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[Home](#) > Dhaka Carnage – A Wake up call for Realism

Dhaka Carnage – A Wake up call for Realism

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The siege of the Holey Artisan Café by a group of young Jihadis on July 1 evening was something waiting to happen. Twenty guests dining in this up-market restaurant in Dhaka's diplomatic area were killed by these terrorists. Most of them were foreigners. Two police officers also lost their lives. The terrorists were killed in a mixed forces commando raid later.

It was the last Friday before Eid, considered very holy. Ramadan, a period of fasting for Muslims is supposed to be a period of peace and prayers. In a manner, the terrorists who believed they were killing infidels to save Islam had themselves desecrated the very same religion. It may be noted that in the last two weeks more than three hundred people in different countries have been killed either by the Islamic State (IS) or sympathisers of IS.

The profile of these radical Islamic groups is changing very quickly to suit the needs of the technical world. As terrorism goes global, the old madrassa indoctrinated Jihadis are giving way to well-educated tech savvy recruits. This does not mean that the Madrassa influenced products have become redundant. They are foot soldiers to be utilised on the streets to counter opponents and institutions, and storm the bastion. From the strategic ideology of global Jihadis like the IS, Bangladesh, India and some other secular countries have not reached this stage yet. Formation of a Caliphate army in Bangladesh to penetrate India and the rest of South Asia will come later, unless checked.

The profiles of some of the killers at the Holey Artisan Café support the above. Nirbas Islam (22) studied in the well reputed Turkish Hope School in Dhaka. He also studied in Monash University, an Australian-Malaysian education enterprise in Malaysia. He was quiet and religious, his friends say. He went missing in January, without informing his family.

Rohas Imtiaz went to the high profile Scholastica School in Dhaka, and then to Monash University. He became untraceable after returning to Dhaka.

Mir Soameh Mubasser was also a student of Scholastica. He also disappeared in February without informing his family and friends.

All three came from wealthy families who had no connection with radical Islam. They were also information technology enthusiasts. Two of the others were from lower income families but educated.

In an earlier case, security personnel arrested two persons in May 2015 suspected to be members of Islamic State. One was Animul Ialam Beg, a computer science graduate and head of the IT department of a multinational company. The other was Sakib bin Kamel, a teacher in an English medium school in Dhaka. Obviously, Bangladesh intelligence agencies had sniffed the growing influence of the IS in the country, through the government remained in denial.

The problem of Islamic radicalism and terrorism is deeply enmeshed in the political current in Bangladesh. The problem goes as far back as 1971 when Bangladeshis fought Pakistan at great human cost and created an independent Bangladesh. But there was a minority at that time that still supported Pakistan against the vast majority opinion. Subsequent developments in Bangladesh like the assassination of Sk. Mujibur Rahman in 1975, political rehabilitation and empowerment of those who were against independence, re-emergence of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI) by President (Gen.) Ziaur Rahman in 1977-78 and, thereafter, Islamization of the Constitution by President (Gen.) H. M. Ershad overturning the original secular constitution of 1972, were the major springboards for radical Islamization.; with the creation of the BNP by Zia in 1978 and its partnership with JEI there was a sharp tilt towards Pakistan.

This introduced a deep divide in the country between the pro-Pakistan and Islamic lot, and the freedom fighters and moderate Muslims of Bangladesh (Sunnis with Sufi characteristics). The Awami League, which led the freedom movement and was the repository of freedom fighters and secularists, was sabotaged. The Awami League under Sk. Hasina, elder daughter of slain leader Sk. Mujibur Rahman fought back and returned to power in 2008 December. It still continues to be the ruling party. In the last few years the country has been flourishing, with a GDP of over 6 percent and creation of jobs. But a bitter division has remained, and seems to be getting worse.

The period between 1975 and 1990 was a period of political turmoil, judicial murders, extrajudicial executions and the return of Bangladesh to the Pakistani orbit.

The period between 2001 and 2006 saw the establishment of Islamic radicals-cum-terrorists in the country with official patronage. The BNP-JEI combine along with two other small radical parties known as the four-party alliance was in power. The high profile Islamic terrorist organisation Jamatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB) under Abdur Rehman established itself firmly. This group struck its roots in the country in

1998 when the Awami League was struggling to retain its power, which it lost comprehensively in the 2001 elections to the BNP-JEI combine,

The “9/11” incident, bombing of the New York World Trade Center by the Al Qaida on September 11, 2001, encouraged the Mullahs and the JEI to a sense of invulnerability. The secularists went into psychological disarray and lost their initiative. A large majority of the people also tried out the BNP-JEI alliance. Later, these same people changed their decision after witnessing the rule of this combine for five years.

The JMB, which was established in 1998, comprised fighters who had returned well indoctrinated from the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union. By 2004-05 it had around 50,000 trained cadres with financial assistance from Al Qaida and Pakistan’s ISI. Other major Islamic organisations that sprouted almost simultaneously included Harkat-ut-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI) Bangladesh, Hizbut Touheed, Shadat-e-Hikma and Shadat-e-Nabuwat. Funding came from Saudi and Gulf NGOs to promote Wahabism.

There is hard evidence that senior leaders of BNP like Air Marshal (Retd.) Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, BNP Home Minister, Lutfozzaman Babar, another Home Minister and Successor of Choudhary, Deputy Minister Ruhul Quddus Talukdar Dulu, and BNP Chairperson’s elder son and currently the party’s Senior General Secretary, Tareque Rehman accorded those terrorists protection and used them for political work including assassination of political opposition. Sk. Hasina barely escaped with her life in a grenade attack in 2004 in Dhaka. An atmosphere of terror reigned over Dhaka those years.

Pakistan is a factor in Bangladesh and will continue to be. The Pakistani military establishment is still nursing the wound of defeat in 1971. They have their supporters in Bangladesh in the last year at least two members of the Pakistani High Commission in Dhaka were caught giving funds to JMB activists to conduct terrorism.

Following the Holey Artisan Café attack on July 1, another attack took place on an Eid congregation in Solakia, killing four including two policemen, one woman and one of the attackers. This attack comes two days after three Bangladeshi men appeared in an IS video warning that the Holey Artisan attack was just the beginning and more attacks would take place till Bangladesh comes a country ruled by Sharia.

The Islamic State has not established an organisation in Bangladesh. Tactically and strategically, that opportunity has not come yet. But they have succeeded influencing and winning franchises. JMB, which was allied to Al Qaeda, appears to have shifted its allegiance to IS. The IS claims it has territory and a caliphate, fighting and killing perceived “enemies” of Islam. It is far more “attractive” than Al Qaeda. The Ansarullah Bangladesh Team (ABT) is following the same line. In a fluid situation shifting from one mentor to another can be seamless. The target is common – Sharia law, caliphate and the killing of non-believers who include Shias, Ahmedias and even moderate Sunnis.

What Bangladesh must seriously consider now is to look squarely at the larger threat than from the narrow prism of party politics. If political parties or individuals are involved, pinpointed action against them is required. The BNP supported and reared terrorists groups for political gains, Khaleda will have no space in a Sharia ruled society. She would have to rethink her political strategy very carefully, otherwise she

and her party will be used and thrown away like a dirty rag. The JEI is a harder nut to crack as they support Sharia law and segregation of women. They need utmost scrutiny, especially their students' wing the Islamic Chatra Shibir (ICS). The ICS is involved in the current episodes against the minority and free thinkers.

The formation of organisations like the Olemea (Olema) League by the Awami League may help for a short time. But they also believe in the ultimate goal of Shariat.

Finally, give liberals and free thinkers space. Otherwise, their space will be taken over by the fundamentalists. The confidence of foreign investors is being shaken by these killings. It is time to act and not miss the wood for the trees. If there can be street protests against Israel's attack on Palestinians, then why not similar people's protest against the terrorists?

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Tags:

[bangladesh](#) [2]

[JMB](#) [3]

[Pakistan ISI](#) [4]

[Awami League](#) [5]

[BNP](#) [6]

Category:

[Papers](#) [7]

Countries:

[Bangladesh](#) [8]

Topics:

[Terrorism](#) [9]

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