extremism heavily focus on violent extremism or terrorism, and are globally known as Prevention or Counter-Violent Extremism measures (P/CVE). These divert attention from the fundamental issue to be tackled, i.e., the ideology underpinning all forms of extremism, violent and non-violent. In the context of Muslim extremism, Schmid posits that the difference between non-violent extremists who engage in missionary work and violent extremists who practice jihad "is often only one of strategy and tactics."[8] Hence, it is more important "to look at what both groups of extremists share in their political outlook", as they are "two sides of the same coin."[9]

Second, the binary assumes that extremist ideas that have not been pursued through physical violence are incapable of inflicting harm on targeted groups or society. This neglects the fact that other forms of violence, such as psychological and emotional ones, may be inflicted without resort to physical force. To be sure, security studies are many steps behind research on domestic violence, which considers psychological pain to be of equal significance to physical violence. For instance, psychological violence may be inflicted in the form of the fear instilled among targeted communities due to hate speech and discrimination. This then begs the question: since non-violent extremism can harm people in other ways, is it really "non-violent"? While physical violence is the most overt manifestation of extremism and is therefore of great concern, restricting the definition of violent extremism solely to physical acts of terror excludes discussions about other forms of violence and about the harm faced by many individuals and society at large. Ultimately, extremism carried out at the discursive level must not be neglected, and should in fact be considered as fodder for violent groups in their development towards conducting acts of terror.

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NON-(PHYSICALLY) VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MALAYSIA

The intolerance towards and unsympathetic treatment of intra-religious minorities in Malaysia, such as the Shi'as, reflect hatred against them. While the Shi'a community rarely encounters physical violence, they continue to be victims of the ideology of hatred propounded by religious preachers and state religious authorities. This punitive trend against the Shi'a community arose in the 1990s, especially following the 1996 *fatwa* (legal opinion) issued by the Fatwa Committee of the National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs which outlawed all doctrines that contradict the doctrine of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*, or Sunni Islam.[10] Tolerance of the Shi'as among Malaysian religious leaders had earlier been due to various external conditions; indeed, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 inspired many Malays to study Shi'ism, awed as they were by its capacity to mobilise the masses to topple the unpopular westernised Shah of Iran.

However, the Syrian civil war that began in 2011, with "its sectarian framing along the Sunni/Shia divide",[11] caused Shi'as to be portrayed more and more negatively. Research reveals that the extremist ideology adopted by sections of the mainstream Muslim community in Malaysia manifests itself mostly in the form of hate speech. This includes labelling, false information and portrayals of Shi'as as dangerous and deviant. Occasionally, the mistreatment escalates into raids on Shi'a community events.

DAILY ENCOUNTERS WITH ONLINE AND VERBAL HATE SPEECH

It is not uncommon for some Sunni Muslims, who constitute the majority in the country, to insult minority Shi'a Muslims and to spread falsehoods about them.[12] For example, at the everyday level, there is a Facebook group by the name of *Gerakan Anti Syiah Malaysia* (Malaysian Anti Shi'a Movement) which posts content about the alleged evils and deviating teachings of Shi'ism and talks about the need to "dismantle the Shi'a movement" so as to prevent Malaysia from being "tainted with corrupted beliefs."[13] They also say that "as long as the Shi'as have a place in this country, Malaysia will not be peaceful."[14] Such comments not only falsely portray Shi'a Muslims as deviants from the teachings of Islam, but also claim them to be a security threat that needs to be eliminated. This amounts to psychological violence. Verbal insult and harassment of Shi'a Muslims disrupts their peace of mind, and has resulted in many Shi'a followers going into hiding. This contradicts the fact that Malaysia is a signatory of the Amman Message, an international accord sponsored by King Abdullah Hussein of Jordan in 2004 and signed by Muslim leaders declaring Sunnis, Shi'as and Ibadis to be part of mainstream Islam.[15]

However, such comments are not only made by Malaysians at the everyday level but also by religious preachers who have access to a large following. For example, Ustaz Azhar Idrus, an independent preacher who has more than a million followers on each of his social media platforms, agrees with the popular view that all Shi'as are *kafir,*[16] or the alternative view that most of them are *kafir*, and only some are "still Muslim."[17] Another preacher, Ustaz Don Daniyal, who is popular for his appearances on several television programmes, says that Shi'as are infiltrating schools and "corrupting the morals of the students."[18] He further says that Shi'ism is a "deviant teaching", and that Shi'as believe that Angel Gabriel wrongly sent a revelation to Prophet Muhammad. Similar to the ones made on Facebook groups, these comments are forms of hate speech and psychological violence against Shi'a Muslims. Since they are made by preachers and often delivered in mosques, listeners from

across the country may believe that these comments are backed by religious knowledge and authority, which will therefore deepen their prejudice and even hostility towards Shi'as, perpetuating an environment of fear for the latter. Prior to becoming the Mufti of the Federal Territories, Dr Zulkifli Al-Bakri, currently the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department for Religious Affairs, once commented that while not all Shi'a beliefs are wrong, some attempt to distort the religion and engage in conflict. Citing the conflict in Syria, he said that Shi'as have permitted killings of Sunnis.[19]

Hate speech against the Shi'a community is also perpetuated by state religious authorities such as the mufti (a person who issues *fatwa*). The Mufti of Perlis, Dr Mohd Asri Zainal Abdin (MAZA), for instance, has stated that "Shi'a is a deviant teaching"[20] and that "they do not know how to live in harmony with others in a Muslim country as evidenced from the sectarian conflicts in Pakistan and Iraq."[21] He also highlights that it is problematic when Shi'as practise their beliefs in public spaces.[22] This implies that Shi'as do not have the freedom to practise their religion in public, and should remain behind closed doors. However, as will be shown later, even religious Shi'a events held privately and away from the public eye, have not been spared. The Mufti of Perlis also claims that "Shi'ism is a political *mazhab* (school of thought)"[23] that seeks to establish a cleric state, and is therefore dangerous if not controlled.

Overall, the hate speech directed against Shi'as, and the labelling of the community as deviant and dangerous stands in stark contrast to the reality of the community. Presenting the Shi'as in Malaysia as a security threat is also uncalled for as they are significantly outnumbered by the Sunnis. Moreover, if there are Shi'a followers who seek to undermine the state through revolution or armed struggle, there are enough laws in Malaysia to prevent this, and the same laws against insurrection apply to anyone, including the Sunnis.

Anti-Shi'a views propagated by state religious authorities not only deepens the normalisation of hate speech against Shi'as on both online and offline platforms but has also resulted in the formalisation of discriminatory practices against the community in state-level religious institutions. This is evident from the publication of a booklet by the Selangor Islamic Religious Council (MAIS) in 2015 which refers to Shi'ism as a "virus" that needs to be contained in order to prevent "chaos and bloodshed which stems from the conduct and actions of Shi'as."[24]

Since 2010, extreme views against the Shi'a community among religious authorities have gone beyond the verbalising of such sentiments to raids being carried out against their private gatherings.[25] More recently, the *New Straits Times* reported that in September 2019, raids were conducted in Johor and in an area near Kuala Lumpur against Shi'as holding events to commemorate Ashura.[26] It is worth noting that prior to a raid conducted by the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS), several mosques in the state "delivered a government-sanctioned sermon" that labelled Shi'a "heinous", "nonsense" and "nauseating".[27] This episode highlights that hate speech can easily be translated into physical actions.

What is more significant is that the raiding received support from several religious authorities, such as the late Harussani Zakaria, the longest-serving Mufti of Perak.[28] He also stated that the teachings of Shi'ism should not be spread and practised in Malaysia, not even in private spaces.[29] This view is also held by Abdul Rahman Osman, the Mufti of Pahang,

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who claims that Shi'ism is deviant and that there should be no room for their beliefs in Malaysia.[30] The Mufti of Selangor, Mohd Tamyes Abd Wahid, justified that the raiding had to take place because the Shi'a gathering violated "a state *fatwa* that declares Shi'a to be deviant."[31]

"NON-VIOLENT EXTREMISM" AS PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

The European Institute for Gender Equality defines psychological violence as "any act or behaviour which causes psychological harm to the partner or former partner. Psychological violence can take the form of, among others, coercion, defamation, a verbal insult or harassment."[32] While this definition was coined in relation to intimate partner violence, it can also be applied to non-violent religious practices. The definition can be applied to the case of Shi'as in Malaysia. For example, following the raids in 2019, they expressed great fear for their safety,[33] claiming that the religious authorities had stepped up the crackdown on the community as demonstrated in the fact that several Shi'as were detained without a warrant and brought to the Sharia Court without any reason being given.[34] Furthermore, throughout the years during which Shi'as have been subjected to extremist views by the public and by religious authorities, they have feared identifying themselves publicly as Shi'a.[35] They also hide their beliefs and practices.[36]

That the regular instances of hate speech and raids have effectively stoked fear among members of the Shi'a community supports the argument that such non-physically violent practices qualify as violent extremism based on Angus' definition that violent extremism occurs when "a person or group decides that fear, terror and violence are justified to achieve ideological, political or social change, and acts accordingly". [37] Hence, the seemingly non-violent practices against the Shi'a community are potentially not "non-violent." The absence of physical harm done towards the community does not negate the fact that Shi'as are the subject of discrimination and persecution which have harmed their psychological well-being.

CONCLUSION: UNDERSTANDING NON-VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The harsh treatment of Malaysian Shi'as serves as a reminder of the dangers of non-violent extremism in Southeast Asia. The Shi'a example is not unique to Malaysia, but also applies to Indonesia, where a fatwa issued by the East Java chapter of the Council of Ulama Indonesia (MUI) declaring Shi'as as deviant led to persecution of the community in Sampang. Physical violence that transpired in the episode remains a blackmark for the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) government on inter-faith and intra-faith matters. Moreover, hate speeches and online vitriols against Shi'as also apply to other religious minorities such as Ahmadiyyas, and some Sufi *tariqah* orders. To be sure, extreme voices at the discursive level, if not clamped down on by those in power, especially the state, undermines intra-religious harmony at the societal level. These may also fuel harsher structural policies targeted at religious minorities, providing an atmosphere for the development of violent physical extremism.

The Malaysian and Indonesian experiences provide several learning points for neighbouring countries such as Singapore. Labelling groups or individuals with different viewpoints as "deviant" even though they are accepted as mainstream in the Islamic world, is non-violent extremism. While Shi'as and Ahmadiyyas are allowed to practise their faith freely in

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Singapore, the view of the religious authority towards the former, remains ambiguous, despite Singapore too being a signatory of the Amman Message. At the everyday level, there are still Muslims in Singapore who argue that the sect is outside of Islam's fold. There is also very little attempt to distinguish the different schools of thought within Shiism.

In Singapore, the more significant concern is the labelling within Muslim discourses of those with different views as "liberal" and the term is often used against those deemed deviant or out of the fold of Islam. This has caused distress among those who hold a different religious point of view. Unchecked labelling could result in those with alternative viewpoints withdrawing from society and not contributing to social betterment.

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