

09/07/2000

Knowledge is the weapon to curb deviant groups

Abdul Razak Ahmad

THE bizarre motive behind the arms heist by members of the Al-Ma'unah Islamic martial arts group strengthens a long-running thread among such deviationist groups nationwide.

According to Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai, they apparently wanted to set up "an Islamic Government according to their interpretation."

Described by an analyst in a recent news report as the "ideological extension of political Islam - militant, aggressive and radical", the threat posed by these groups to national security is real and immediate:

* In 1980, eight men from the Mahad group were killed after they stormed the Batu Pahat police station armed with swords.

* In 1985, police mounted a five-hour operation against 37 men from a group led by Ibrahim Mohamood, or more popularly known as Ibrahim Libya.

Four policemen and 14 criminals were killed in the operation in Kampung Memali Ceruk Putih in Baling, Kedah.

* In September 1994, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the Government had evidence regarding the presence of a militant group of Islamic deviationists known as Tentera Badar - belonging to the banned Al-Arqam movement.

Currently there are 44 Islamic groups identified as "deviant" by the Islamic Development Department (Jakim).

Each is a potential Al-Ma'unah in the making, so the possibility of similar incidents will continue to plague the country unless effective measures are taken to curb them.

The misguided religious zealotry of deviant Islamic groups in Malaysia is not new. The Perak Religious Affairs Department alone has detected no less than 38 from 1965 to 1993.

Pusat Islam has 46 categories of deviant Islamic activities which range from deviationist silat martial arts groups to bomoh and other practices.

Its research defined several common traits and operating procedures among such movements.

Followers are often duped into believing that they could possess "spiritual powers" like invincibility under the guidance of their leaders, who sometimes claim lineage from various prophets to boost credibility.

"The most common deviation involves misinterpreting the al-Quran and Hadith to suit the group's teachings," the research cited.

Slavish devotion to the movements' leaders are the norm, cultivated by two practices.

The first is Rabitah, a concept which calls upon its followers to visualise the leader when performing religious chants, resulting in the sycophantic devotion commonly displayed by such groups towards their leaders.

In 1995, for example, over 4,000 members of a silat group refused to leave their deviant teachings fearing they would be "cursed".

The second tactic is claiming Kasyaf or the ability of the leader to "know" and "see" beyond the physical.

Among cases brought to court involving deviant groups include group leaders who claimed to be the Prophet Muhammad, to have received divine revelations from God in classical English, and insisting that the obligatory five-times-daily prayers and fasting in the month of Ramadan were unnecessary.

For movements propagating deviant teachings through the use of silat, the incorporation of spiritual and mystical elements provides a tantalising lure in attracting members.

In this aspect, one reason cited for the rise in deviationist Islamic movements is the influence from groups in Indonesia - long a bedrock of Islamic mysticism and spirituality taught by both genuine masters and quacks alike.

Some of the prominent registered and approved silat groups in Malaysia include groups from Indonesia like Silat Cemandi, Silat Banten, Silat Sunda/Bugis, Silat Sunting, and Silat Jambi.

In the case of Al-Ma'unah, it is understood that its teachings were relayed by its leader, identified as Mohd Amin Mohd Razali, in Indonesia.

But the transnational movement of deviant groups works both ways. Deviationist groups in Malaysia have also been reported to have spilled over into neighbouring countries.

The Al Arqam movement, for example, founded in 1968 by Ashaari Muhammad and based in Kampung Sungei Penchala, Selangor, expanded not only nationwide but to 16 other countries by 1993.

With the cocktail of deviationist teachings and blind devotion needing only the spark of Jihad (Holy War) and Syahid (Martyrdom) to explode, effective co-ordination is needed between national religious authorities to determine and address groups infiltrating each other's borders.

But despite repeated calls and promises of tighter supervision by Jakim and the State Religious Affairs Departments, mandatory registration of Islamic groups will not be entirely effective in controlling the problem.

This is because most reported incidents of deviationist teachings have discreet beginnings and only blow out at a critical stage.

But the Al-Ma'unah arms heist indicates that the problem has not abated and is continuing to persist.

Not for lack of prosecution, however. Of the 49 deviant groups identified up to 1995, 30 were charged under various laws such as the Syariah Crime Enactments.

But though several members of groups posing a grave danger to national security, like Al-Arqam and Al-Ma'unah, have been detained under the Internal Security Act, deviant Islamic groups have maintained currency.

Because a lack of knowledge about Islam is the often cited as the reason why such groups are easily able to manipulate members, the most effective deterrent could be to seek religious knowledge - which after all, is power.

In this sense the most effective weapon against deviant Islamic groups and their teachings would be to permit no room to those planning to abuse religion for underlying agendas: be it personal or political.

(END)