

# COUNTERING TERRORISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMIST PROPAGANDA IN SRI LANKA THROUGH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract-** Radicalization and violent extremism driven by religious, racial and ethnic supremacist ideology has become the new face of the ever-evolving landscape of terrorism. Gone are the days when only a military approach with either a kill-or-capture directive was required to root-out the scourge of terrorism. With the advent of social media and innovations in information communication technology, terrorist groups are now waging information warfare with the primary goals of propagating their ideology, create a fear psychosis, expand their support and recruit extremist terrorists.

Terror groups such as ISIS have been successful in recruiting thousands of foreign fighters through successful publicity campaigns on social media platforms and misinformation campaigns against their adversaries. This phenomenon has created the need for a more holistic and integrated counter terrorism strategy to be adopted and implemented. Strategic communications and counter narratives is the new weapon against the ideological war on terror.

Since the end of a three decade long protracted war in 2009, Sri Lanka has been grappling with the growing influence of Muslim Jihadi and Buddhist extremism. This paper will take an in-depth look into the rise of violent extremist groups in the wake of a post conflict scenario and their implications on Sri Lanka's national security. While examining the rise of Jihadi Muslim extremism and Buddhist extremism, this paper aims at providing recommendations on an integrated and collaborative strategic communication framework that is paramount to counter terrorism and violent extremism in the present security dimension.

**Keywords-** Counter Terrorism, Extremism, Strategic Communication

## I. INTRODUCTION

As a result of constant innovations in information technology and its rapidly evolving nature, the world is faced with fighting an unseen enemy that can influence, coerce and instill fear among nations and its target audience through the strategic dissemination of extremist content. Religious extremist terrorist organizations such as ISIS have evolved greatly through their use of strategic propaganda via social media to spread their radical religious views which have successfully aided their campaign to recruit foreign combatants from around the globe and gain a large international support base.

Many countries have been successful in militarily defeating violent extremism. However, in the face of military setbacks suffered by a terrorist organization such as ISIS, they are still capable of influencing their target audience through the use of strategic communication campaigns (NATO StratCom COE, 2015). The asymmetric setting of extremist terrorism which is currently prevailing, focuses more on political, cultural, religious, psychological and economic targets rather than military targets.

Following the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009, Sri Lanka has been on the path towards reconciliation and lasting peace. Despite efforts by the government to ensure peace, security and stability in a once war battered nation,

Sri Lanka is facing a new wave of extremism which poses a grave threat to national security and challenges the country's peace building process. The rise of Islamic extremists that indirectly promote violence and recruit Sri Lankan nationals to join groups such as ISIS and the recent spate of violence orchestrated and influenced by Buddhist extremist groups such as Bodu Bala Sena, Ravana Balaya and Mahason Balakaya (Demons Brigade) have become serious questions surrounding the matter of national security. The use of the internet and social media platforms is a key weapon for extremist organizations to spread their message of hate and incite violence.

On August 03, 1990, a group of LTTE terrorists raided four mosques in the Eastern town of Kattankudy and began sporadically opening fire at those gathered for congregational evening prayers, killing 147 men including children (Amnesty International, 1991). The attack on the Kattankudy mosques eventually sowed the seeds of a new breed of extremist militants known as the Jihad group that were arming themselves against the LTTE.

From 2004 onwards, moderate Muslims who did not adhere to the extremist rules of the Jihad groups in the Eastern province had to face brutal repercussions. The Jihad groups were imposing their brand of extremist Wahabi Islam on the day-to-day lives of moderate Muslims living in certain parts of the East. On several cases sectarian violence had broken out in Katankudy in which extremist Muslim militant groups attacked the Sufi Muslims and moderates and had destroyed several Sufi mosques, congregational prayer centres, IT labs, education centres, houses and their businesses (Fuard, 2006a; Fuard, 2006b; Kamalendran and Fuard, 2009). Just months after the end of the war in 2009, a major sectarian clash between two Muslim groups escalated in the southern coastal town of Beruwala as a result of a new mosque in the area conducting a hate speech against the practices of the much older Buhari mosque (Sunday Times, 2009). As a result of the sequence of events related to extremist violence, in 2009, the government issued an amnesty for Jihad militants in the East to surrender their weapons to a Mosque in Kattankudy (Fuard, 2009).

Following the end of the war groups such as BBS, Ravana Balaya and Mahason Balakaya commenced a drive to radicalize and recruit followers to their organization which was based on Sinhala Buddhist supremacist and extremist ideology. Similar to the Jihad groups operating

in the east the BBS and Mahason Balakaya have been conducting well organized misinformation campaigns through social media to incite violence against the Muslim community in the country. Groups such as BBS and Mahason Balakaya are part of a new wave of extremists who are radicalizing youth and spreading their version of religious and ethnic intolerance through the calculated use of misinformation and terror (Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, 2014).

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on qualitative data derived from first-hand accounts and secondary sources from reputed books, online journals, media reports and academic research. This paper empirically analyses the rise of violent religious extremism following the end of the war in 2009 until the current time frame. The objective of this research was to examine the use of strategic communication by extremist groups and provide necessary recommendations on a comprehensive framework to counter terrorist propaganda and extremist narratives.

## III. ANALYSIS

Even though terror has no religion, race or creed, the subject of violent extremism and Islamic Jihadi terrorism is shrouded with much controversy and debate due to its sensitive nature. No religion condones or promotes the use of violence or sanctions the killing of innocence which is being committed under the banner of Islamic terror groups and other violent religious extremist groups. Since the dawn of the 20th Century, modern terrorism has evolved over the years based on four waves, which are the Anarchist wave, Anti-Colonial wave, New Leftist wave and Religious wave of terrorism (Rapoport 2008). The current global terrorism trend is primarily driven by extremist religious ideologies and is prevalent in many major religious groups.

However, religious terrorism is now not only Islam-centric. According to Nathan Lean, the author of Islamophobia Industry (2012) and researcher at Georgetown University, a large section of the western media has played a part in fuelling extremism by creating an air of Islamophobia and paranoia of anything related to Islam (Arab News, 2013). There are several extremist groups in almost all major

religions and ethnic groups around the world that are spreading their brand of fundamentalism and radicalising vulnerable segments of society. One can witness the rise of Christian extremist groups in Africa and Neo-Nazi extremist groups in Europe, Buddhist extremist groups in Myanmar and Hindu extremism in India. All these groups much like the Jihad groups which try to preach their brand of extremist notions of Islam, emphasise on propagating their own extremist message of religious and ethnic intolerance. Almost all of these extremist groups have the ability to incite violence, conduct devastating attacks and propagate their own brand of hate through the use of social media and online platforms. In Myanmar fake news on social media platforms orchestrated by Buddhist extremist groups within the country have led to widespread attacks on the minority Rohingya Muslims (Financial Times, 2018). Similarly, investigations into extremist terrorist propaganda in India have shed light on how a Mumbai based extremist Islamic preacher who has a large social media following inspired the 2016 July, Dhakar attack (Dawn, 2016).

Social media is a key instrument used by both Buddhist and Muslim extremist groups to propagate hate speeches and extremist content which in turn have inspired violence in the recent past. If such radical groups are not countered, the possibility of them transcending into a fully-fledged terrorist outfit is a possibility which cannot be ruled out. Countering online violent extremist content and preventing ethnic and sectarian violence is a security dilemma which requires immediate attention and implementation as part of a national counter terrorism strategy.

The rise of ISIS and its ambitions of having a global Caliphate was a significant transnational security threat that was unavoidable. Their use of the internet and social media to disseminate violent extremist content reached unparalleled levels of influencing an audience and instilling fear. Many European nations experienced a large influx of their citizens joining the extremist terrorist group which was using the power of social media to radicalise and recruit thousands of foreign combatants – to fight for their holy war. A clear sign of Sri Lanka also being a vulnerable target of ISIS propaganda was when a 37 year old Karate instructor and teacher from an international school in Galewala, was reported to be the first Sri Lankan national to die fighting for ISIS in Syria. According to the ISIS propaganda magazine – Dabiq, several Sri Lankans had joined ISIS to fight in Syria (Asian Mirror, 2015).

Following investigations into ISIS operations in South Asia, it has come to light that Mohammed Shafi Armar, an Indian national who was named as a 'Specially Designated Global Terrorist' by the US State Treasury Department was operating several Facebook and other online personal messenger services to contact, radicalize and recruit youths from India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to join their cause. The 2016 Country Report on Terrorism established further indication of ISIS influence in Sri Lanka as it stated that the security forces and intelligence agencies were on full alert against the possibility of ISIS or its affiliates emerging in the island (Country Report on Terrorism, 2016). These events go on to establish the undeniable fact that the ISIS recruiters have targeted vulnerable Sri Lankan Muslims to join their cause and have been on a drive of online extremism in the island.

Strategic communication and the use of tactical propaganda has been the primary tool which fuels the extremist ideology and provide their impetus to continue despite being militarily weak. When analysing the process of radicalisation, terrorist groups such as ISIS conduct a planned psychological operation through the use of networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, blogs and messaging services such as WhatsApp and Viber to influence the attitudes, emotions and perceptions of their target audience. The information communication technology revolution and end-to-end encryption in communication technology has posed an ever-greater challenge to the security establishment to monitor and counter violent extremist activities.

### A. The Emergence Buddhist Extremist Groups

The most recent rise of Buddhist extremist groups such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and Mahason Balakaya (Demons Brigade) in which both groups have been instrumental in conducting well planned attacks on houses, businesses establishments and towns predominantly populated by Muslims, pose additional security and strategic challenges to Sri Lanka.

Since the rise of the BBS in 2012, the group's vocal leader Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero has been openly conducting campaigns of hate speeches in a bid to incite violence and conduct calculated attacks on the Muslim community. The BBS campaign initially commenced by drawing media attention to protests, disruptions and hate speeches which further intensified their drive towards radicalisation. The BBS has also been involved in

strongly advocating for the ban on the Halal certification on food (BBC,2013), the postponement of Law College registration on racially motivated grounds (Daily Mirror, 2013), attacks on properties and businesses of the Muslim community (Colombo Telegraph, 2013), attacks on Media and hate speeches against certain Muslim mosques and Christian churches (Colombo Gazette, 2013).

The key element of the BBS campaign in order to incite violence was its use of communication networks such as WhatsApp groups and social media networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to spread a campaign of misinformation and rumours among their vast network of radicalised followers.

In 2014, following a minor incident in Dharga Town, the BBS leader Gnanasara Thero began to capitalise on a personal dispute between a Buddhist monk and three other Muslim men in the area. He incited a mob by delivering a racially charged hate speech against the Muslim community which was followed by BBS extremists leading attacks on shops and properties owned by Muslims in Beruwala, Aluthgama and Dharga Town (Groundviews, 2014; Sri Lanka Brief, 2014). The BBS attack on the Muslim community sparked immediate global attention with the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon expressing serious concern over the communal violence. Human Rights Watch (2014) and Amnesty International (2014) also expressed their concern over the plight of the affected Muslim community in the island and urged the government to take immediate steps to investigate and bring to books those instrumental in perpetrating extremist violence. Several countries issued travel advisories to their respective citizens in the aftermath of the violence which directly affected the local tourism industry in the area. The build-up of the BBS support base and their ability to gather extremist followers was due to their effective targeted propaganda campaign.

The most recent anti-Muslim riots which began in Ampara and Kandy early this year is a clear indication of the effectiveness of social media in amplifying a distorted message which could lead to extremist violence (Jeyaraj, 2018). The dissemination of anti-Muslim rhetoric and hate speeches which were targeting the Muslim community in the towns of Teldeniya, Digana, Udispattuwa and Tennekumbura were the primary cause for the violence in the Kandy district to escalate and a minor personal incident being blown out of

proportion, leading to communal riots (DailyFT, 2018). The government took immediate steps to temporarily block Social media and messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in a bid to prevent the further escalation of violence which was occurring due to extremist propaganda (Daily Mirror, 2018). It was the first time Kandy district faced communal violence since the 1915 Riots and 1983 Black July riots.

Amith Weerasinghe, one of the key figures of the Buddhist extremist group Mahason Balakaya has over 150,000 followers on his social media platform. His ability to influence his following on social media was a key aspect of him being able to mobilise violent extremists to launch coordinated attacks on the Muslim community in Kandy. In many of his videos and posts, Amith Weerasingha is seen encouraging Buddhist extremist mobs to attack Muslims in Kandy (The Guardian, 2018). Many of these events which led to extremist violence provide a valid basis to understand the darker side of social media and how it could be used as a primary tool for terrorists and extremist groups to create violence and instil fear.

### ***B. Global Agenda To Counter Extremist Propaganda***

The United Nations Security Council, taking note of the alarming rise in global violent extremism, adopted resolutions 2178, 2250 and 2354 to counter extremism, radicalisation and counter terrorist narratives. The UN by adopting these resolutions have urged all its member states to prevent the rise of violent extremists and the spread of extremist violent content.

However, taking serious consideration of the available options to counter racial incitement and global security threats as a result of extremism and radical propaganda, there is much controversy and debate on its implications on freedom of expression. As indicated previously, the Sri Lankan government sanctioned the blocking of Facebook and other social media platforms in the wake of the anti-Muslim riots which affected parts of Kandy and Ampara early this year (2018). The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which emphasises on the protection of freedom of expression in Article 19, also recognises that certain exceptional speeches and content such as war propaganda, racial hate speeches that incite violence which are stipulated in Article 20 should be prohibited.

Even though censoring extremist content and blocking access to certain platforms is the instinctive option by many, on countless occasions it has been proven that censorship does not entirely provide a solution to prevent the dissemination of extremist content. Much of extremist propaganda is based on a multi-headed hydra system making censorship a challenging task. As a result of online censorship, extremist groups are able to operate through several other accounts and networks to spread their message and recapture their audience. In many cases, extremist followers are able to access blocked sites through the use of proxy websites. The ability to identify and ascertain vital intelligence required which will assist the counter terrorism drive and counter extremist narratives will be hampered due to censorship. Despite the censorship, followers of extremist groups are able to reach out to their networks through a number of alternative methods to circumvent online setbacks.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon when delivering his speech at SOAS, University of London, on 'Counter-terrorism and human rights: winning the fight while upholding our values' clearly pointed out that social media is central to Daesh's terrorist campaigns and expressed the need to take measures to counter such a campaign (2017). It is important to note that the internet and social media alone does not instantly radicalise an individual. The internet and social media act merely as a catalyst that provides the tools for an extremist group to capitalise. Radicalisation is a gradual process which develops over time and the placement of strategic extremist content has the potential to alter and appeal to the mind-set of a target segment.

It is imperative for the authorities to identify and address why people join violent extremist groups in the aftermath of global atrocities committed in the name of ideology. There is not a single individual profile trait to identify an extremist, as many come from a wide range of social, political, cultural and economic backgrounds. As it is now a global initiative to combat violent extremism and its narratives, Sri Lanka is in need to adopt firm strategies against the rising tide of radicalisation and violent extremism which pose a threat to the island's national security.

The primary strategy in countering terrorist and violent extremist content is to adopt counter narratives as an integral component of the strategic communication plan rather than taking the path of imposing censorship.

Censorship should only be imposed as a last resort, and only if there is an unavoidable serious threat to national interest and security. Professor Peter Neumann (2013), Director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence states that the governments' pursuit of restrictive measures of extremist content can be undesirable and ineffective.

According to a research published by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, the concept of, "counter-messaging spectrum" is an effective mode of combating extremism (Briggs and Feve, 2014). The counter-messaging spectrum can be implemented to counter and prevent violent extremists and extremist propaganda in the Sri Lankan context. This strategy will comprise of a subtle government communication angle to provide legitimacy and authority, which focuses on the reduction of the "supply" of extremist messaging by addressing the "demand" (Briggs and Feve, 2014). The counter messaging spectrum can be categorized as;

### ***C. Government Strategic Communications***

Government Strategic Communications is the strategic dissemination of content which present government policy in a positive manner in the fight against extremism. This may take the form of a public awareness campaign, publicity campaigns and public forums that address the need to counter extremist ideology.

### ***D. Alternative Narratives***

This can be categorised as an integrated Strategic Communication initiative. The Alternative Narrative aims to present compelling narratives to alter the perception of extremists and those vulnerable to radicalisation, rather than directly engaging extremist content. These narratives take more of a human interest angle and project humanity, ethnic harmony, peace and diversity.

### ***E. Counter Narratives***

Counter narratives are messages disseminated to directly counter extremist narratives by challenging their content such as articles, videos, social media and online posts. The counter narrative strategy is best affective when civil society, government agencies and religious organizations take a joint stand to counter extremist propaganda.



#### IV. CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

Taking all factors related to the communication strategies and tactics employed by religious terrorist and extremist groups into consideration, this study clearly indicates that Sri Lanka is in need of a comprehensive plan to counter terrorist and extremist narratives.

The core strength of any terrorist or extremist organization is its ideology. The global war on terrorism can only be won if the ideology of terrorists and violent extremists can be challenged. It is imperative to establish a specialised, integrated task force or department with the functions of planning on executing strategic communication initiatives aimed at countering terrorist propaganda and extremist narratives.

The Research, Information and Communications Unit of UK and the Global Engagement Centre (Centre for Strategic Counter Terrorism Communication) which functions under the US State Department have been playing a pivotal role in countering extremist narratives, radicalisations and terrorist propaganda. Such an integrated division will be working with multiple stakeholders such as law enforcement agencies, legal experts, media organisations, social media organisations, IT advisory bodies, internet providers, intelligence agencies, journalists and communication specialists to take appropriate steps to counter online extremist propaganda. The counter messaging spectrum as indicated previously can be actively executed through such an integrated framework.

Strategic Communication is a force multiplier and its applications to counter terrorism and extremism can be implemented based on strategic, tactical, and operational levels. It is essential to conduct intelligence gathering, target audience analysis, production, dissemination, and finally evaluation of the operation. The intelligence requirements for such an operation focuses on the emotions, attitudes, language, beliefs, culture, and social patterns and will greatly differ from conventional intelligence gathering.

In addition to having a specialised integrated strategic communication task force to counter extremist and terrorist content, some of the areas which are essential in combating extremism that need to be implemented are as follows;

- I. Establishing an immediate national action plan with the co-operation of political leaders, religious leaders, civil activist, legal experts, NGOs, Media organizations, journalists, ICT industry, social media organizations, businesses, intelligence and law enforcement agencies to counter any form of radicalisation and extremism.
- II. Enacting and strengthening laws, regulations and policies to counter and prevent hate speeches, extremist content and narratives.
- III. Cooperation with international and regional nations to counter violent extremism and prevent the flow of foreign extremists and terrorists.
- IV. Investing on training and resources for respective government and intelligence agencies to monitor and counter violent extremist content.
- V. Direct education and awareness campaigns at district levels to counter extremist ideology and promote ethnic harmony.

A comprehensive and multi-dimensional strategic communication approach aims at preventing and countering extremist violence and imminent violence. Guns and missiles have become obsolete in winning the war against extremist terrorism in an age of propaganda warfare. The only way forward in winning the ideological war is by changing individuals' attitudes and perceptions on extremist violence and ideology. It is the need of the hour to take necessary measures to address this issue before it explodes into a much larger crisis.

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