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By Bhaskar Roy

The assassination of two liberal bloggers in quick succession in February and March raises some very disturbing questions.

First was that of Avijit Roy, a Bangladeshi-American, who came to attend the “21st February” book fair where a couple of his books were on sale. Machete wielding assailants killed him while his wife Rafida Bonna was injured. **Policemen watching the incident simply walked away, ignoring Rafida’s pleas for help.**

Avijit, a Hindu and his wife Rafida, believed in liberal humanity. Avijit’s blogs attacked religious extremism which is prohibited in Bangladesh’s constitution. That infuriated the Islamists who promised to get him. And get him they did, with some assistance from law enforcers.

Two of the three assailants of 27 year old blogger Washiqur Rahman who were apprehended by the police were both Madrassa students. When questioned by the police both confessed that they had no idea what a blog was, nor had they read Rahman’s writings. They were simply acting on the orders of another person who told them that killing Rahman was a religious duty.

Another case of hacking to death of blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider in 2013 remains unsolved.

What was the crime of these young men? They did not break any laws of the country. They were opposing a trend, which appears to have become a force, to convert Bangladesh's Sufi oriented Islam to the obscurantist Wahabi Islam which is regressive, anti-inclusive and antediluvian.

It is extremely worrisome that the two apprehended youths who hacked to death Washiqur Rahman had no idea why they were ordered to kill him. They were brainwashed to carry out orders of a senior to do their "religious duty".

What are these religious schools teaching the impressionable young? What contributions can they bring to the society when they are grown up? From where would their own livelihood come? From the power behind these Madrassas, of course.

But their sources of funding is not eternal. These young men are being conditioned not to think, not question, but just obey orders. These orders, they are reared to believe are not of man but that of God, Allah. And they will all go to heaven and will be gifted with *72 houris*.

If there was a real blasphemy of Islam then this is it! Islam is a religion of peace and it has room for all. The biggest problem is that this is not only against non-Muslims, but against Muslims who know the religion well but choose to stand up against those Muslims who are trying to misinterpret Islam to pursue their political ends. The leaders of this movement want to create a caliphate in Bangladesh which they will rule with murderous sinful acts. They would rule the nation in comfort while their foot soldiers, like those who hacked these bloggers will remain where they are, or worse.

The non-action by the policemen in the Avijit Roy case is not only worrisome, but downright dangerous. Were they influenced by the terrorists? The terrorist religious group Ansurullah Bangladesh is supposed to be behind the killing of Roy and Rahman. But this is not the only religious terrorist organization now active in Bangladesh. There are many, and all of them appear to be franchises of one idea, and there is one powerful organization legally active which appears to be the mastermind.

Before coming to other related issues, the insidious activities of the Hizb-ut-Tehrir (HUT) need special attention. Founded in Jerusalem in 1953, it has become a trans-national extremist organization with its registered office in the UK. Its aim is to establish Khilafat run by Islamic Sharia law. It took roots in Bangladesh in 2000, came to prominence in 2001 after the US twin-towers bombing, but was banned in 2009 for anti-state activities. The Bangladesh army revealed in January 2012, a coup was planned by a group of HUT influenced officers, but it failed. Now HUT has units at all divisional headquarters and reportedly has a membership of 10,000! It is reported the organization attempted a coup through some sympathetic army officers in 2009.

In a public release on 28 February 2005, the organization appealed to military officers to immediately remove Prime Minister Sk. Hasina and the current ruling system. It referred to the Bangladesh army as a Muslim army sent an appeal to the media not to obey the government's

directive not to give prominence to HUT, and work for the cause of Khilafat.

The HUT has targeted the urban youth, the urban middle class, members of the armed forces and other security forces including the police.

Following the banning of Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI), Jamatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB), Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJ), Shahadat-e-Al Hikma (SAK), HUT was also declared a proscribed organization. Other banned organizations include Hizb-ut Tawhid, Islami Samaj, Ulema Anjuman al Baiyinaat, Islamic Democratic Party, Tawhid Trust, Tamir ud-Deen, and Allahar Dal.

According to Bangladeshi sources the HUT is the richest banned terrorist organization in the country, but their sources of funding are not known. Money is absolutely important to run such organizations because their cadres and foot soldiers have to be paid. The private Madrassas a.k.a Quami Madrassas provide readymade foot soldiers for these organizations.

Blocking terrorist funding is possible to some extent only and that is generally limited to bank transfers. Some banks like the Islami Bank are suspected of being complicit in these transfers. Substantial money comes in from workers returning from countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. There are approximately 10 million Bangladeshis working in the Gulf and West Asia. They return indoctrinated in Deobandi Islam and with the belief that they must contribute part of their earning to the cause of jihad against infidels, the surest path to heaven. This kind of funding is very difficult to track and stop.

According to reports emanating from Bangladesh, based on intelligence files, the HUT has tied up with the JMB and others. The JMB in turn is in touch with the Al Qaeda through its strategist. Both the strategist and the JMB explosive expert, who were on death row, were rescued by their cadres when being transported from one jail to another. They were very high value prisoners and leads to the question whether the security personnel escorting may have been in collusion with the terrorists. If this is true, the terrorists have made deep incursion inside the security establishment of the nation.

Another development that must be mentioned in the above connection is how much the conservative aspect of religion has penetrated the families of armed forces' officers. A majority of lady wives have reportedly taken to wearing the burkha for official events. In the lower ranks the burkha appears to have become mandatory.

This is an eerie development. On the one hand the government is trying to bring women out of purdah, give them education and make them economically independent. The Bangladesh ready made garment industry, the second biggest garment exporter in the world after China, is women dependent. If the Mullahs should force them to go back into purdah, not only will the industry collapse, but it will severely hurt the economy and the societal fabric of the nation.

At the same time, the jihadis are trying to use women in bomb making activities and training them as human bombers. The explosions in a

JMB cell in Burdwan district, West Bengal, is an example, where two women were helping in bomb making.

Circumstantial evidence suggest that the HUT and the JMB may be working in coordination. Both are engaged in toppling the government. Both see India as an enemy supporting the Awami League and the west as propping up Khaleda Zia and the BNP. The JMB was at one time promoted and protected by powerful BNP leaders like Minister of State for Home, Luftozzaman Babar, deputy Minister Pintu and others. HUJI, which was involved in the assassination attempt of Sk. Hasina in 2004, at the direction of some BNP leaders, and other banned extra-religious terrorist organizations are working as ancillaries to the terror leadership.

It has now come to light that the JMB has been expanding in the border areas of India. An accident in a bomb making facility in Burdwan district of West Bengal brought in central Indian intelligence agencies for investigation and subsequent arrests.

What is confounding is the fact that 60 JMB sleeper cells were discovered in West Bengal and another 20 in Tripura and Assam. The outfit is also expanding in Jharkand. Yet, with 60 modules discovered and there may be more, the West Bengal state intelligence and police seemed to have had no inkling of these developments.

Unfortunately, West Bengal Chief Minister Ms. Mamata Banerjee was initially in a denial mode, nor has she condemned these developments since. She is obviously banking on Muslim votes for her electoral politics, and is under the mistaken belief that obscurantist Maulvis and Mullahs will garner Muslim votes for her.

With such policies of the state government some Maulvis have been encouraged to experiment with imposition of Sharia law in small ways. Recently, a women's exhibition football game in Murshidabad district had to be cancelled due to objection from local religious leaders that the clothes the players wore was against Sharia. The state administration took no action, despite the fact that local Muslims were involved in organizing the event. Even in Kolkata, progressive Madrassa teachers are being physically assaulted and intimidated by religious extremists.

The big picture of the growing threat to India's security is being missed. Available information suggests that ISIS is reportedly in partnership with the Al Qaeda. Some Bangladeshi youth have joined the ISIS, and their organization is spreading its influence among some Indian Muslim youth.

The ISIS has declared Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan as Khorasan. Sections of the Pakistani Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP) have pledged alliance with the ISIS. With the JMB in contact with Al Qaeda, the prospect of the ISIS entering Bangladesh is a real possibility. Another group, the Rohingyas who are Muslims, are vulnerable to the approaches of the Al Qaeda and Taliban. The Rohingyas are a stateless people with presence both in Bangladesh and Myanmar. They are a persecuted lot.

Around 2003-04, the Pakistani Embassy in Bangladesh was alleged to have been in touch with the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) a Rohingya extremist group.

More recently this year, a Pakistani ISI agent working in the Pakistani High Commission in Dhaka under the cover of consular attaché, was caught red handed giving money to JMB and Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI) activists for subversive activities including in India. The head of the Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) in Dhaka was also expelled by the Bangladesh government for “illegal” activities, an euphemism for working against the state of Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government has, however, underplayed both these incidents.

Pakistan’s army and the ISI have never forgiven Bangladesh for breaking away from Pakistan. Late Sk. Mujibur Rahman was seen by Islamabad as the main leader of the liberation movement. Sk. Hasina, as the daughter of Sk. Mujibur Rahman, is seen as the next enemy. Deep hatred has been reserved for India for helping Bangladeshis in their liberation war. The BNP has colluded in that plan, giving Indian separatists open sanctuaries in Bangladesh and using Bangladesh territory to launch terrorist attacks in India.

As Pakistan has learnt, the BNP should also learn, that such terrorists are nobody’s friends. Snakes reared to bite others will ultimately bite the owners.

The terrorist forces are also now turning against the BNP, and will certainly not accept a woman leader who is also known to be personally liberal.

The BNP has willfully allowed the JEI to ride on its shoulders. Khaleda Zia relies on the street power of the JEI. Nobody should take comfort from the fact that the JEI has only 4% of the votes. In Pakistan, the fighting parties have even fewer votes. But that has not prevented them from wielding power much beyond their vote share and helped militancy to grow. This is because the deep state has used them as foreign policy assets against India and in Afghanistan.

The BNP made similar mistakes and continues to do so. This is a grave mistake, and can boomerang against itself.

The Awami League is also making a mistake by prohibiting the media from reporting on HUT. The media needs to expose these organizations. What the *Daily Star* did was expose the threat posed by HUT. In the caption to the photograph of HUT poster, the daily attacked HUT. The intent of the daily was very clear.

In contrast to the media clampdown HUT has taken to the internet for propaganda of their views, persuading people to join them. And it appears they have scored some success.

One has only to sit back and imagine the looming threat to Bangladesh and its neighbourhood. Playing ostrich is the wrong approach.

It is time the BNP shed the JEI for its own survival. The major parties must put aside their political differences for a separate tussle, and join forces to fight this imminent threat that may consume all.

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