

BY METHMALIE DISSANAYAKE

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as the ISIL and as the "Islamic State" is a serious threat to the world. Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe recently told Parliament that 32 Sri Lankans of four families have gone to Syria and joined the ISIS. Surprisingly, the government later denied Rajapakshe's claim. Some sections of society are demanding a ban on the ISIS terrorist organization. The government seems to be slow to take action in this regard. In this backdrop, *Ceylon Today* spoke to international terrorism expert Prof. Rohan Gunaratna on this matter.

THERE ARE A FEW HUNDRED ISIS SUPPORTERS IN SL

— PROF. ROHAN GUNARATNA

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Excerpts:

Q: What is the threat the ISIS terrorists can pose to Sri Lanka?

A: The meaning of threat is the degree of harm. Sri Lanka is a society that all communities must stay together. So the ethnic and religious harmony is essential for the unity and the security of the country. ISIS's real threat is to disrupt the harmony among the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities and also to divide the Muslim community between Shia and Sunni sects. Ninety-nine per cent of Sri Lankan Muslims are moderate and mainstream. ISIS wants to radicalize, politicize and militarize them. The ISIS also wants to create disharmony within the Muslim community by saying that the ISIS-type of Islam, not the local and traditional Islam, is the correct version of the religion.

In Sri Lanka there has developed a local and traditional form of Islam for generations. It is the most ideal form of Islam for a country like Sri Lanka. It helps Muslims and non-Muslims to live as brothers and sisters. The version of Islam coming from the Middle East is very brutal and harmful towards non-Muslims. That version of Islam attacks and kills non-Muslims and even destroys their places of worship and monuments. It creates discrimination between Muslims and non-Muslims. Therefore, such a version threatens the maintenance of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in the Sri Lankan context.

This is the point where Sri Lankan academics have missed out. They think that ISIS only poses a terrorist threat. ISIS does pose a terrorist threat. But 90 per cent of the damage is caused by the erosion of the social fabric in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan Muslims and non-Muslims have been living as brothers and sisters for ages. For centuries Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims lived in harmony. Because of the ultra-nationalism of Tamils in Tamil Nadu, the relationship between the Tamils and the Sinhalese and between the Tamils and the Muslims was disturbed. Because of it we had problems in the North. It also created the 30 years of bloodbath in the country. We can't afford another conflict like that between Muslims and Sinhalese, and between Muslims and Tamils.

The extremist ideologies coming to Sri Lanka exist in both physical space and cyberspace. Such ideologies must be detected and neutralized. If we cannot do that then there will be disharmony between communities.

The government should not wait until the formation of another extremist group which is influenced by the ideology of the ISIS and any form of attacks to take place. The Rajapaksa regime destroyed Tamil extremism in the North which caused 30 years of suffering. Today it is up to the Wickremesinghe and Sirisena Government to avoid the formation of another conflict like that between the Muslims and the Sinhalese and between the Muslims and the Tamils. They should not wait until a group is formed in Sri Lanka by those who are driven and influenced by the ISIS ideology, and should not wait for attacks to take place.

Q: How can the government respond?

A: From now on, the government should start three programmes to handle the extremists. The first programme is bringing Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim leaders together to make sure that there is perfect harmony among the communities. The government should strive for perfect harmony between the three communities. There should be meetings every week in every district with their participation. They should discuss and implement initiatives to maintain good relationship among the communities. There should also be support from the highest levels of office. The President and the Prime Minister should provide the leadership. The Sri Lanka Police, religious bodies, intelligent services, NGOs and other relevant bodies should also engage and facilitate moderation, toleration and coexistence.

The second step is to create a legal framework to prevent incitement of ethnic and religious hatred. Any individual or a group inciting such hatred should be heavily fined and sentenced. That law must be very comprehensive and it should prevent any moves which create hatred. Without laws, the government cannot act against extremism. The current set of laws in Sri Lanka is insufficient to face the threat of ISIS today and in the future. There must be a set of eminent legal experts to draft a set of laws with the assistance of security experts who understand the ISIS threat. They should look at what is happening around the world and develop the laws. We cannot consider Sri Lanka as an isolated island anymore. Already there are a few hundred ISIS supporters in Sri Lanka, and this number will gradually increase. When they become strong they will start to operate openly. It will affect the stability and security of the nation.

Therefore, those who operate extremist websites and blogsites cyberspace should be immediately investigated, charged, prosecuted, tried and sentenced.

Those who raise funds for ISIS should also be punished. Those who have travelled to ISIS territory, those who wear and promote symbols related to ISIS should be severely punished.

Right now the government is still waiting and watching. The government is reactive, not proactive. The current government should move in this direction because it has built a strong relationship with the western nations, which the previous government failed to do. They can get the assistance of legal experts who have already drafted laws and procedures.

For example, any preacher who has praised the ISIS should not be allowed to enter Sri Lanka. Any preacher who is in Sri Lanka promoting, recruiting and fundraising for the ISIS should

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be arrested, charged and prosecuted. His properties also should be confiscated. There must be very strict laws to punish such persons. Assets belonging to any person who raises funds for ISIS, should also be frozen. They must be investigated. There must be very strict measures to prevent the growth of the ISIS in the country.

This is the early stage of ISIS in South Asia and in Sri Lanka. ISIS is spreading like a wildfire in South Asia. Governments are only crawling when the ISIS is sprinting.

Thirdly, a number of Sri Lankans have travelled to the ISIS territory and a few Sri Lankans have returned with ISIS ideas. Some have rejected the ISIS. When they went to Syria and Iraq they thought that ISIS was a genuine Islamic Organization. But later they realized that it was not, and that they were misled. ISIS is killing more Muslims than non-Muslims. They have realized that ISIS is a political organization operating in a garb of religion. They

cover themselves saying that they are true Muslims but their objectives are political and violent.

However, there are some who have not rejected the ISIS ideology. Sri Lanka should start



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a rehabilitation programme for ISIS extremists in Sri Lanka. Anyone who supports ISIS should be sent to a rehabilitation centre. It is a monumental mistake of the government that they are waiting until someone launches an attack to start rehabilitation programmes. Such programmes should start now. The Muslim community, Muslim religious leaders, Muslim religious and educational institutes, must actively participate in the rehabilitation programmes for ISIS supporters. The few hundred ISIS supporters should be put in a rehabilitation centre. They should be taught how to live as

mainstream and moderate Muslims. This is an initiative the government should take with Muslim leaders. Every responsible Muslim citizen should support this programme. If ISIS spreads in Sri Lanka it would not be beneficial for the Muslim community. The previous government has done a brilliant job by rehabilitating Tamil Tigers. The government should launch rehabilitation programmes for the ISIS supporters as well.

Q: There is an ongoing campaign in Iraq and Syria against ISIS. Wouldn't this be able to defeat the ISIS?

A: ISIS will not end with the collapse of their territory in Iraq and Syria. They are actually dispersing from there. They will be located in different parts of the world including Afghanistan and Pakistan. Already ISIS has created several hundred cells in East Bangladesh, the Maldives and South India. They have built several organizations in Pakistan and Afghanistan. If the government is genuinely concerned about the stability and the security of country they should start with rehabilitation programmes and proactively counter extremism. I do not think that this is the real Yahapalanaya (Good governance). Yahapalanaya should not be rhetoric. It should take actions. If the government is genuinely concerned about coexistence, rule of law and good governance, then they should not play with security. It will boomerang and affect Sri Lanka very seriously.

In India national security and ethnic harmony are under a threat because of the ISIS influence. In Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, ethnic harmony is under threat of due to ISIS. So, Sri Lanka should be very concerned about these matters where small groups of people are trying to disrupt ethnic and religious harmony. The government should contain, isolate and rehabilitate them. There must be very strict measures.

Q: Sri Lanka is yet to ban the ISIS. Shouldn't it be done immediately?

A: The government has made a huge mistake by delisting the terrorist fronts in Canada, the US, Australia and Europe that have funded and supported Sri Lankan conflict. By appeasing extremists, the government thought that they would be pleased and then be turned into responsible and moderate citizens. But it is these groups that have gone to Geneva and now make false allegations once again.

So, extremists must be kept designated as extremists and terrorists. If you play with fire it will burn you one day. The government, without thinking further delist the British Tamil Forum, Global Tamil Front, Australian Tamil Congress and several other terrorist fronts. As a result of that decision, now there is a continuous pressure in Geneva on Sri Lanka by extremists and terrorist groups.

The government should carefully identify not only the people, but also the organizations that are promoting, educating and supporting the ISIS and ban them. There are Sri Lankan and foreign organizations. If Sri Lanka can legally ban them, then the country can take legal action against extremists. This is the purpose of having a large national security structure. Terrorism is a vicious by product of ideological extremism. If ideological extremism is neglected and ignored by any government, it would lead to terrorism in future.

