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Rising Terrorism Can Derail Bangladesh

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While the World Bank raised the status of Bangladesh to a lower middle – income country and World Bank President, Jim Yong Kim lauded Bangladesh's role in empowering women, terming the country a model in women's progress, rising terrorism has cast a shadow on the nation

.In the last six years, since the Awami League– led progressive and secular coalition government under Prime Minister Sk.Hasina came to power, the GDP grew over six per cent despite global economic slowdown, exports increased and foreign exchange reserves went up seven times. This is no mean achievement for a country which was described as a “basket–case” by Henry Kissinger. No efforts were spared after liberation, by a section of the people, (with foreign assistance), to convert the liberal country into a right wing Islamic nation run by Sharia law. It may be kept in view that through Saudi funding to spread the extreme Islamic ideology of Wahabism, madrassas sprouted all over the country and over 250,000 mosques were built.

The ethos of Bangladesh was split between the citizens and political parties, between those who rejected Pakistani culture and Islamism and won freedom for the nation in 1971, and those who clung on to the character of Pakistan.

President Zia- ur- Rehman, a highly decorated freedom fighter revealed another side of his character. From a major in the Pakistani army he rose to become chief of army staff of Bangladesh through dubious means including assassinations and betrayals, becoming president of the country through a coup. Shunned by all political parties, he floated his own party, the BNP, in 1978 ;rehabilitated the banned Jamaat-e-Islami, but was eventually assassinated in 1981.

The Jamaat which was anti-liberation and staunchly pro-Pakistan was involved in the rape and killing of pro-liberation citizens. Many of

Jamaat's top leaders are being tried for genocide and crimes against humanity, being sentenced to life-imprisonment or death in open trials by a special court.

In the interim, between 1978 and 2006, the BNP and Jamaat's Islamic conservatism and politically supported terrorism took roots. Especially during the BNP-Jamaat government, many terrorist organizations such as the Jamatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB), HUJI and others were used for crimes. The political patrons of terrorism remain strong, well-funded and active.

When she returned to power as prime minister in 2009, Sk. Hasina asserted that her prime aim was to eradicate terrorism from Bangladesh and counter terrorism elsewhere. Her party won with a sweeping majority, signifying the deep disillusionment and disgust that voters felt about the previous government. First time voters resoundingly rejected terrorism, political assassinations, high handedness and corruption. They wanted jobs, development and progress – something that Sk. Hasina's government has striven to give and the global community and institutions have recognized the same.

Sk. Hasina, a victim of terrorism herself and survivor of an assassination attempt in 2004, initially succeeded in her counter terrorism agenda. But it is apparent that she is being challenged severely. The JMB has not only reared its head in Bangladesh but has infiltrated into India across the porous border.

In the meanwhile, several other terrorist organizations have taken birth. The Ansarullah Bangladesh Team (ABT), which claims affiliation to the Al Qaeda, killed four secular bloggers in separate incidents earlier this year. Al Qaeda chief, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, gave a call last year for the establishment of his organization in Bangladesh.

The recent killing of two foreigners, Italian NGO worker Cesare Tavella (Dhaka, Sept. 28) and Japanese citizen Kunio Hoshi (Rangpur, Oct. 3) has created a new concern. An American for-profit enterprise, SITE reported that the Islamic State (IS) had claimed responsibility for the killings. The killings led to the UK, US and Australia issuing advisories to their citizens in Bangladesh to be alert.

The above two incidents had immediate effect on Bangladesh's economy. Fewer foreign businessmen are seen in Dhaka. Some foreign purchasers of garments have either cancelled or delayed their visits. The garment industry, which is the biggest foreign exchange earner is beginning to feel threatened.

It is still being questioned whether the IS has really entered Bangladesh. According to a report, Indian intelligence agencies are not convinced that the IS was involved in the Tavella and Hoshi killings. The argument is based on the premise that these were not signature IS killings. Tavella and Hoshi were shot by three men on a motorcycle, whereas the IS uses terrifying methods like beheading, burning and drowning.

This differentiation or identification appears a little too simplistic. The IS has entered Afghanistan and is fighting the Taliban. There has not yet been any dramatic IS signature execution of prisoners. Their method of killing depends upon the geography, social conditions and psyche of the killers.

As the IS expands beyond its Iraq and Syrian stronghold, where it claims to have established a caliphate, it will have to depend on its recruits.

Enticed by IS propaganda over the internet, several Bangladeshis have joined the IS, travelling to Syria via Turkey. An extended expatriate family from UK crossed over to IS earlier this year. Similarly, around 15 Indians joined the IS but some of them returned after experiencing horrifying conditions.

The IS, with an ideology far retrograde to Wahabism does not accept Wahabism because the latter embraces a king. They are unlikely to accommodate the ideology of Bangladeshi terrorists or of the Jamaat. The Jamaat accepts a woman prime minister as a political strategy, but once it wins, if ever, it will impose its ideology which has no place for women.

Police in Dhaka arrested two IS recruiters in May this year. One of them, Aminul Islam, was a computer science graduate and the other, Sakib bin Kamal, was a teacher in an English medium school in Dhaka. Both were in their thirties and were involved with the JMB. Over a period from September 2014, police have arrested around 20 suspected IS members. Most importantly, JMB cadres are shifting towards the IS. Saturated with the ideology of terrorism, it is not surprising that cadres from JMB and other such organizations are ideal for recruitment by the IS.

Interestingly, the Jamaat elders have never condemned the IS and its entry or potential entry into Bangladesh. While the Jamaat has sharply criticized the government for the rise in terrorist incidents, they have to explain how two of their leaders, former lawmakers Mia Golam Parawar and Mojibur Rahman were arrested from a house in Dhaka with 20 home-made bombs.

Parawar is an assistant general secretary of Jamaat, while Rahman is an acting Naeb-e-Amir of the party (bdnews24.com dated 7 Sept. 2015). Crying conspiracy will not help.

At the same time, the government must take much stronger steps to arrest culprits and bring them to justice. Several international observers are of the view that the government does not want to alienate the conservative Muslim voter. This policy will not help. It could encourage deviationists who may think they have found a door open to them.

Obviously, the opposition feels that if the government's development plan collapses and progress stalls, voters will turn to them. Hence they aid and abet these activities, not realizing that if the terrorists succeed, they will also be swept away.

The IS is a huge international concern. The world, including Bangladesh's friend China, will not allow an IS supremacy in Bangladesh. Strong action by the government and international assistance to Bangladesh in this regard is an urgent necessity. The IS may not come to Bangladesh, but lone wolf attacks are very likely to proliferate. Apart from strong law and order initiatives, the government and the clergy need to think out of the box using the progressive media and the internet to explain to the people that the IS has no connection to Islam and is a noxious organization.

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