



Robert O Blake, former Ambassador to Sri Lanka and Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs in discussion with Milinda Moragoda.

'In Black and White' by Milinda Moragoda discusses the latest global issues and their relevance to Sri Lanka. First broadcasted from 1999 to 2004 on MTV, it was the first and only Sri Lankan television program to be broadcast in over ten countries across the Middle East and Asia. In its first revival episode, Milinda Moragoda (MM) interviews Robert O Blake (ROB), former Ambassador to Sri Lanka and Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs.

**MM:** To me, this program is not a journalistic enterprise. It is about learning. Learning from people who have reached the top of their fields – about their vision, experience, aspirations, and passion. In all my fields of endeavor, be it business, public service, policy research, or the media, I ask myself three questions; Am I helping to make a difference? Am I doing the best I can? And am I enjoying myself?

**Before we get into the meat of our discussions, you were ambassador here in Sri Lanka, and then you moved on. Could you give an idea of your career post-Colombo, if you will?**

**ROB:** Sure. After my time here in Colombo, I was invited by Hillary Clinton to be the Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia in the State Department. I was responsible for the policy in the region for four and a half years, which was quite a long time. It was a very interesting and fascinating time. We wanted first to build our relationship with India; we had many important things going on in Central Asia, we were trying to support our troops in Afghanistan, and of course, we were working hard to support efforts here in Sri Lanka, on reconciliation and the whole build-up towards the UN Human Right Commission effort.

After completing my tenure of four and a half years, I was then appointed as the Ambassador to Indonesia, for three years. I retired – mostly because my kids were entering high school and, I had promised them that we would stay in one place. We are back in Washington now.

I do a combination of things. I am a Senior Director at McLarty Associates. McLarty was the former Chief-of-Staff of President Clinton, and the company helps US businesses overseas. I am also engaged in non-profit work, mostly in Indonesia, helping young people, but also engaging in environmental work, which is fun. I keep busy, but I am happy to be back in Sri Lanka, and it brings back so many fun memories, to see friends like you and so many others.

**MM:** You are most welcome. You have many friends here in Colombo. I thought to start with your period in Indonesia, because the tragedy that happened on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka is something, I believe, that we are still coping with. We cannot comprehend it, we still don't know where, how to move on from here as a society. You were in Indonesia. Indonesia is an Islamic country; there are radical elements there, I'm sure. Dealing with radical Islam, dealing with

that kind of situation, what are your observations, from your period in Indonesia, but also from your broader foreign policy experience?

**ROB:** In Indonesia, as in many countries, we were very focused on working with the government to try to first prevent more Indonesians from joining the so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria that ISIS was trying to establish. And in the end, a minimal number of Indonesians joined them – only about 500 people, including family members. For a country of 260 million people, that was a relatively small number. And you know, many people became disillusioned once they reached Iraq and Syria and saw some of the brutal things that the ISIS was doing, and so many of them returned very quickly.

At the same time during that period, ISIS began to lose territory because the United States supported efforts to gradually reduce and finally eliminate their presence in Iraq and Syria. The challenge that all countries face now, mainly Muslim states, but also countries like Sri Lanka, is, how do you prevent this group from taking root in your country? Because they want to prove that they are relevant, to show that just because they have lost their territory, that they are still consequential.

Therefore, they are still very active on the internet, recruiting people, and looking for targets or opportunities. They are in Afghanistan and also in the Southern Philippines, which is a relatively ungoverned space. The Indonesians are very worried that they have infiltrated.

But the Indonesians have been quite successful in combating ISIS. Why? Because they have an economy that is generating jobs and creating hope for young people, and most people feel like they are going to be better off than their parents were. They now have a thriving democracy, after the fall of Suharto in 1998. They have NGOs, free media, and many political parties, including Muslim parties. There are opportunities for dissatisfied people to express their minds, and they are not tempted to join organizations such as ISIS and so forth.

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**MM:** What has puzzled many people here is that most of the individuals involved in this act of terrorism were from middle-class and even wealthy backgrounds. Why is that?

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**ROB:** I do not really have an answer as to why that particular family decided to engage in such an attack. But, with globalization taking place, there is a sense that national sovereignty is being compromised and people feel a loss of identity. In a way, groups such as ISIS present some sort of clear alternative, even though, for most of us, it's a very irrational and sort of evil philosophy that they are trying to promote. It does still attract people here, and in the United States too. You would find relatively middle-class or even higher people who go and join them.

**MM: Even the 9/11 bombers were of middle-class background.**

**ROB:** Exactly. That is one side of it. I spent most of my career in the Middle East, South Asia and in Indonesia. The other side of it is that every country needs to be careful about the money coming from Saudi Arabia, from Wahhabi influences.

I spent a significant amount of time talking to the Indonesians about how they needed to really, monitor the schools – the Madrasas. To make sure that the curriculum that was being provided to these young Indonesians is appropriate considering that about 20 percent of young Indonesians attend these religious schools. It is a significant percentage of the population. A good number of them have pretty strong Wahhabi influences and that in turn, is an entry point for them to perhaps, become recruited by these groups. And often, these students are not receiving the type of education that will enable them to be competitive, to go to, let's say, a good university. It is all too easy for them to study in Yemen or in Saudi Arabia, and then the next step is to become radicalized.

It is imperative to have a good sense of what is going on in the universities, in the education system, the primary and secondary levels. We have to make sure that students are getting a solid basis that will enable them to be competitive in the universities.

**MM: How do you balance everything? Because when incidents such as this happen, the first recourse is to ensure that the security of the country and the society is established. But then there is a point at which one has to balance security interests with civil liberties. How do you, within a democratic setting as you said, which requires sophistication on the part of any**

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**government, manage such a situation? Otherwise, you are pushing more people in the wrong direction. What should we be careful of, given our experience?**

**ROB:** I will go back to our own lessons from 9/11. After 9/11, the Bush administration, in many cases, went a little bit too far in constricting American civil liberties. They started to monitor everyone's phones, and there was a pushback from the people because they felt that these kinds of extraordinary steps were really not warranted.

In many cases then, we started to do things on the policy front that many Americans disagreed upon. We introduced efforts for extraditions; we set up a facility at Guantanamo Bay that was outside the American legal system so that these detainees there did not have access to the rights that they would have enjoyed in the United States. Many people were upset about that. In retrospect, we went too far. Ultimately our system of checks and balances corrected it, and we have been able to get the right balance in place. But it took a few years, I have to be honest about that.

Sri Lanka would be wise to make sure that, as these investigations proceed, that they are very even-handed in how they treat all of the different communities. To the extent that the leads that have to be followed up on, is done correctly; that they respect the civil liberties of the people, that they do not create grievances. Because if you have a sort of collective punishment for any given community for something that might have happened, that is obviously going to cause more problems.

It has to be done sensitively. Adhering to the rule of law is essential. And from what I heard so far, the security services have been very professional.

**MM: Yes we are, but one has to learn – because this is a new experience for us and we really have to see what has happened elsewhere and, not go in the wrong direction. If you look at the Islamic State and the sequence that probably leads to its formation – starting with the Taliban, step-by-step. There is a perception that the US also made several mistakes, beginning with maybe the Taliban and the Russians and so on and so forth. There is a genesis story. Then there is the Saudi relationship with the United States as well. What more could the US do – while fighting the Islamic State – to ensure that we look at the root causes of this issue?**

**ROB:** The root causes in many of these countries is going to be, at the heart of it, good governance, democracy, and economic opportunities for the people. That's going to be the ultimate way to fight this.

But there needs to be a law enforcement side to that, as well. And so, it's going to be critical. The United States has the best network of intelligence to follow up different leads. I am happy that the FBI – Federal Bureau of Investigation – is in Sri Lanka, and doing, and providing assistance. They do have access to an incredible network of intelligence that we have developed over many years.

We integrate countries such as Sri Lanka into the community of nations that we now work with on a very regular basis, to follow these threats and to run these down as much as we can. To make sure that information is shared with people at points of entry and that if any person has a suspicious record, it will trigger a warning, so that your people in immigration will know that they should keep that person aside until they can run a name-check on that person. That is very important.

In Sri Lanka, there are obviously great divisions, between the President and the Prime Minister. Another lesson for us, from 9/11, was that we had many of these same divisions. We had the FBI not sharing information with the CIA, and vice versa; the local law enforcement in New York was not necessarily part of that full information sharing network, and so it was all instead sort of haphazard.

President Bush then did something that I believe was quite clever, he set up a group of very senior technocrats in the White House, with very high-level representation from each of these agencies – not just the intelligence side, but also from the law enforcement side. Every week, they would systematically go through every single piece of intelligence, evaluate it, and decide whether it is credible or not. The ones that were deemed credible were assigned to be followed up. Who are these people? What is their network? How do we make sure that they are not going to follow up and do some harm? This system worked.

We have not had a major attack from an international terrorist organization, and all the terrorism that we have experienced since then has been homegrown. This is an approach that Sri Lanka could benefit from as well. Just remove the politics from all of this. Get the very senior



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technocrats in all of the relevant military, civilian intelligence, and law enforcement and get together on a very regular basis to evaluate intelligence and then be very clear who has the responsibility to follow up and make sure that none of these threats actually take place.

It is essential to stay in touch with India, the United States, and other influential powers that themselves have functional networks that will be able to feed in information into your system.

That is probably the best thing that we can do. But a lot of it has to be internal too; having good governance and law enforcement, which is respectful to the people and does not sow further divisions.

**MM: Moving onto the bigger picture; Sri Lankans feel that we have become like a football in a regional power game. There's India, China, the US, Iran, and Russia. We feel like everyone wants a piece of us. And it is not a nice feeling to have, though on one side it is also flattering. Starting with the great power rivalry in the region, could you give us an overview from your perspective?**

**ROB:** China, I believe, has stolen a march on all of the rest of us. China, particularly with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has really managed to vastly influence the Asia Pacific region, not just in Sri Lanka. Indeed, now in Africa and Italy and in places like that. And the Belt and Road Initiative has given them a tremendous opportunity to increase their influence, and they have done it quite well.

There have been some excesses. The whole problem with their diplomacy, as well as the use



of Chinese labor and the lack of transparency. But I also believe that the Chinese are becoming more mindful of those things. In the most recent BRI Conference, Xi Jinping directly addressed some of these aspects and said, 'We are going to try to do better on these things'. And I think they will.

The lesson for countries such as Sri Lanka is definitely taking advantage of these programs, but also make sure that you are going to be choosing projects that have a reasonable internal rate of return, so you are going to be able to service that debt and genuinely benefit from these.

The United States has been engaged in strategic disarmament. President Trump decided to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which was a new agreement that really would have positioned us to shape the trade regime for most of Asia Pacific. There is the perception in the region that the United States is just not as actively involved anymore – the President has not been attending the high-level East Asia Summit and APEC.

On top of that, the administration has delayed the appointment of some Cabinet positions within the State Department and the foreign affairs agencies. We do not have the diplomatic throwaway that we used to.

**MM: Why did President Trump choose not to appoint permanent positions. Was this by design, or is it an act of omission – or commission, if you will?**

**ROB:** I believe it is a little bit of both. The President wants to run foreign policy out of the White House, and he feels that a lot of the people in the

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State Department disagree fundamentally on some of the things he has done – which is probably right.

Therefore he has not appointed any senior officials. To give two examples; the Assistant Secretaries – my successors – for South and Central Asia, and also for East Asia and the Pacific have still not been appointed. Here we are, more than two years into a four-year government. Those people should be out as I was – I traveled every two or three weeks. I was out in the region, meeting with governments, talking to the press, and telling people what the United States was doing. That is just not there anymore.

There is a perception that we have diminished our focus and interests. In fact, that is not true. Our interest in Asia is as great as ever, if not more. In some ways, the Trump administration has been better. One of the things that he has done that I give him credit for is a new international development finance cooperation. It is going to be established, they are going to capitalize it with about 60 billion dollars. And that, of course, will never compete with BRI, but it will provide an alternative. And so it will force the Chinese to be more transparent and adhere to international rules on how these things should work. This will certainly help to promote business.

**MM: It will also help build alliances with Japan.**

**ROB:** Yes, and also with India and Australia. The quad is still an essential diplomatic grouping, and we attach importance to that. There is no substitute for having our leaders present in the region, and talking about what our objectives are, making sure that our businesses have the right resources. Not necessarily countering what China is doing, but providing our own positive vision for the region. And that, I find, is often missing, which is a shame.

**MM: With the rise of China, there is an idea of a rising power vs. the power that is there. A rivalry is taking place. What are the risks for countries like ours? When a US delegation is in Sri Lanka, then it is 'Be careful of China', and when the Chinese are here, India is nervous. How do you balance these interests?**

**ROB:** In a way, countries like Sri Lanka are the in the catbird seat. Because, as you said, everyone is competing for influence in Sri Lanka. You need to be clear that you want to keep good relations.

The Trump administration has tried to force countries to say 'Either China or the United States.' No country in Asia is going to do that. They have to deal with India, they have to deal with China, they have to deal with the United States. You need to be clear with everyone that you are going to maintain an even-handed policy. That you are going to work collaboratively with all the countries and you are not going to shut any one country out. Once you do that you are going to benefit from the resources and attention of all three. I believe, to a certain extent, that is what you have been doing.

In the beginning, the perception was that Sri Lanka had sort of shifted too much in China's favor. But I believe the equilibrium is shifting back now. I am happy that the US has good economic ties and military-to-military relationships with Sri Lanka. We have just reestablished our Millennium Challenge Corporation program in the country as well. Of course, there is the FBI's presence here too. These are all concrete signals of confidence of the United States and Sri Lanka's future.

There is a lot of hope and opportunity for US-Sri Lankan relations going forward. India remains as active as ever, and such an important influence in the region.

**MM: Another aspect which is sometimes difficult for even people like me to comprehend is the way the US is handling the Iran relationship. President Obama, I thought, made a lot of progress there. Suddenly we seem to have been thrown back. In this region and of course, in the Middle East, Iran is a significant player. What are your views on that?**

**ROB:** A plan of action that was agreed upon by the so-called P5 – Prominent Five – post one, was the right way to go. It provided a long-term vision, to give the incentive for Iran not to develop nuclear weapons. The Trump administration objected to the agreement because they said that it did not cover many of the activities that Iran was involved in the Middle East. Their support in Yemen, for Hezbollah, Hamas, and the other groups that are trying to destabilize Israel.

However, that is beyond the scope of the agreement. But the hope was, as Iran became more integrated into the international community, its behavior would begin to moderate as well. And that the influence of the RIGC and the more hard-line elements inside Iran would start

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to diminish over time. That was probably a reasonably good strategic bet.

The vast majority of Iranians are moderate. They do not support terrorist activities nor Hezbollah. The Trump administration has put an end to that whole vision and has established a much more confrontational policy. In doing so, has also antagonized our European allies, which of course, still support the agreement and believe it is a good idea, and of course, the Russians and the Chinese as well.

It is also about putting countries such as India, who are large importers of Iranian hydrocarbons into a tricky position. Because of the importance of the US market for these countries, they have grudgingly agreed to new sanctions. They can always find alternatives to Iranian hydrocarbons. However, if the United States cuts off access, it is going to be much more painful for them and their companies.

They know that Trump is capable of doing that. He has been all too willing to impose substantial tariffs and sanctions on countries at the drop of a hat. They have again, grudgingly gone along with it. But whether this is, in fact, going to influence Iran's behavior – I do not know. I would not say that there is much to show for it. Whereas there is a great deal of anxiety and opposition in the European capitals, for example. I would say it has damaged our relationship quite severely with the Europeans at least.

**MM: One last question; if you were the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, how would you navigate this current global environment? What would be the three or four things you would address as priorities if you were the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka?**

**ROB:** Influence over these start with strength at home. The first step has to be to re-establish your brand. That means getting to the bottom of the investigations, identifying the networks that were either inside the country or outside the country and dismantling those, so that you can get your economy going, tourism and so forth.

There is now an opportunity to really finish the unfinished business of reconciliation after the war. It has now been more than ten years. While Sri Lanka has taken some steps to promote reconciliation, the Easter Bombings actually opened new cleavages in Sri Lankan society. It is going to be essential to address those thoughtfully, and to engage, for example, with religious




## Newly revamped 'In Black & White' TV talk show with Milinda Moragoda is back

**M**ilinda Moragoda's popular English TV talk show *In Black & White* is back at the forefront, breaking down the latest global issues and their relevance to Sri Lanka. The programme, which was first broadcast on MTV/MBC ran for five years from 1999-2004.

'In Black & White' was the first and only Sri Lankan TV programme to have been broadcast in over ten countries across the Middle East and Asia on the Channel News Asia network. In addition, it was the first Sri Lankan television programme to bring interviews with world leaders and leading international personalities, including prime ministers, politicians, Pulitzer-prize winning journalists, and artists. It carried interviews with over 80 guests including then Prime Ministers Mahathir Mohamad, Benazir Bhutto, Thakshin Shinawatra and Inder Kumar Gujral; US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, Pulitzer-prize winning authors, Daniel Yergin and New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman; CNN journalists, Anita Pratap and Peter Arnett; William Hague, then Leader of the British Conservative Party and British Foreign Secretary; and Booker-Prize-winning author Amitav Ghosh; and World Bank President James Wolfensohn. The latter was one of the earliest Sri Lankan interviews to be conducted via satellite.

*In Black & White* with Milinda Moragoda, will be telecast on alternate Sundays on TV One, at 8:30 pm before the news. It will be rebroadcast with Sinhala and Tamil subtitles on Sirasa and Shakthi. It is directed by Fredrick Dissanayake.

Future guests will include Ambassador Shiv Shankar Menon, former Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and National Security Advisor to the Government of India; and Lord Jonathan Marland, former UK Minister, Conservative Party Treasurer and present Chairman of the Commonwealth and Investment Council.

Milinda Moragoda's regular Sinhala programme Milinda Samaga Niyamarthaya will be telecast as usual every Saturday at 6 am on Sirasa TV and repeated at 5:00 pm on TV One. 

leaders of Sri Lanka. Engage young people who want to work together. And mostly, bring together more unity – political unity, where you do not have the Prime Minister and the President fighting each other.

Re-establish this brand of a moderate country, a country that wants to work with the rest of the international community. Most of all, as a country that has got its act together and is promoting reconciliation, healing the divisions of war and also of the recent attacks. Be a force for good, and not just here in the region, but in the wider region.

I fully believe that Sri Lanka is capable of that. You have a vast cadre of brilliant young people who can do this. Another priority domestically is to increase your university training and linkages. Because you have some big challenges coming down the pipe from artificial intelligence, Internet of Things, and new technologies. Countries that are not prepared for them will be swallowed up. And again, you would have always benefitted from having a very highly educated population and good health indicators. But you have also taken the next steps to prepare your population to really be competitive in these new technologies. And, you have to address the issues that we spoke about earlier. American companies and universities will be pleased to establish those partnerships that will enable that kind of learning to happen so that you can be a leader in this area.

**MM:** I am glad that you brought up the technology and education aspects, which I believe are key element in all this as well.

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