

II. Research Note

Bangladesh: an Emerging Centre for Terrorism in Asia

by Sajjan M. Gohel

Abstract

This Research Note examines the political developments that have occurred in Bangladesh in 2013 and explores how these have fed into the rise of religious militancy. The ongoing conflicts not only intensify the instability and schisms within the country, but also illustrate that there is a rise in religious militancy that the country can ill afford at this juncture. Furthermore, it highlights how some members of the Bangladeshi diaspora in the United States and United Kingdom have been recruited by al-Qaeda and its affiliates to plot mass casualty attacks. Significantly, it is argued that all these threads are tied together because of the murky role of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JEI), which is Bangladesh's largest religious political party. A further deterioration of Bangladesh's democracy and political stability could create additional space within which Islamist militants may be increasingly free to operate not just for domestic terrorist activity but for preparing international plots as well.

Keywords: Terrorism, Bangladesh, Jamaat-e-Islami, Ansarullah Bengali Team, Hefazat-e-Islam

Introduction

Bangladesh has received little attention in comparison to other countries in South Asia such as Pakistan or Afghanistan. As the fourth largest Muslim state in the world, Bangladesh's progress has been encouraging. [1] The functioning but flawed democratic system has been in place since 1990, coupled with a vibrant civil society movement. Bangladesh's democracy, however, faces a number of security-related challenges. The main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), refused to take part in the 5th January, 2014 general elections, claiming they were illegitimate.[2]

The build-up to the elections saw bouts of political, social and religious violence by political opposition parties as well as militant groups. Commentaries on contemporary Bangladesh give increasing attention to the role of religion in politics, particularly its more fundamentalist form. In addition, the conflicts that are spilling onto the streets not only intensify the instability and schisms within the country, but also illustrate that there is a rise in religious militancy that the country can ill afford at this juncture.

This Research Note examines the political developments that have occurred in Bangladesh in 2013 and how they have fed into the rise of religious militancy. It also assesses the diverse array of terrorist challenges Bangladesh faces from domestic threats and the fact that it is a safe haven for extremists. Furthermore, it highlights how some members of its diaspora in the United States and United Kingdom have been recruited by al-Qaeda and its affiliates to plot mass casualty attacks. Significantly, it is argued that all these threads are tied together because of the murky role of *Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh* (JEI), which is Bangladesh's largest religious political party. The JEI is intrinsically tied to how Bangladesh has evolved as a country. The country's nationalist characteristics have been undermined by a movement that has arguably served as an antechamber for terrorism.[3]

The Shahbag Protests

The February 2013 protests in Dhaka brought hundreds of thousands of young Bangladeshis out onto the streets of the capital, seeking punitive action for alleged war crimes committed by some members of the JEI during the Liberation War of 1971, when the country secured independence from Pakistan following a violent war of secession.[4] The “Shahbag protests,” as they came to be known because the protestors would congregate at the Shahbag intersection in Dhaka, were propelled by online social networking sites.

When Bangladesh split from Pakistan in 1971, it endured a brutal reprisal from the Pakistani army. It is estimated that between 1-3 million people were killed and 200,000 to 500,000 women were raped in a coordinated military crackdown that also led to assassinations of intellectuals.[5] In encouraging and arranging these killings, the Pakistan army found willing collaborators in the form of a minority of Bengalis who did not wish to secede from Pakistan, some of whom became part of the JEI.[6]

Few collaborators were ever brought to justice for their part in these crimes against humanity and against humanitarian law. To the consternation of many Bangladeshis who had lived through the Liberation period, the BNP included JEI as its coalition partner in the 2001-2006 government.[7] When the Awami League won the general election in 2009, its leadership initiated the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh to deal with unfinished business arising from the 1971 Liberation War.[8]

On February 28, 2013, the Tribunal sentenced Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, vice president of the JEI, to death for his involvement in the 1971 murders and war crimes. On September 17, 2013, the Bangladesh Supreme Court found Abdul Qader Mollah, assistant secretary-general of the JEI, guilty of murders and other war crimes and ordered his execution, converting his previous life sentence to a death sentence.[9] On October 1, 2013 BNP Member of Parliament Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury was sentenced to death for his part in the 1971 atrocities.[10] On December 2012, Mollah was executed which resulted in street battles between security forces and supporters of the JEI, sparking fears of a descent into disorder.[11]

The tribunal’s establishment has sparked backlashes among religious political parties and groups.[12] In an effort to save its senior leaders being found guilty in the tribunal and also to save itself from being banned, the JEI attempted to divert the focus from the war crimes trials through online propaganda, claiming that the Shahbagh movement was “a movement by atheists.”[13]

Trouble began on February 15, 2013, when prominent blogger and civil rights activist Ahmed Rajib Haider, who had helped coordinate the protests, was hacked to death, allegedly by members of an offshoot faction of the JEI’s student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) known as the Ansarullah Bengali Team (ABT).[14] Haider was one of those who the JEI and its affiliates have accused of mocking Islam. Relatives and friends blamed JEI for the murder.[15] On March 2, 2013, Bangladesh’s Detective Branch arrested five students from North South University, in connection with Haider’s murder. Detective Branch spokesperson Monirul Islam said the five murdered Haider on directions of an ICS leader: “They [the suspects] said killing Rajib [Haider] was their Iman (religious) obligations.”[16]

The ABT is ideologically motivated by the Al-Qaeda doctrine and has been trying to resuscitate the local extremist groups in Bangladesh. The ABT’s ultimate goal has been to take control of Bangladesh through an armed jihad and implement Sharia rule.[17]

On August 12, 2013 Bangladeshi authorities arrested radical cleric Mufti Jasimuddin Rahmani, an ideological leader of ABT, along with dozens of his followers in Barguna, a south western district of Bangladesh. Rahmani and the ABT have established a strong presence on the Internet and have engaged in not just spreading the group’s propaganda but also translating and distributing material produced by Al-Qaeda and

the American-Yemeni ideologue Anwar Al-Awlaki who had been killed in October 2011 in Yemen by a drone strike.[18]

Despite these arrests, the problems of extremism show no sign of abating in Bangladesh. On May 5, 2013, Bangladesh's largest radical Islamic movement, the Hefazat-e-Islam (HEI), led by Shah Ahmad Shafi, organized a demonstration in Dhaka of more than 500,000 supporters that left seven people dead. Hundreds of shops were also set alight.[19] They demanded the application of 13 Taliban-esque measures, including punishment to all bloggers who "insult Islam," cancellation of the women development policy and the removal of sculptures.[20]

The HEI gained new recruits following the Shabhag protests and the death of Haider. Since the May 5, 2013, protests the authorities have failed to make any progress in the dozens of cases that accused the HEI of creating anarchy in Dhaka.[21] On November 8, 2013, the civil society movement, Ekatturer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee, released a report in which it described the HEI as "the B-team of JEI." [22]

The Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS)

The JEI could not function effectively without its student wing, the ICS, which remains its main recruitment ground. ICS members are strong in many educational campuses in Bangladesh. Rajshahi University, Chittagong University, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Khustia Islamic University, Jahangirnagar University and North South University are considered "strongholds" of the ICS.[23] The JEI placed its party members at crucial positions in universities and the Public Service Commission during its time in coalition government with the BNP and was able to appoint its cadres and sympathizers to various universities in Bangladesh and civil services, marking its presence in the educational institutions and bureaucracy.[24] Some students affiliated to ICS opt for subjects that are taught by teachers belonging to JEI, which enables them to receive preferential treatment. In addition, due to the system of recruitment, some of these students are recruited as faculty members. [25]

The members and workers of the JEI contribute 5% of their monthly income as a contribution to the party. [26] The JEI uses its political and religious ties with Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf nations to enable its supporters to obtain employment in these countries as well as provide a platform for those that seek further ideological guidance. These workers tend to contribute generously to the party fund (Baitul Maal).[27] To financially sustain their organisation, the JEI are involved in a number of economic enterprises ranging from large financial institutions to household level micro credit schemes, from mosques and madrasas to news outlets and IT businesses. The estimated amount of annual net profit generated by these enterprises is a staggering \$200 million.[28]

Links with Domestic Terrorism

The JEI has a murky relationship with militant outfits in Bangladesh. It could be argued that it has served as the antechamber towards terrorism, especially with outfits like the Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB), a domestic terrorist group founded in 1998 and committed to establishing an Islamic state in Bangladesh through violence. The JMB gained international notoriety when it coordinated an audacious countrywide bombing campaign on August 17, 2005.[29] The group detonated approximately 460 bombs at 300 locations in 63 of the 64 districts in Bangladesh. Leaflets were found at the scene of the blasts in which the JMB asked the government to establish Islamic rule or face a ruthless offensive.[30]

In the wake of the countrywide bomb blasts of 2005, the authorities arrested seven members of the JMB.

All had been members of either the JEI or its student wing, the ICS.[31] In March 2006, when the former director of the Islamic Academy, Maolana Fariduddin Masud, was detained for suspected links to militancy, he shockingly alleged to a Dhaka court that a huge amount of information would be revealed if the then Industries Minister and JEI leader, Motiur Rahman Nizami was investigated.[32] Nizami, had openly stated in the past that the JMB was a fictitious imagination of the media and foreign powers to malign Bangladesh's image as a moderate Islamic state.[33] Nizami is currently being held as a suspect while standing trial for war crimes in 1971 at the Tribunal. He was the supreme commander of the militia group al-Badr which aided the Pakistani military during the Bangladesh Liberation War.[34]

In a separate development, on January 30, 2014, a Bangladesh court sentenced 14 people connected to the JEI to death, including Nizami, over a substantial arms smuggling racket ten years earlier. Nizami, was sentenced to hang after being convicted over the racket involving 10 truckloads of arms seized by police from the southern port city of Chittagong.[35]

In October 2005, the law courts and judges were targeted in another series of bomb blasts in Chandpur, Chittagong, Sylhet and Lakshmipur. [36] The situation escalated when the JMB killed two senior assistant judges and wounded three others in a suicide bomb attack in Jhalakathi on November 14, 2005.[37] Police investigations discovered that the Jhalakathi bomber, Hasan Al Mamun, and his family members were closely linked to the JEI. Al Mamun was also an activist of the ICS.[38]

Shortly after these incidents, authorities apprehended more than 700 suspected members of JMB and its affiliate party, Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB). In March 2007, the Bangladeshi government executed a number of JMB's leaders, including its leader, Shaikh Abdur Rahman (more commonly known as Bhai).[39]

The International Terrorism Dynamic

Bangladesh does not attract as much Western attention as some other South Asian countries like Pakistan or Afghanistan. As a result many important issues end up being overlooked by the international community. For example, Usama bin Ladin issued a fatwa on February 23, 1999, that called for a jihad against "the Jews and Crusaders." The fatwa was endorsed by Fazlul Rahman, a Bangladeshi religious leader commonly identified as "the Amir of Jihadi movement in Bangladesh," in his capacity as leader of the Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HUJI).[40] Yet the domestic and international reaction to this reputed Al-Qaeda link was surprisingly overlooked. It took until April 2004 for the U.S. Department of State to designate HUJI as a terrorist organisation. And Bangladesh took even longer to follow suit, because the Khaleda Zia government maintained that HUJI was 'not present' in the country which can be attributed to JEI's presence and influence in the government.[41] However, in the wake of the 2005 bomb blasts, the BNP government was forced to ban the HUJI and the JMB in August 2005.[42]

Another largely overlooked incident involves Bangladesh's terrorist connection to Southeast Asia. Prior to being captured in Thailand in August 2003, the former operational planner of the Jemaah Islamiya (JI) terrorist group, Hambali, who helped organise the 2002 Bali night club bombings which resulted in the deaths of 202 people, had made a decision to shift JI elements to Bangladesh in response to recent counter-terrorist activity in Southeast Asia. Hambali identified Bangladesh as a safe refuge and a place where sleeper cell of future leaders in Pakistan could be set up.[43]

In October 2003, The Central Bank of Bangladesh ordered the country's commercial banks and financial institutions to freeze the accounts of several Malaysian nationals associated with the JI for their suspected

involvement in financing terrorists. Some of those were senior members of the JI, including Noordin Mohammad Top, Azahari Bin Husan and Zulkifli Marzuki.[44]

Terrorist Recruitment in the West

Although more heavily monitored by the authorities now, the JMB continues using the Internet and social networking forums to recruit new members online, luring university students to its fold and this has potential repercussions for the West. Rajib Karim, a member of JMB, lived in the United Kingdom and was employed as an information technology expert with British Airways. Karim's activities involved raising money and making propaganda videos for JMB. Yet Karim eventually came under the influence of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in particular, the operative Anwar al-`Awlaqi, the Yemeni-American cleric based in Yemen and involved in a number of terrorist plots against the United States.[45]

Karim then attempted to switch jobs within British Airways, applying for a position as a member of the cabin crew with the intention of smuggling an explosive device on-board a trans-Atlantic flight. However, British authorities arrested Karim, who eventually received a 30-year prison sentence in February 2011.[46]

On 13th August, 2009, a US court found Ehsanul Islam Sadequee guilty. He was convicted of conspiracy to materially support terrorists where the Internet was used to plot attacks and form a loose network connecting North America, Europe and South Asia. Sadequee was sentenced to 17 years in prison. Sadequee, although the son of Bangladeshi immigrants and raised in Roswell, Georgia, spent a considerable amount of time in Bangladesh, plotting terrorist activities connected to the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Bosnia & Herzegovina. Sadequee had even tried to link up with the Taliban.[47]

On 9th August, 2013, Quazi Mohammad Rezwanaul Ahsan Nafis, a Bangladeshi national, was sentenced to 30 years in prison after pleading guilty to terrorism charges for trying to blow up the Federal Reserve Bank in New York. Nafis was arrested after he tried to detonate what he thought was a 1,000-pound truck bomb outside the bank in October 2012. He pleaded guilty in February 2013 to attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction and for attempting to provide material support to Al-Qaeda.[48]

Nafis had come to the United States in January 2012 on a student visa and enrolled at a Missouri college to study cyber-security. However, his real motivations were more sinister. Prior to coming to the United States, Nafis had been expelled from North South University in Bangladesh in 2012 after he had performed poorly in examinations. North South University was the same institution where the assassins of blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider studied at. In his trial it was stated that Nafis became radicalised at North South University and came to the US with aspirations of jihad.[49]

Conclusion

The growth of the JEI in the democratic political process has also provided an atmosphere for the growth of extra-parliamentary militancy. A centrifugal problem is emerging in Bangladesh that threatens trouble for the region and beyond if left unchallenged. Yet so far it has been largely unnoticed in the West.

Bangladesh had endured a wave of violent radicalisation during the 1999-2005 period. The emergence of groups like ABT illustrates that a new generation of violent extremists are emerging. As in other countries, the Internet is increasingly becoming their lifeblood, enabling extremists to spread their doctrine and establishing clandestine networks.

The secular and nationalist foundations of moderate Bangladesh are being undermined by a culture of

political violence and the rise of Islamist extremists. Although the JEI was banned by the government from taking part in the general elections, it still commands a significant and loyal following. It is not about to disappear anytime soon even if the war crime tribunals causes some discomfort for its leadership.

A further deterioration of Bangladesh's democracy and political stability could create additional space within which Islamist militants may be increasingly free to operate not just for domestic terrorist activity but for preparing international plots as well. Such developments may have destabilising implications for Bangladesh, South Asia, and beyond. They also have the potential to affect U.S. and European policies in combating international terrorism.

This concern is being highlighted by the fact that European nationals of Bangladeshi origin are travelling to fight with Al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria. The proliferation of this activity raises a number of security concerns because it creates a potential nexus and blow-back between Europe, Bangladesh and Syria.

About the Author: *Dr. Sajjan Gohel is International Security Director at the Asia-Pacific Foundation, a London-based Think-Tank. He is also a Visiting Teacher at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) where he had received his Ph.D. in International History. His doctoral thesis was titled, "The Evolution of Egyptian Radical Ideological Thought from Hasan al-Banna to Ayman al-Zawahiri". Dr. Gohel's primary research interests include: security challenges in South Asia, the Middle East and the Horn of Africa and their implications for the West; radical ideological thought, both present and historical; and the role that New Media plays in transnational terrorism.*

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