



Rising Trend of Religious Radicalization in Bangladesh

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Issue Brief

About the Authors



Ambassador Tariq Karim is the former High Commissioner of Bangladesh to India with the rank and status of a Minister of State. Ambassador Karim joined the Foreign Service of erstwhile Pakistan in 1967. Among his senior diplomatic assignments abroad he has served as Ambassador of Bangladesh to the United States, High Commissioner to South Africa (with concurrent accreditation to Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Swaziland and consular jurisdiction over Zambia and Zimbabwe), Ambassador to Iran (with concurrent accreditation to Lebanon), Deputy Chief of Mission in Beijing (concurrent covering North Korea and Democratic Kampuchea), and Deputy High Commissioner to India in New Delhi. As Additional Foreign Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh with responsibility for the South Asian region (1995-97), he advocated bold and innovative approaches to normalizing troubled relations with India and resolving long outstanding problems relating to water sharing, cross border insurgency and boundary demarcation. He was entrusted with a critically important role in finalizing the negotiations that resulted in the signing in December 1996 of the landmark 30-year Ganges Water Sharing Treaty with India.

State fragility, civil society, democratic transition, human rights and rule of law, governance issues in South Asia, and political Islam and globalization issues are among his primary areas of academic interest. Thus opting for early retirement from the Foreign Service, Ambassador Karim joined as a senior faculty at the University of Maryland in 1999 and was associated George Washington and the Virginia International Universities.

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Rising Trend of Religious Radicalization in Bangladesh

Bangladesh, world's third largest Muslim majority nation has, right from its independence, cherished and followed the cardinal democratic values of freedom, equality, justice and religious tolerance. These, in a major way, also played a pivotal role in the nation's freedom struggle.

This is not to say that these principles were universally accepted by all sections of the community in the erstwhile East Pakistan that eventually became Bangladesh. As I had mentioned in one of my earlier papers 'Politics of Confrontation' (VIF July 2015), Bangladesh's tryst with democracy began a new chapter in the nation's history when the newly independent nation adopted its first Constitution in 1972 with the tenets of nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism. The then political environment of the country was probably not conducive to fully accept these principles of democracy as it had just witnessed the vicissitudes of political assassinations followed by an extended period of 'junta rule' that lasted for nearly two decades. Nevertheless, the aspiration for democracy encouraged Bangladesh to restore a Parliamentary form of democracy in 1991.

However, in terms of acceptance of the principle of secularism, there always appeared to be some misgivings and reservations amongst those elements which were also opposed to the Liberation War then and even now. The recent cleansing process of the intellectuals in Bangladesh appears to be a part of the systematic conspiracy by a section of its political and its religious leadership possibly aided from outside who were then vehemently opposing the principles of democracy, freedom, equality, justice and religious tolerance. As Amb. Tariq Karim puts it, "The goal is not to replace the government, or cause public mayhem, but instead to silence individuals for expression of atheism. These are assassins targeting secular minds".

The aim of this paper is to study and assess the depth of penetration that radical and Islamist-oriented ideology have managed to slowly establish since Bangladesh came into existence, followed by its recent outward manifestations through blogger killings and hacking of secular and free minded individuals. Thereafter the study shall attempt to examine the possible role that can be played by the educated and enlightened civil society in countering the infested Islamist-Oriented Ideology and whether there is any viable solution to the present state of crisis that the country is witnessing.

Growth of Islamist-oriented Ideology since the Inception of Bangladesh

Though the rise of religious extremism manifested through blogger's killings and silencing of liberal thinkers in Bangladesh is a relatively new phenomenon, the extreme nature of violent contest over the Islamic character of the society and the state is grounded deeply in a prolonged history of ideological disputes. As a part of undivided Pakistan (1947-71) the ethnic Bengalis suffered under the obdurate and archaic control of the Punjabi dominated Urdu speaking elite in the Western half of the country. Although

Bengalis in the eastern province of undivided Pakistan constituted well over half of Pakistan's total population as aggregated in all its five provinces, they were subjected to extreme racial and cultural subjugation and economic exploitation and deprivation. The long simmering resentment of the Bengali community finally acquired political traction when they were politically disenfranchised following the only free national elections held in December 1970 that resulted in Bengalis winning the majority in the National Assembly but being prevented from forming the national government. The chain of events following this eventually vented explicitly in the Declaration of Independence in 1971. During the Liberation War, the Bengalis were subject to grisly and inhuman torture. Bangladesh's war of Independence has been the genesis of this Secular-Islamic divide that still impacts the country's politics. The secular and democratic politics of the Awami League were fiercely opposed by the Jamaat-e-Islami, the foremost religious political movement that favoured a unified, and undivided Islamic Pakistan.

Bangladesh's tryst with democracy and secular principles established a new chapter in the nation's history when the newly independent nation adopted its first constitution in 1972. But these principles never found a favorable ground and acceptance with the other existing political and Islamist-Oriented Parties. The opposition to the liberal and progressive ideology of the Awami League coming from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and other fundamentalist parties led by the Jama'at, have largely been responsible for the growing radicalization within Bangladesh since a long time. The genesis of the deep-rooted ideological conflict between the Awami League, the BNP and the fanatic Islamist parties can well be traced back to the divisive policies pursued by the British when they were contemplating the division of the Indian sub-continent to an extent that this tussle between the two warring ideologies significantly contributed to the eventual emergence of the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party as the two principal political entities in the country. Pakistan too left no stones unturned to stir up the clash between the regional identities vis-à-vis the religious identity¹. Bengali identity was deeply entrenched in the cultural ethos of Bangladesh whereas the concept of religious identity was the game-plan of the Pakistani elite, the Islamist-Oriented parties and their supporters. To accentuate their identity, they purposely pursued policies which ended up in exploitation of the resources of East Pakistan. As a result, Bangladesh became effectively a prisoner of transition from 'one colonial rule to another'.

Sustained economic discrimination further contributed significantly to an early consciousness of a separate and secular identity in the then East Pakistan. Further on, Jinnah's Declaration in Dhaka of Urdu being the only state language of Pakistan made matters worse for the regionally active Bengalis of this region². It was against this backdrop that Awami League under the towering leadership of Sheikh Mujibur-Rahman became the only probable platform for pursuing the national aspirations of the Bengalis of the East Pakistan.

Even though with the birth of Bangladesh, the ideology of secular nationalism triumphed over that espoused by the fanatic 'Islam-Pasand' parties backed by Pakistan, Islamic resurgence as is being witnessed today in Bangladesh, was never given up as a long term strategy of all the fanatic parties of West Pakistan and also the Pakistan army which

could not come to terms with the creation of a separate nation founded on the tenets of secularism and Bengali nationalism.

The developments in Bangladesh, post its creation, presented an ideal ground where the Islamist parties could work underhandedly to spread the growth of “Islamist-oriented” ideology. Moreover, the overly complacent attitude of the ‘natives’, that their nation was presumably immune to all Islamist militancy, eased the surreptitious infiltration of radical Islamism into the Bangladeshi polity. They failed to detect or check the growing menace of Islamic orthodoxy which aimed at destroying the fabric of their flourishing democracy. To make matter worse, the alliance between non-Bengali residents of East Pakistan and members of the Jama’at (Jama’at-i-Islami) took away the secular sheen the country once proudly possessed³.

Thereafter within a short duration, two military coups took place, wherein the system of parliamentary democracy was replaced by presidential ones that came in the form of military dictatorships. As a result, the middle class and the urban elite now stood completely alienated. The military action that overthrew the first elected government of the newly independent nation set the foundation for military and quasi-military rule and the growth of Islamist-Oriented parties dominant in the country where the principles of freedom of speech, secular thought and righteous democracy once prevailed.

Thereafter, fundamental changes were brought into the Constitution which could be seen as a departure from the secular thought process. General Zia-ur-Rahman removed the reference to “secularism” as a fundamental principle of Bangladesh nationhood from the Preamble of the Bangladesh Constitution and replaced it with a new clause asserting that “absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah” should be “the basis of all actions”. Hence, secularism was dropped, and even the pillar of socialism was redefined. Islamic Preamble now acknowledged the primacy of Islam thereby emphasizing the Muslim identity over the cultural Bengali identity. Now the identity of the nationals as Bangladeshis rather than Bangalis which was earlier favoured by the Awami League was being encouraged in the country. A war footing effort was also launched by the newly formed BNP in collusion with Islamist parties to negate the role of the Awami League during the war of liberation. The Jama’at and other Islamist-Oriented parties officially gained a very significant role during Zia’s reign. From earlier having been universally viewed as colluding and active partners with the Pakistani military in the assault on Bengalis of erstwhile East Pakistan, they were rehabilitated now and allowed once again officially to function as a political party in Bangladesh⁴.

An increased role of Islam in Bangladesh’s culture and politics was further carried on from 1982-1990 through another military takeover by General Ershad. He permitted the rise of other splinter Islamic parties to counter the growth of Jama’at. The highlight of General Ershad’s rule was the amendment to the Constitution that declared Islam as the state religion. Radicalization was thus being sown sequentially in the Bangladeshi soil.

In the current context of growing Islamisation, BNP remains deeply committed to conservatism, nationalism and anti-communism. It seeks to represent the Islamic conscience of Bangladesh. Awami League’s ideology stems from its commitment to

secularism and its staunch belief in Bengali nationalism and pluralist democracy. Ideological fault lines, questions of secularism, Bengali nationalism and above all the role of Islam, are the underlying causes for the persistent growth of radical ideas in the country.

Causes of Radicalization in Bangladesh

Major causes for growth of radicalization in the Bangladeshi society were absence of good governance, lack of social justice, absence of rule of law, antagonistic relations between leading political parties bordering on extreme hostility, politically engineered violence and politics of vendetta. The current wave of global pan-Islamic resurgence has also influenced a significant section of Bangladeshi Muslims as manifested in the widening network of deeply radicalized religious entities well beyond the existing Jama'at-e-Islami network that it inherited at the time of independence. The propaganda and political platform of these institutions are primarily faith-driven, exploiting the religious sentiments of the poor and deprived masses. Ideological conviction is the most predominant feature of radicalization and extremism where the radicals exploit people's religious sentiments. The madrassas owing allegiance to Wahabi and Salaafi schools of thought, played an important, rather critical, role in their primary strategic agenda to mould the young minds towards radical Islam. Women also formed an important component of their campaign as a crucial motivator within the families and local societies. It may also be relevant to mention here the direct and indirect impact of the Pak-supported and Saudi backed Afghan Jihad in influencing the growth of radical Islamic philosophy in Bangladesh society. It is well known that a significant number of Bangladeshi Muslims volunteered or were recruited for participating in the Afghan Jihad through Pakistani and Saudi backed local Islamic bodies in Bangladesh. The returnees from the Jihad built or strengthened new or existing units that continued to spread the message of radicalization. Also, the influential Tablighi Jamat network of Pakistan played an important role in spreading the message of radicalization in a significant manner. Lately, online methods of spreading radicalization among the educated youth have come to acquire a key role in the global programme including Bangladesh.

Another interesting aspect of radicalization in the country is the popular perception among the common people that the radicals and extremists elements have been utilizing the civil society network for spreading their radical activities. A large number of survey respondents think that NGO's and community section of civil society are widely involved in and are being used by the radicals and the extremist followed by professional groups, social workers and media. Some CSO's and NGO's are directly founded and funded by the radical organizations. Fund collections from the expatriate communities in the name of religion are a common practice. The veracity of this perception and the extent of its influence if true need to be investigated and conclusively established through empirical studies.

Security Manifestations of Radicalization

The two recent major terrorist attacks in Dhaka (July 1-2, 2016) and the Eid congregation 90 Km north of Dhaka (July 7, 2016) focused national, regional and international attention on the extent and depth of radical Islamists in the country. Briefly,

in the July 1 incident, a highly motivated group of 6 'home grown' radical youth attacked an up market restaurant in Dhaka's posh suburb and brutally killed 24 patrons and two police men before being neutralized by the security forces. One terrorist was captured alive. According to media reports, the group of highly radicalized youth owed allegiance to ISIS but Govt. sources strongly maintain that they belonged to a local terror group. In the later incident of July 7 close to the venue of Eid prayer near Dhaka, the same message came out. The truth perhaps lies somewhere in between. While it is true that the ISIS/ISIL, if imagined as a corporate entity, does not have a corporate branch office in Bangladesh, local militants, whether remnants of older Islamist groupings (particularly the JMB) or its neo avatar, the new JMB, have most likely established indirect links via several degrees of separation as well as over the electronic media. If the end-goal of ISIS is to establish one (its own) exclusive brand of Islam then its ambition would also seek to portray followers (soldiers) throughout the present day Muslim world. In a world transformed by the 21st century globalization that has rendered time and space irrelevant, ISIS need not establish physically located branch offices located far away from its present epicenter – virtually located surrogates are good enough to try and establish beach-heads for its vaulting ambitions.

Since Bangladesh has traditionally been an inclusive, secular and tolerant society, the country had therefore, generally not experienced any major or frequent political upheavals and historically only Islamist-oriented people were attracted to any violent extremist ideology. This was despite Bangladesh's problems of widespread poverty, limited land and areas of poor governance. However, today Bangladesh is caught at the crossroads between two parallel, violently opposed ideologies and the irreconcilable strains have split the political and social instincts of the country into two distinct parts.

Violent extremism first captured attention in Bangladesh with a string of increasingly spectacular attacks throughout the early and mid-2000's⁵. Bangladesh has come a long way since August, 2005 when Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), an indigenous extremist Islamist-Oriented organization carried out a string of 500 homemade bombs attacks which happened within a time-frame of 30 minutes in 63 of Bangladesh's 64 districts. Though the perfectly synchronized explosions killed only two, JMB's dramatic display of religious militancy captured global attention within no time. Bangladesh was now on the international map as the hot-bed for radicalization. The then BNP led government banned the involved militant outfits of JMB and HUJI-B in 2005, but that was merely in letter and not seriously implemented on the ground.

Bangladesh is presently witnessing resurgence of radical Islam. The rapid expansion of home-grown and jihadi affiliated militant groups have raised fears of deep radical Islamisation of the pluralistic Bangladesh society. Ever since the ISIS declared the establishment of the 'Caliphate' in June, 2014, Bangladesh has witnessed the emergence of pro-ISIS outfits, which pledge allegiance to ISIS and support their recruitment drives both online and on the ground.

The kind of violence which is being perpetrated by the radical Islamist groups today is in a way linked to what is happening generally in the Islamic World. Al-Qaeda and the ISIS are targeting the Asian subcontinent in a major way and Bangladesh is fast emerging as a

fertile hunting ground by both these terrorist outfits. The two have set up their own modules which are largely active in indoctrination of youth and their recruitment for participation in the West Asian battle grounds. The location of Bangladesh makes it a critically important geo-location for ISIS end-goals. With a burgeoning population of over 165 million, on the eastern flank of Bangladesh are located Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines; while on its western flank is the huge Muslim population in India, rivaling in numbers Pakistan's Muslim population. In ISIS's strategic calculation, if Bangladesh could be induced to fall, its shock waves would travel both to its east and west. One should not lose sight of one important factor here: while possession of territory to form an Islamic State may be important, in today's virtually connected world, it is no longer a *sine qua non*. Spreading the ideology is perhaps far more important at this point of time

Initially, the Bangladesh government in 2005 had banned five militant groups namely Hizb-ul-Tahrir⁶, Jamait-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, Harkat-ul-Jihad Bangladesh, Jagrata Muslim Janata of Bangladesh and Shahadat-e-Al-Hikma in 2003. Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) has been the latest one to be banned in 2012. A newly emerged group called Jund-al-Tawheed WalKhilafah (JTK) has reportedly started openly seeking recruits from Bangladesh. Authorities suspect that the JTK is the key platform for recruiting Bangladeshi militants bound for the Syrian battle field⁷.

Presently, 14 radical Islamist-Oriented groups are under the radar of the Bangladesh government. ABT's growing activities are alarming as it aims at the establishment of a Sharia state in Bangladesh. Al-Qaeda Chief Ayman-ul-Zawahiri's video released in September, 2014 heavily influenced the Bangladeshi youth. The dreaded international outfit launched its wings called⁸ Al Qaeda in Indian Sub-Continent (AQIS) to wage Jihad in South Asia. Ansar-ul-Islam that projects itself as part of the AQIS, claimed responsibility for killing three bloggers. The larger objective of this militant outfit is to join AQIS after Al-Qaeda's adequate expansion in Bangladesh. Between the various terrorist outfits, Al Qaeda's extensive and long standing regional network across South Asia has helped it gain an edge over ISIS which is a relatively new starter. Unlike ISIS which focuses on holding and expanding territories in Syria and Iraq and recruiting fighters for these theatres, Al-Qaeda has a long history of alleged engagements in South Asia dating back to the 1980's when Al-Qaeda and South Asian militants fought together in Afghanistan. AQIS takes keen interest in exploiting local grievances in India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The authorities in Bangladesh have arrested a significant number of militants from groups linked to Al-Qaeda. These include militants from JMB, ABT and Harakatul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B). The latest outfit to enter in the militant scenario is Ansar-ul-Islam Bangladesh which is believed to be the new AQIS affiliated outfit in Bangladesh. The law enforcement agencies are also deeply worried about what they refer to as the "New (or neo) JMB", another militant group whose nefarious designs to attack the countries personalities and major infrastructural facilities is immensely disturbing.

Manifestation of Radicalization through Blogger Killings

The cold-blooded murder of Xulhaz Mannan and his colleague Rabbi Tonoy by Ansar-ul-Islam, an Al-Qaeda affiliate in Dhaka on April 25, 2016 demonstrates a pattern of

organized killings, targeting the secular bloggers, religious heads, academicians, foreign aid workers and minorities. It is alleged that the renewal of extremism which is represented in the blogger killings, is linked indirectly to the 'secular authoritarianism' of the Awami League. The boycott of the BNP and Jama'at of the 2014 elections which gave the Awami League a landslide victory, was amid widespread violence⁹. This move stirred up afresh the secular vs. Islamic tension and bred radicalization. The rise of this extreme form of violent Islam is occurring at the time when Bangladesh's politics has become deeply polarized and is creating a governance vacuum. List of major violent incidents beginning 2014 is attached.

These attacks and killings have opened up a new chapter of conflict between the values of a syncretic, secular and humanist Bangladesh on one hand and on the other, a rigid and extremely fanatic world view where there is no space for other religious sentiments. Given Bangladesh's economic growth and modernization, these killings have been a cause of concern as they might adversely impact the growing economy of the country and of course its tolerant secular values.

Successive governments of Bangladesh have focused intensely on tackling internal terror and terror-prone propaganda. Even the earlier BNP-Jama'at government had banned militant organisations like HUJI & JMB in 2005, preceded by that against Jagrata Muslim BD and Shahadat al-Hikma in 2003. It may be apt to study here the following three developments tackled by the governments of Bangladesh.

The emergence and activities of Hefazat-e-Islam in 2013 raised severe concern. Though the group was formed in 2010, it gained momentum only after it staged a march from Chittagong to Dhaka in 2013 as counter-dissent to a largely secular youth protest movement seeking death penalty for convicts of war crimes. Hefazat-e-Islam released a set of thirteen demands which included blasphemy law with death penalty provision for all who insulted Islam. This declaration struck counter to Bangladesh's age long culture of modernization, and that of a gloriously inclusive civilization. Although Hefazat-e-Islam may not be a declared terrorist group yet, it may not be far from becoming one.

The second area of concern relates to displaced and dependent Rohingyas. India and Bangladesh have been vocal about their grave concern over the radicalization of these migrants by the LeT's two front organization, Jamaat-ul-daawa and Fala-i-Insaniyat foundation which are active among the Rohingya youth. Further on, a formation of a partnership between Rohingya student's organization and the HUJI-B has been a cause of concern for the authorities.

The third area of concern is the dramatic spread of the self-proclaimed Islamic State into Afghanistan and Ayman-al-Zawahiri's announcement last year of a new Indian subcontinent specific AQIS captured substantial attention¹⁰.

It has almost been three years, since the first atheist blogger was hacked to death in 2013. Assaults on other free-minded bloggers and thinkers have shaken the country and captured international headlines. In 2013, the isolated murder of Haider caused alarm but it did not appear at that time to indicate initiation to blogger killings and radicalization of

Bangladesh. The subsequent murder of Avijit Roy was prematurely presumed as a one-off radical lone wolf action. But, when the third attack happened, the clear outline of a definite pattern behind these systematic and targeted killings became more compelling evidence of linkages for all to see. The tragedy of this manifestation of intolerance and bigotry has been receiving global attention since 2013-14. The 'publication' of a hit list of 84 bloggers to be hacked if they continued to write 'anything objectionable' against the tenets of Islam, sent alarm bells ringing in the hitherto placid social order and amongst the law enforcers in Bangladesh. More than 20 people have been killed in the hate crimes since 2013. It is unfortunate that, but for the murderer of blogger Rajiv Haider in 2013, no one else had been convicted or punished for any subsequent attacks, though it must be mentioned that in recent times enforcement of the law to bring the perpetrators of such dastardly acts, has been receiving much more serious attention with regular arrests and prosecution.

As far as the reaction towards the killing of the bloggers is concerned, the ruling Awami League reacted intensely for the first time after the hacking of Niladri Chakraborty on August 7, 2015. Reaction to such ghastly crimes from the government machinery, many felt, should have come earlier. In spite of the government's stated policy of 'zero tolerance' to terror or hate crimes, security issues assumed serious proportions within the country's liberal thinkers and civil society which became severely concerned over the growing jihadi activities of the extreme radical groups. Presently the government is reeling under severe criticism for its failure to reign in the radical Islamic forces, especially after the killing of four secular minded bloggers and now the incidents like the Dhaka Bakery attack. Containing Islamic terrorism has always remained a key issue in the governance of any nation. Awami League's zero tolerance policy towards terrorism has been appreciated globally. Sheikh Hasina's promise that she will not allow her country to be used for any kind of extremist agenda deserve kudos and the civil society and the liberal thinkers would be closely watching government's ability to deliver on its promises. To this end the government has to initiate comprehensive measures to arrest the perpetrators of such crimes and firmly stem the rising tide of Islamist-Oriented ideology and thereafter reinstate the secular fabric of its Constitution.

The nation requires a change in the thought process of governance and the active involvement of the educated urban intelligentsia in bringing about the required systemic changes. Mere periodic and cyclic transfer of power from one party to another will not usher in the aspired changes. There has to be no betrayal of the secular traditions or thought process. Mukto Mona (free mind) has to be cultivated and encouraged¹¹.

There is another spectrum to the resurgence of religious fundamentalist which may require closer attention here. The desire to keep the nation together should take the desired precedence before the warring minds of the "Two Begums". Democracy anywhere and everywhere, will always be "work in progress – inevitably so, as human societies that establish democracy are dynamic with perceptions of values and social mores changing, imperceptibly but inevitably, with passing of generations, fueled by new ideas and inventions. Inevitably this dynamic nature of society that establishes institutions for democratic governance move ahead of the institutions set before their times by their forbears. In this sense, every democracy today, anywhere, is in different points of imperfection striving to attain perfection. Bangladesh, in this context, is no exception to

this dynamic. Since Bangladesh is, viewed through this lens, also an imperfect democracy(!), radicalization and terrorism are directly linked to corruption and mistrust in the political process. The Hasina government can help this process by focusing on developing a sense of oneness and unity based on consensus on major national issues, as indeed her illustrious father, the Founding Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had done over four decades ago, placing nation and state at the top. The second requirement would be that of transparency that would foster accountability and put a restraint to corrupt practices. Thereafter, transitioning to a more predictable and a plausible transparent relationship with its citizens is primary for establishing good governance.

The country suffers from a critical vacuum in the law and order system. Secular liberal democrats mistrust their legal system. The evolution of the Bangladesh democracy into a reliable system based on consistent laws and accountability remains a major challenge. Therefore Bangladesh should strengthen and streamline its judicial system to check the growth of extremism. Bangladesh now needs to recognize the importance of addressing radicalization as being much more than a merely criminal issue. In spite of all the measures taken, organizations like the JMB, and the Jamaat may well continue to exist and evolve because the international situation has unleashed forces beyond any one nation-state's control.

The government should also look into developing a reintegration programme for the migrant workers returning from abroad. Here, insistence on the validity of Bengali Islam can counter the destructive impulse of reductionist Islamist ideas, the seeds of which can be unconsciously imbibed by Bangladeshi labourers during their prolonged stay particularly in the Gulf and countries like Singapore, where recently 4 Bangladeshis have been found guilty of financing or recruiting terror.

The country has established a good reputation of having mainstreamed and empowered women – in fact this single achievement has acted as a force-multiplier that has served Bangladesh admirably well in the sphere of achieving commendable human development indices. It needs now to further build on these notable achievements and impart intrinsic resilience to its long cherished culture of secularism, pluralism, and tolerance, and to progressively expand further the space for women in terms of freedom and choice in both public and private spheres. Confronting Islamism should focus on capitalizing and building further on the empowerment of women as drivers of societal change and moulding of mores.

Role of Education and Civil Society in Countering Radicalization

Traditionally, responses to terrorism in Bangladesh, (as indeed in other countries), have been dominated by hard power approaches of the government and the law enforcement agencies. But in the recent security discourses, the role of well-educated civil society has come up in a major way in countering radicalization¹². It must be borne in mind that the state alone does not possess all the necessary resources and skills to counter radicalization and deal with violent extremism. Co-opting the educated, civil society enhances mutual trust, offers transparency and thereby strengthens social cohesion. Like

many nations in the “Muslim World”, Bangladesh too seems to be struggling to precisely define the role of Islam and Islamic tenets in society and governance.

Civil society participates alongside the state in shaping and implementing public policies designed to resolve collective problems and promote public good. Counter radicalization should be viewed as a package of social, political, legal, educational and ecological programmes designed to offer a viable attractive alternative to frustrated youth hovering on the brink and weaning them back into reemerging with the larger consensually productive societal fabric, as well as to deter the already radicalized individuals from becoming terrorists¹³.

Unfortunately, very few measures have been taken so far by the civil society organizations in countering radicalization, though it is a work in progress. In a sense, as one of the authors of this paper has argued for long, a pervasive sense of complacency that Bangladeshis’ deep-rooted culture of inclusiveness and tolerance could never be breached by extremist ideologies perhaps enabled the very same radical ideologies to be successful in their creeping annexation of political and societal space. The lack of strategic communication between the civil society and the government was additionally a major deficiency in effectively countering the onslaught of extremist ideas in Bangladeshi society. This was perhaps inevitable when civil society and authoritarian or military backed governments were pitted against one another – in fact radical Islam’s encroachments were actively encouraged by those authoritarian quasi-military governments. It is ironic therefore that when the same civil society made a major role in wresting back democracy for the people, democratically elected governments are viewed by not a few as being perceived as pitted against that very same civil society, preventing it from playing a more effective role in countering radicalization than its potentials hold. This has been exacerbated not a little by the apparent fragmentation among the CSO’s followed by their reluctance in addressing the causes of radicalization. Such fragmentation results in under valuing the strength of civil society as a partner in coordinating their working in tandem with the state in effectively challenging the irredentist forces of radicalism throughout the country.

Any state, particularly those in developing countries, has to effectively deal, and equally importantly be perceived to be dealing, with the underlying socio-economic and political drivers of radicalization, aptly deemed to be hunger, poverty, unemployment, under-employment, lack of value-based education, politico-democratic unrest and corruption by mobilizing and awakening the people. The civil society groups are required to help the state to create awareness, establish methods of checks and balances and to support democratic institutions. Further, it can influence the state to adhere to neutral, humanitarian and welfare based orientation. Civil society has an enormous role in preparing and disseminating counter narratives by providing to the masses the actual and correct interpretation of religion. In other words, CSO’s can play a positive role in countering the ideological aspects of the radical narratives within the democratic polity of Bangladesh. Advocacy works in partnership with the state to create the public space for an enlightened and informed debate could be an important area of joint cooperation between the government and the civil society. Commitment against radicalization has to come from both the sides. Dhaka has to take the required symbolic shift in its governing patterns.

Equally important is the sustainability of such efforts. Maintenance of sustainability of implementations can be a major challenge faced by the civil society in countering radicalization.

The Civil society can be influential in following ways¹⁴:

- It has to be vigilant regarding the role exercised by the media.
- It has to cast a positive impact on the role of education in shaping the youth perceptions against terrorist ideologues.
- Assisting the government and the agencies in choking off the terrorist financing.
- Assessing the impact of Bangladesh's Diasporas on Islamic radicalization.
- Building up of counter narratives that are essential for addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of radicalization in Bangladesh.
- Stemming the radicalization process in itself.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her government has taken cognitive steps to stem Islamic extremism in Bangladesh by cracking down on radical groups and emphasizing the democratic principles of country's founding. Therefore, Bangladesh Supreme Court's recent rejection of the last and final plea against the death sentence and the subsequent hanging of Matiur Rahman Nizami for his alleged role in the war crimes during the 1971 war of Liberation, meets a substantial demand of the largely pro-liberation minded societal forces and has the steadfast approval of the Awami League. Her current government has demonstrated its firm determination to deal firmly with extremist Islamist groups and to roll back the Islamic trends within the country's politics. The execution has come at a time when the nation is suffering a surge of killings of bloggers, atheists, foreign aid workers and secular thinkers, and serves to drive home the message that a culture of impunity will not be tolerated, perpetrators of criminal activities will be held to account and crimes will be punished.

The return to democracy is a welcome development but the country continues to reel under the radical Islamist elements who violently oppose the state which continues still to be wracked by multiple layers of identity-contestations : between its Bengali (cultural) and Islamic (faith-based identity; by questions of what sort of Muslims are they – whether of the Sufi-leaning or Wahhabi-Salafi-Deobandi inclined; and whether it will abide by its legacy of secular, pluralist democracy or morph into an intolerant, Sharia-based autocracy¹⁵. Without concerted efforts by the state along with an even more vigilant civil society, the political centre of gravity in Bangladesh could shift towards Islamism and its fanatic tenets. Since mid-1975, Islamic ideas were permitted the space to progressively become more prevalent in the country's political discourse. It became so having been allowed by the ruling dispensation at that point of the country's history to re-establish itself in the socio-political fabric and was spurred by the phenomenally rising fortunes of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) a powerful political and economic actor.

Impact on India-Bangladesh relations

Bangladesh's efforts to check acts of terrorism and the growing radicalization has been, in many ways, exemplary. Its bilateral relations with India turned a critically important corner following the game-changing visit to India of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in January 2010, following her landslide victory giving her a massive mandate in the elections of December 2008. In order to stem the growth of radical ideas, both the countries have denied transit shelters and sanctuaries to international terrorist groups in the past. The country condemns all acts of terrorism in the name of Islam and cooperate proactively with International Community to eliminate terrorism. The Awami League government has played a very critical and vigilant role in the sphere of de-radicalization. With the efforts of the Sheikh Hasina government, investigation into the acts of terror committed in the past, have been launched afresh and have yielded positive results. The handing over of the Indian north east insurgent leader Anup Chetia in 2015 to the Indian authorities by the present Awami League government, is a pointer in the said direction. Previously, ULFA chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa and Deputy Commander-in-chief of ULFA, Rajiv Barua were also handed over to India sending a firm message of Bangladesh government's commitment in this direction. Thereafter, on January 28, 2013, India and Bangladesh signed an extradition treaty to curb networking among the terrorist organizations of South Asia. A coordinated Border Management plan was agreed upon to keep a vigil along the long porous border.

The two nations have a symbiotic interest in continuing to collaborate in combating terrorism. India will have to consolidate its governance hold over the north-east by providing the region with economic connectivity, development activity, moral and socio-cultural bonding with the rest of the nation and an enhanced integration with the BBIN nations which has been envisioned by the respective countries for working together collaboratively as the best means for fulfilling their ambitious development goals. Instability in India –Bangladesh relations can undermine not only their investments for the desired development activities currently underway but also detract from other future development. The Indian government's doctrine of "together we grow" underpins Modi's five pillars of diplomacy namely samman, smridhhi, suraksha, sanskriti and samvaad¹⁶.

P.M. Narendra Modi has called for the United Nations to speedily adopt the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. This gives us a clear picture as to whom India regards as a terrorist; religion and terrorism have to be delinked. It may be borne in mind that issues related to terrorism and radicalization are no longer purely law and order situation of the individual countries since, on this issue, geography is irrelevant. All nations today should have a zero tolerance policy on terror and radicalized faith-based ideology.

Fighting radicalization and its ideology must be not only an ongoing and continuing law enforcement exercise, requiring concerted and efficiently coordinated collaboration between different agencies within one country but also demanding equally concerted and coordinated collaboration in sharing information and data with all countries, whether in the immediate neighbouring regions or located far away, wherever there surfaces evidence of terrorist suspects having set footprint there. New Delhi and

Dhaka have to, not only together, work collaboratively together to thwart acts of terror, prosecute the terrorists, enact suitable laws to effectively fight radicalism and choke terror financing; if the situation or evidence so warrants, they must also establish similar collaborative networking with other countries used by terrorists as transit or “safe-haven” places. Dhaka and New Delhi have to encourage participation of all mainstream political sections of society to marginalize if not wipe out any harbouring of a feeling of political alienation. The task to educate all citizens stands as a preeminent priority. Collective bonding of global standard to stem radicalization is called for. The commitment to fight radicalization has to be full, imaginative and holistic. All necessary resources should be pooled to fight the scourge of radicalism. New Delhi and Dhaka cannot afford any kind of ongoing conflicts, instability and schisms within their countries to come in way of progress towards strengthening the roots and fundamental institutions of a robust, vibrant democracy free from any sort of radicalised ideology.

ANNEXURE

Incidents of Attacks by Islamic extremists from 2013 onwards

April 9, 2013 : Student Arif Raihan Dwip was badly injured and later succumbed to the injuries.

December 21, 2013 : Self proclaimed Saint Rahman Farok and five others were slaughtered at his Gopibagh House.

August 1, 2014 : Blogger Ashraful Alam hacked to death.

August, 27, 2014 : Islamic front leader Nurul Islam Farooqi died after attack on him.

November, 15, 2014 : Professor AKM Shafiul Islam was hacked to death.

February 15, 2013 : Blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider’s is hacked to death in Dhaka

February 26, 2015: Secular writer and blogger Avijit Roy killed in Dhaka.

April 13, 2015: Online activists Oyasikur Rahman Babu is hacked to death near his home in Tejgaon.

May 12, 2015: Secular blogger Ananta Bijoy Das killed in a very similar manner.

August 7, 2015: Niladri Chatterjee Niloy was hacked to death inside his home at East Gorhan.

September 4, 2015: A self proclaimed fakir and his attendant are killed inside his sanctum in Chittagong.

September 28, 2015: Italian aid worker Cesare Tavella is shot dead in Dhaka’s Gulshan area.

October 3, 2015: A Japanese national Kunio Hoshi is gunned down in Rangpur's Kaunia.

October, 5, 2015: An attempt to kill the saint fails in Pabna's Church.

October 22, 2015: An assistant Sub Inspector of police is stabbed to death at a check-point in Dhaka.

October 22, 2015: A bomb attack on gathering of Shias before an annual procession in old Dhaka leave over 2 dead and over 100 wounded.

October 31, 2015: Two publishing houses that printed Avijit Roy's books came under attack.

October 31st, 2015: Faisal Arefin Dipan of Jagriti Prokashoni is hacked to death in Shahbag.

November 4, 2015: Motor cycle borne attackers hack a police constable to death in Savar's Ashulia.

November 8, 2015: A Bahai community leader is killed in Rangpur.

November 18, 2015:

Italian priest Piero Parolari is shot dead in Dinajpur.

November 26, 2015: A Muezzin is killed in a Shia mosque in Bogra.

December 4, 2015: Bomb attack on Dinajpur's Kantajev Temple during Rash festival that left 9 injured.

December 10, 2015: A bomb exploded in the ISKCON temple leaving two injured.

December 18, 2015: Explosion inside Bangladesh's Navy ISSA Khan base in Chittagong that lift six injured.

December 25, 2015: Suicide bombing at an Ahmediya mosque in Rajshahi killed one & injured ten.

February 21 2016: Jogeshwar Roy beheaded in north Bangladesh. ISIS claimed the responsibility behind this attack.

April 8, 2016: Sylhet's Ganajagaran Mancha activist & Jagannath University student Nazimuddin Samad, who was vocal online against religious extremism was hacked to death in Dhaka.

April 23, 2016: Prof. Siddiquee was hacked to death near his house in Rajshahi.

April 23, 2016: A.F.M. Rezaul Karim Siddique, a professor from the University of Rajshahi was hacked ISIL later claimed responsibility of his death.

April 30, 2016: Nikhil Joarder a Hindu tailor was hacked in central Bangladesh. The killing was later on claimed by ISIS.

May 7th 2016: Mohammad Shahidullah was hacked to death.

May 25, 2016: Debesh Chandra Pramanik was attacked and killed. ISIL claimed responsibility behind the attack, their second in Bangladesh in less than a week

June 7th 2016, Ananda Gopal Ganguly had his throat slit by suspected Islamist militants.

June 10th 2016: Niranjana Pande was hacked by suspected Islamist militant.

June 15th, 2016: Ripon Chakravarti, a Hindu teacher in Madaripur district was attacked with machete knives.

July 1st, 2016: Shayamanand Das, a Hindu temple worker was hacked in Jhenaidah.

July 2nd, 2016: Mong Shwe Lung Marma, a Buddhist farmer and the vice President of ward seven Awami League was hacked to death in Bandarban.

All these killings paved way for the July 1st 2016, attacked at Holey Artisan Bakery where 28 people including 5 terrorists, one security personnel and 17 foreign national were killed.

Action by Security Forces

2nd March, 2013: Bangladesh Detective Bureau arrested five members of the extremist organization Ansarullah Bangla Team for the murder of Ahmed Rajib Haider. The five, all students of North South University, confessed to the crime in front of a magistrate.

2nd March, 2015: Rapid Action Battalion arrested Farabi Shafiur Rahman, a radical Islamist as a suspected murderer of Avijit Roy. It was suspected by the police that Farabi had exchanged Roy's location, identity, family's photographs with various people. Farabi had threatened Roy several times through blogs and social media sites including Facebook. He said on different posts and comments that Roy would be killed upon his arrival in Dhaka.

14th August, 2015: Bangladesh police said that they had arrested two men, suspected to be members of the Ansarullah Bangla Team, in connection with the murder of Niloy Neel.

18th August, 2015: Three members of Ansarullah Bangla Team, including a British citizen named as Touhidur Rahman who police described as “the main planner of the attacks on Avijit Roy and Ananta Bijoy Das”, had been arrested in connection with the two murders.

December 30, 2015: On December 30, 2015, two members of Ansarullah Bangla Team, Mohd. Faisal Bin Nayem and Redwanul Azad Rana were found guilty of murder and sentenced to death for Rajib Haider’s murder. It may be recalled that Ahmed Rajib Haider’s murder case handled by a “fast-track trial court”. Faisal, the court said, was the one who attacked Haider with a meat cleaver. Rana is absconding and was sentenced in absentia. Another member of the outlawed group, Maksudul Hasan was also guilty of murder and given a life sentence. Five other members of ABT, including firebrand leader Mufti Jasim Uddin Rahmani receive jail terms of five to ten years. One person had a term of three years.

June and July, 2016: The security forces of Bangladesh carried out extensive raids and arrested over 8000 criminals, drug peddlers and members of banned organization post the Holey Artisan Bakery attack.

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6. Although the HizbutTahrir was banned, it did not disappear. It simply went underground and continued its activities in the shadows. Its ideology is the precursor for the IS’s professed ideology, and some of the people identified with the attacks in Bangladesh in July appear to have been members, whether active or dormant, of the HT
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when had it participated, even under the changed system of electoral governance which was legally valid, it stood a fair chance of winning sufficiently large numbers of seats, essentially vacated political space that was promptly occupied by the AL. Its continuing dependence on JI to demonstrate street power through unabashed violence also served to alienate the population increasingly angered by mindless violence.

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