Singapore to rely on "intelligence sharing" with Australia in preparation for "expected reprisals" after Christchurch massacre: Ng Eng Hen

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In an effort to step up Singapore's counter-terrorism measures in the face of "expected reprisals" following the Christchurch massacre that took the lives of 50 Muslim worshippers on 15 Mar, the Republic will rely on "intelligence sharing" with Australia.

Speaking to reporters after a meeting with senior Australian ministers in Sydney on Fri (29 Mar), Dr Ng was quoted by Australia's national news service Nine News as saying: "We again agree on the need for intelligence sharing both in anticipation of the returned fighters from Iraq and Syria, as well as, unfortunately, the expected reprisals coming out of the Christchurch incident".

Currently, the SGSecure initiative serves as Singapore's national anti-terrorism movement, which entails advising civilians to "move away from danger, stay out of sight and alert the authorities" in the face of a suspected terror attack, in addition to public workshops focusing on "first aid and psychosocial support".

The 28-year-old Australian gunman who was accused of perpetrating the terror attacks at the Al Noor and Linwood Mosques was purportedly driven by right-wing supremacist ideologies.

Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, who was also present at the meeting with Australian ministers on Fri, said that the dangers of extremism today is "not confined to one wing or the other", as illustrated by the gunman's 74-page manifesto.

Nine News quoted him as saying that such "hate speech" intends "to sow division and discord, and to gut out the broad middle, which has been the pillar of stability and progress for our societies".

The spread of extremist ideologies, said Dr Balakrishnan, is now easily enabled by digital technological advancements, the popularity of new media such as mobile devices, and "a shift from broadcasting to narrowcasting", which have all "created echo chambers" that not only validate, but exacerbate, "very partisan views" in modern societies.

Thus, he emphasised that "internet technology companies" should "take responsibility" for the spread of such extremism through their platforms and services, adding that "they will have to be part of the solution".

"We don't need to be convinced any more that this is a clear and present danger that requires urgent action. It is something that governments, the private sector and civil society will have to engage in," urged Dr Balakrishnan.

A "sizeable number of respondents" – who are young Singaporeans – are "open to religious extremists publishing their views on the internet or social media": Latest IPS Working Paper

Dr Balakrishnan's concern regarding the role of digital technology and new media as vessels of extremist ideologies and in flaming hatred against certain vulnerable groups is reflected in the findings of a Working Paper released by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on Thu (28 Mar).

The paper, titled "Religion in Singapore: The Private and Public Spheres", highlighted that while an overwhelming majority of respondents in a survey – 97.4 per cent – agreed that it was "unacceptable for religious leaders to incite hatred or violence against other religions", there was "a sizeable number of respondents (26.8 per cent) who were open to religious extremists publishing their views on the internet or social media".

"Younger respondents were much more open to this, with nearly 46 per cent of those between 18 to 25 years indicating that they would allow for publication such extremist views that considered all other religions as enemies," according to the paper.

It added that "challenges and threats to interreligious harmony are constantly emerging" despite efforts to achieve interreligious harmony, noting that only "base levels of interreligious harmony" have been successfully attained through "racial and religious management in Singapore".

Citing the work of Assistant Professor Walid Jumblatt Abdullah of Nanyang Technological University (NTU)'s School of Social Sciences, the paper stressed that "Given the current proliferation of religious extremism amongst Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia, it is feared that religious extremism could potentially become a divisive force in Singapore".

"This is especially so with extremist ideologies which are generated in other societies but easily accessible to Singaporeans through the internet.

"Online channels such as Telegram, which can be encrypted, pose greater challenges for state regulation and action.

"The ubiquitous nature of online platforms with its enabling of rapid information exchanges may undermine interreligious harmony if employed as tools to spread religious extremism," according to the Working Paper.

Researchers and co-authors of "Religion in Singapore: The Private and Public Spheres" – namely Mathew Mathews, Leonard Lim and Shanthini Selvarajan – had also predicted in their paper that "while many Singaporeans did not anticipate community violence and reprisals after a terrorist attack which claims to be religiously motivated, there would be heightened suspicion towards religious communities which the terrorists are associated with".