
Bangladesh Tinderbox: The Challenge of Political Islam

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The Backdrop

The murderous attacks on bloggers – which have claimed the lives of three secularist free thinkers this year and seven since 2013 – have highlighted the relentless danger facing Bangladesh since the liberation war in 1971. The outrage sparked in the cyber space by these killings has attracted worldwide concern though the situation on the ground remains dangerous as ever. In the words of Dhaka University academic and political economist, Professor Abul Barkat, the country remains a ‘tinderbox’ and a sitting target for Islamist radicalists who roam the streets freely preaching their doctrine of violence in the name of Islam, the religion of peace. The word ‘Jihad,’ which the Islamists keep on invoking from pulpits of mosques and political and madrassa platforms, does not occur even once in Islam’s Holy Book, the Quran, says Prof Barkat. Yet

the drumbeat of jihad keeps growing louder and louder.

Speaking at a seminar in London, Prof Barkat squarely named and blamed Jamat-e-Islami, Bangladesh, which he called as the “HQ or headquarters” of a triangular set-up forever plotting the overthrow of the constitutionally established government of the country. The other two pillars of this structure, according to him, are the 123 radical groups and 231 NGOs (non-governmental organisations) funded nationally and from abroad. The three wings of this radical power bloc act as a loose conglomerate and constitute a ‘state within state’ and ‘government within government.’

The major support structure

The fundamentalist parallel economy whose finances come from enterprises owned and run by religious forces clocked a net

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estimated profit of nearly \$320 million in 2014. The biggest share of that profit (27 per cent) comes from financial institutions, followed by NGOs (19 %), with trading, health, education, and real estate business contributing around 10% each, besides other smaller contributors.

More strikingly the growth rate of this fundamentalist economy is of the order of 9-to-10.5% against the national GDP growth of about 6-to-7%. The cumulative profit of this economy over the last four decades is estimated to top \$6.5 billion, supporting "500,000 full-time cadres , capturing strategic posts and votes, and even allegedly running armed training camps.

The trajectory of fundamentalism in Bangladesh is pretty well known. Starting with the division of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947, leading to the transformation of East Pakistan into independent Bangladesh after a bitter war that is said to have cost three million lives, the role of Jamat-e-Islami elements is well chronicled. They steadfastly opposed Bangladesh independence and remain unrepentant till today. The assassination of Bangladesh founder Sheikh Mujib-ur Rahman, the change of national constitution from a secular polity to making Islam as the state religion under General

Zia-ur Rahman , and the ding-dong succession to power as prime ministers by the General's widow Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Mujib's daughter Begum Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the current prime minister, continues to divide the country with little sign of any rapprochement between the two blocs.

Asked about any chance of peace or compromise between the two Begums, Prof Barkat's blunt response was 'No!' His considered opinion: Bangladesh will have to find some other route to peace and progress. An ominous prognosis for the country wracked by instability of extreme proportions. Yet that is the stark reality readily conceded by analysts and observers, both insiders and outsiders.

Challenges and optimism

Prof Barkat's analysis is echoed by a more recent report in London's *Guardian* newspaper quoting prime minister Hasina's appeal to the British government in particular and international community at large to take action against western based jihadis who are stoking religious extremism in Bangladesh. The recent arrest in Dhaka of a British based alleged mastermind, Tohidur Rahman,

behind the brutal killing of two bloggers this year is being specifically held out as a warning against the rising ability of the Islamists to strike at will. It could be a case of lone wolf, yet the reality is that there are too many wolves roaming about and destabilising Bangladesh, preaching al-Qaeda, Islamic State or global Caliphate or Khelafat ideology in the name of Islam.

The enormity of the challenge facing Bangladesh is brought out in sharp focus by the stark statistic of madrassas or faith schools at primary and secondary school level over the last 40 years. Every third student in Bangladesh is a madrassa student, affecting 8 million children, with 73 per cent of all madrassas, totalling 55,000, are under the *kaumi* or privately run religious umbrella. While the number of state primary schools has merely doubled over the four decades, the number of privately run faith dominated schools known as *Dakhil madrassas* has shot up 13 times. Likewise the expenditure per head in government schools is around 3,000 Takas while the spending per head in faith schools is around 5,000 Takas. Thus both *qualitatively* and *quantitatively* the faith merchants are catching the young early, warns Prof Barkat.

Unfazed by the enormous threat from the jihadist mindset, Prof Barkat believes that the secular, Sufi heritage, which he calls the DNA of Bangladesh, of over 450 years, would prevail, with a bit of help from abroad and political and administrative steps at home. Among the list of internal doables, he calls for a thorough audit of Jamat-linked financial transactions, confiscation of assets of extremists and weeding out of extremists within the government.

However, the balance sheet of the 44 years since the birth of Bangladesh, he concedes, is not very inspiring. His insistence, like that of many of his compatriots, on punishment, for those involved in 'war crimes' during the liberation war is not likely to promote peace, direly needed for the country's progress and development. Excessive insistence on punishment, especially death penalty, becomes too often counter productive. Perhaps it is time to think the unthinkable and offer an olive branch to the former misguided 'enemies' of the state in return for remorse and apology. A long jail term should be the limit even for the recalcitrants. The quality of mercy, sanctioned by all religions, humanistic and Sufi traditions, may yet be more profitable and practical and lead to peace and reconciliation.

The country must move on.

More immediately, the international community must extend a helping hand to Bangladesh, not only with anti-terror strategic cooperation, but also with generous financial aid to convert religious madrassas into mainstream state run secular schools

to wean away young minds from the jihadi influence. Equally the country needs to be helped with development programmes to reduce poverty and unemployment, the recruiting ground of jihadists of multifarious affiliations. The time to help Bangladesh is here and now—before the jihadists strike the tinderbox!

