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Rising Deviant Islamist Terror in Bangladesh

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Terrorists have no religion. That is the emerging consensus globally so that religious sentiments are not hurt and society is not divided. When murders are committed in the name of religion, it can at best be called deviant religious terrorism or extremism. And these deviants went to establish a global caliphate by establishing minor caliphates in different regions of the world and amalgamate them.

This deviant religious terrorism based on medieval thoughts appears to have engulfed Bangladesh and is seeking to destroy its founding principles laid out by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his visionary colleagues. From the day East Pakistan broke away from West Pakistan (Pakistan) to establish Bangladesh, efforts were on from both inside and outside the country to destroy it. Two instruments were used- Assassination of leaders, and extreme Islamism. The core principles of the founding a Bangladesh were religious tolerance, fairness, multiculturalism, modernity and the unique culture of the people. The current government, led by the Awami League in a coalition with other small but progressive political parties, is trying to uphold and protect the founding ideals which find place in the constitution. But right wing and conservative religious pressure has given way to aberrations.

The immediate challenge of deviant religious extremism lies in the government's efforts to exorcise the ghosts of the liberation war. The occupying Pakistani army in 1971 along with their Bangladeshi henchmen mostly belonging to the Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI) killed an estimated three million people who supported independence from Pakistan. Around three hundred thousand women were raped. Children, the old and the infirm were not spared. There was a huge demand for accountability. Two war crime Tribunals were set up to try the living leaders of those criminal acts.

A group called the Gonojagoran Mancha (roughly translated as Peoples Awakening Forum) was formed purely on volunteering basis to

demand trial (and exemplary punishment) of the anti-liberation “killers”. The volunteers or members comprise mostly of post-liberation generation who saw previous governments rewriting the history of the liberation war and bringing to political power the very same people who opposed liberation, committed atrocities on freedom loving people, and remained faithful to Pakistan, with regressive Islam as their ideas. They were and remain, member of the JEI, who were rehabilitated by President and former army chief Zia-ur-Rehman, in 1977-78 after the assassination of Sk. Mujibur Rahman.

Zia founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and remained in alliance with the JEI even till date. After Zia’s assassination in 1981 in a coup attempt by a nationalist army officer, Maj. Gen. M. A. Manzoor, his widow Begum Khaleda Zia took over the party, and is a two time prime minister and remains the leader of the BNP, the main opposition party.

Zia-ur-Rehman, a highly decorated freedom fighter who apparently defected from the Pakistani army to fight for freedom, remains a controversial figure. He claimed that he declared independence and not Sk. Mujibur Rahman. But his actions post liberation suggests that he may have been either a Pakistani plant or changed his allegiance to Pakistan subsequently. But that is another story which will come out some day.

Gonojagoron Mancha comprises mainly of secular believers and some atheists. The blogger community who support secularism, minorities, and the down trodden, and are anti- extremist Islam, come mainly from this group.

The latest victim (August 06) of the deviant Islamists is Niladri Chattopadhyaya who used the pen name Niloy Neel. Four men with machetes barged into his fifth floor flat, confined his wife to a room, hacked Niloy to death, and vanished in broad day light.

He was the fourth blogger to be killed this year. The other bloggers killed and Avijit Roy, Wasiqur Reheman, and Ananta Bijoy Das. All write in the blog is “Mukto Mona” (Free Thinkers) created by Avijit Roy. The other to be assassinated similarly was Ahmed Rajiv Haider, in February 2013. He was a leading figure of Gonojagoron Mancha.

There is a similar signature in all these assassinations. Guns are not used. The machetes hack the neck upward, to imitate beheading. The killers graduated from street killings to entering homes, suggesting their growing boldness.

Ansar-al-lalam Bangladesh claimed responsibility for killing Niloy Neel in an e-mail to media establishments. The organisation which is of recent vintage, also claimed it was a branch of Al Qaida in South Asia (AQIS). Al Qaida Chief Ayman al Zawahiri announced the formation of AQIS in October 2014.

Ansar-al-Islam Bangladesh (AIB) in a message in May 2015 designated the following seven categories of individuals as their targets: academics, actors, bloggers, doctors, engineers, judges, politicians and writers who insult Prophet Muhammad and “distort” Islam. This list

has since been expanded to include atheists and “free thinkers”.

Another new organisation is the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) which claims affiliation to Islamic State. Extremist religious groups which have a declared agenda to establish Bangladesh as an Islamic State to be ruled by Sharia law include existing banned organisations like to Jamatul Islam Bangladesh (JMB), Hizb-ut-Tehrir (HUT), Hifazat-e-Islam (HEI) among more than one hundred other splinter groups which espouse the same ideology.

It must be taken into account that HUJI (Bangladesh) was involved in the attempted assassination of Sk. Hasina in 2004. In the grenade attack on an Awami League meeting, Sk. Hasina was injured but twenty two others died. The commander of HUJI, Mufti Hannan, who executed the operation is in custody and is under trial. But the conspiracy is much larger and includes leaders of the BNP. When the trial comes to a conclusion it will shake the whole of Bangladesh. One of the accused is Lutfozaman Babar, then Minister of State of Home Ministry. He too, is in custody and under trial.

Bangladesh’s counter-terrorism agencies like the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) have done commendable work. But in the case of blogger killings very little progress has been noted. According to Bangladesh media, Niloy Neel approached the police to lodge a report that he was under threat. The police declined to register his protest and advised him to leave the country as soon as possible.

The lower level police officials may have declined to register Niloy’s case to avoid additional burden of work. But in all the blogger murder cases lack of progress raises some serious questions. Have some in the police force been influenced by the ideology of these extremists? If that is so, it is most dangerous.

It is well known that during the BNP-JEI government (2001-2006) substantial recruitment in the security apparatus were made from religious extremist groups. This was done in all ranks on the same lines as President Zia-ul-Huq did in Pakistan.

According to reports and talks in knowledgeable sections in Dhaka, the Bangladesh army stands divided among BNP, JEI and the Awami League. In a democracy, the armed forces should remain a political to effectively guard the nation’s borders and in dealing with internal emergency when called upon by the government.

It has to be admitted that religious conservatism is slowly but surely creeping into the armed forces. Lady wives of forces’ offices are increasingly taking to wearing burqas at mess evenings. If this happens in a disciplined institution like the armed forces, then it can be imagined what can happen or what is happening to the more vulnerable organisations and the civil society.

Political rivalry has led to the use of extremist sections for votes. This policy has backfired and religious bigots have only been encouraged.

The JEI is a declared religious political party. Its ultimate goal is to establish Sharia rule in the country. To their credit, the JEI is open about

it. But they should abide by the constitution. If they have a different view they should contest democratically, and not by subversive means.

It was, therefore, surprising when the JEI issued a statement, “severely protesting and condemning the inhuman and brutal murder of blogger Niloy Hossen (sic1) by some miscreants”, and blamed it on the failure of the incumbent government. (The statement was made in a Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, International Relations Team Circular). But it is curious why they called Niloyu Neel “Niloy Hossen”. Niloy, a self-declared atheist was born Hindu. Why try to protect him as a Muslim? The JEI must publicly clarify this.

There is no doubt that religious extremism is emerging as a major threat to the fabric of Bangladesh. It is time the political parties realise that use of religion and religious groups will be disastrous for all. Religion and politics have their own places and should never be mixed.

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