Dismantling the False Bai'ah of Extremists in Religious Counselling

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SYNOPSIS

Bai'ah (an oath of allegiance in Islam) endures as an ideological anchor for extremists despite Jemaah Islamiyah's disbandment in June 2024. AI-enabled remote bai'ah facilitates radicalisation, as seen in a recent case in Singapore. This digital shift impacts counter-extremism efforts, requiring strategies that address both theological roots and the psychological effects of virtual allegiance.

COMMENTARY

Among the most pressing challenges in terrorist rehabilitation is identifying and dismantling the misuse of *bai'ah* – the Islamic oath of allegiance – in radicalised individuals by extremist organisations such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and ISIS. Following the official disbandment of the JI in June 2024 and its subsequent operational weakening, the relevance of *bai'ah* has shifted from a binding organisational oath to a more diffused ideological commitment among sympathisers. Although the group no longer operates as a structured militant organisation, its core doctrinal narratives continue to influence individuals, often through digital platforms, thereby maintaining the significance of *bai'ah* in the radicalisation process.

This transition highlights the *bai'ah*'s evolving role in today's security landscape, where it functions more as an ideological anchor than a directive for militant action. Addressing these issues requires collaboration among stakeholders to uncover those foundational elements attracting and retaining individuals within radical groups – motivating them to fight and even die for their ideology or organisation.

Bai'ah in Authentic Islamic Tradition

In Islamic history, *bai'ah* stems from the Prophet Muhammad's pledge of mutual commitment to justice, goodness (*ma'ruf*), and ethical conduct. It emphasised moral accountability and obedience in righteousness, not blind allegiance. The Quran asserts that *bai'ah* to the Prophet is, in essence, an oath to God, underscoring its spiritual gravity.

Due to this sacred significance, classical scholars established stringent criteria for a valid *bai'ah*. It requires a clear scholarly lineage (*silsilah* or *sanad*), ethical conduct (*adab*), and recognition from legitimate religious authorities. Self-proclaimed leaders lacking these credentials cannot claim legitimate religious authority, and any *bai'ah* made to them is void in Islamic jurisprudence.

The Evolving Nature of Bai'ah and Technology

Hence, the misuse of *bai'ah* by extremist organisations like JI and ISIS is targeted in counselling. Radical leaders weaponise *bai'ah* to enforce obedience, falsely framing it as a religious duty that guarantees salvation and legitimacy. Through this, recruits come to believe that their violence and subversion are acts of faith.

In JI, *bai'ah* ceremonies were conducted with its leaders, such as Abdullah Sungkar or Abu Bakar Baashir. As for ISIS, its members pledged allegiance to Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph. These oaths vary, with some pledging wealth or life for the establishment of a so-called *Daulah Islamiyah* in Southeast Asia. This binding allegiance created deep psychological and spiritual commitments to false leaders.

It is important to note that traditional *bai'ah* involves a commitment to a person or group, thereby forming a personal and organisational bond. This traditional understanding of *bai'ah* as a physical oath sworn to a leader is being transformed by technological advances. Recent developments in Singapore have demonstrated that *bai'ah* is increasingly occurring online, facilitated by AI chatbots, creating new complexities for security and rehabilitation.

A recent case under Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA) involved a self-radicalised 17-year-old youth using an [AI bot](#) to generate a *bai'ah* to ISIS, underscoring the intersection of technology and radicalisation. This case illustrates how technology now plays a crucial role in how individuals pledge allegiance – a dynamic that exacerbates the challenges for counsellors tasked with dismantling these ties. The impersonal nature of AI-mediated *bai'ah* makes it harder to contextualise and humanise the oath, complicating counsellors' efforts to guide detainees away from extremist beliefs.

These technology-mediated *bai'ah* experiences can accelerate radicalisation, according to findings from Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD), which indicate that online platforms and chat groups have halved the time it takes for Singaporeans to become self-radicalised. The speedy dissemination of extremist

content on platforms like Telegram leverages memes, slang, and AI tools, amplifying ideological commitments and increasing the emotional grip of *bai'ah* on individuals.

Implications for the Counselling of Detainees

In rehabilitation programmes, trained religious counsellors carefully deconstruct each counselee's *bai'ah*. They examine personal experiences, trace involvement timelines, and guide the detainee in re-evaluating the meaning of allegiance. This intellectual and spiritual unpacking allows detainees to recognise how emotional manipulation, group loyalty, and pseudo-religious reasoning have sustained their radical beliefs.

The authority of the Amir cited in rituals made the *bai'ah* seem sacred, inspiring individuals to make financial contributions, undertake intelligence-gathering, sabotage, or even suicide missions (*istimata*). Such acts are portrayed as divine services despite representing a profound misunderstanding of legitimate Islamic teachings.

The *bai'ah* used by JI and ISIS fails because they have been careless in proclaiming their leaders as authorities in Islam without the necessary recognition from Islamic scholarship. Their self-proclamation as caliph and Amir fails the stringent test employed by Islamic intellectual heritage. Their *bai'ah* is not accepted as they have not proven the chain of intellectual and spiritual authority binding them to Islamic intellectual heritage, with its continuous transmission to the Prophet.

Due to this fact, many JI counselees realised the hollowness of their allegiances, which have no foundation in Islamic tradition and practices. In Indonesia, for example, more than 400 former JI members have revoked their *bai'ah* between 2021 and 2023, as reported by [Detachment 88](#). In Singapore, most JI detainees who have been released from detention have renounced their allegiance to the group.

Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) plays a vital role here, helping offenders disentangle faith from extremism and to recognise that true religious duty lies in peace, not militancy. However, counsellors must now contend with the dual challenge of addressing traditional theological misinterpretations of *bai'ah,* which involves loyalty to a person or group, alongside the new, abstracted form of allegiance fostered by digital technology.

The use of AI and other online tools to perform *bai'ah* introduces an additional layer of complexity: Counsellors must recognise and address how detainees perceive their online oath as binding and real, albeit formed through non-human interaction. This requires enhanced digital literacy among counsellors, new strategies to engage with detainees about the impersonal nature and lack of legitimacy of AI-generated *bai'ah*, and psychological techniques to deconstruct the emotional and cognitive grip of virtual allegiance.

Moreover, the rapid onset of self-radicalisation facilitated by online platforms demands quicker and more responsive intervention frameworks. Counsellors need to contextualise and develop tailored programmes that address how technology

reshapes identity and loyalty within a radicalised context, integrating digital literacy with religious rehabilitation.

Conclusion

The *bai'ah* remains a significant ideological construct despite the operational decline of groups like JI. Its role has evolved, adapting to the digital age where technology increasingly mediates allegiance. This evolution presents fresh challenges for counter-extremism efforts, particularly in the rehabilitation and counselling of detainees who may have pledged *bai'ah* via online platforms or AI bots.

Over the past two decades, Singapore's terrorist rehabilitation programme has proven effective with its three-pronged approach – religious, psychological, and social rehabilitation – and has shown robust adaptability to evolving threats. Multidisciplinary teams work to debunk misinterpretations of Islam that radical groups exploit. Such work is increasingly vital in today's era of Internet-fueled misinformation, where extremist narratives easily spread.

Successful rehabilitation requires understanding these new dynamics, combining theological clarification with innovative approaches to confronting technology-facilitated radicalisation. Moving forward, collaboration between security agencies, religious counsellors, and technology companies is essential to countering the persistent and evolving threat posed by *bai'ah* in the age of digital extremism.

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