

Report

Bangladesh: Islamist Militancy, Democracy Deficit and Where to Next?

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A Hindu man in Pabna has become the latest victim of the wave of violence in Bangladesh [AFP]

Abstract

Bangladesh has been featured prominently in the international media as the Islamic State (IS) and an affiliate of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) known as Ansar-al Islam, who recently claimed responsibility for the killings of a number of people. At least 49 people have been killed in the past 17 months. The government has denied the existence of transnational 'terrorist' groups. These attacks have increased at a time when the main opposition party is in disarray, democratic space has shrunk and freedom of expression has come under attack from the government. Additionally, laws and steps are being considered by the government to impose further restrictions on citizens.

Introduction

In the past months, Bangladesh has featured prominently in the international media as the IS and an affiliate of AQIS also known as Ansar-al Islam, who have claimed responsibility for the killings of a number of people in a gruesome manner. Bloggers, online activists, publishers, journalists, Sufi monks, professors, LGBT activists, a doctor and a tailor as well as two foreigners have been the victims of these fatal attacks. Machete wielding assailants have not only taken as many as 49 lives in the past 17 months, but have also sent a chilling message that they can stage an assault at any place at will. At least 19 such incidents have been reported since the beginning of the year.(1) Minority groups such as the Shia community has also borne the brunt of these attacks. The government, which until nine months ago claimed that there were international 'terrorists' in the country, has now backtracked and adopted a policy of denial.(2) Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her colleagues have insisted that these are 'homegrown terrorists' such as Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) while also pointing fingers at the arch rival Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its ally the Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami (BJI). Besides, the ruling party

has departed from its earlier position of being supportive of the bloggers who were criticised by the Islamists as being atheists. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has chastised bloggers for hurting the religious sentiments of others and warned that her government will not take responsibility for 'untoward incidents' provoked by the objectionable comments of bloggers. In an ironic twist of events, the ruling party is reportedly developing a warm relationship with the Hefazat-i-Islam (HI), the obscurantist religious group that demanded introduction of an anti-blasphemy law in 2013 and faced the wrath of the government.(3) Surprisingly, there has been very little progress in apprehending and trying the perpetrators of these killings.(4)

In March 2016, Singapore had arrested 8 Bangladeshis accusing them of being members of IS who were allegedly plotting to stage attacks in Bangladesh and were seeking new recruits. Five were deported for similar charges and were later arrested in Bangladesh. These arrests came three months after 26 Bangladeshis were deported from Singapore for forming a religious study group that spread the ideology of Al Qaeda and the IS.(5) Bangladeshi police claimed that 14 of the deportees in December have ties to a Bangladeshi militant group.(6)

These incidents are taking place against the background of an unprecedented situation in mainstream politics. The ruling party is enjoying free reign, because the main opposition has become feeble, and its leaders are facing record numbers of court cases filed on frivolous grounds. Legitimate criticisms of the government are portrayed as a threat to the regime. Restrictions on freedom of expressions from the state have become the hallmark of the country, particularly since the controversial election in 2014 which has produced a parliament with no opposition party. Human rights groups in Bangladesh have reported that in the past years, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and custodial deaths have increased dramatically.(7)

Background

Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971 after experiencing genocide and a nine-month war of independence. Within three and a half years, a military coup deposed the one-party government ruled by the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) and killed its founder, President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and his associates. In the following fifteen years, two military rulers ran the country. The reigns of General Ziaur Rahman (Zia) and General H.M. Ershad saw the country move away from its secularist principles to religion-based political parties. An urban popular uprising overthrew the military backed government in 1990. By then, the Bangladeshi political landscape had become dominated by the Bangladesh Awami League, a secularist party; the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), a center-right party established by Zia; the Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami (BJI), an Islamist party which opposed the founding of the country in 1971; and Bangladesh Jatiya Party (BJP), a right of center party established by Ershad.

Between 1991 and 2007, state power alternated between the BAL and the BNP through elections every five years that were overseen by a non-partisan caretaker government (CTG). Street agitations led by the BAL broke out after the BNP tried to manipulate the constitution to engineer a sham election. A military-backed government took over for two years. The election in late 2008 brought the BAL to power with a majority of more than two-thirds in the parliament. The BAL used the power to scrap the caretaker proviso in 2011. The BAL also founded the International Crimes Tribunals (ICT), a domestic tribunal, to try those who committed crimes against humanity in 1971. The BNP and its ally BJI alleged that these tribunals are politically motivated. The BNP and major political parties boycotted the election held in late 2014 and violence engulfed the nation.⁽⁸⁾ In the wake of the first anniversary of the controversial election, the BNP launched a nationwide protest and called for a blockade. For more than three months, violence perpetrated by the opposition and heavy-handed response of law enforcement agencies cost 138 lives.⁽⁹⁾

The tribunal began to deliver verdicts in February 2013 and the BJI activists "responded with violence" to each verdict that sentenced their leaders.⁽¹⁰⁾ Two conflicting movements, one led ostensibly by secularists, particularly bloggers, demanding capital punishment for those tried by the ICT; and another led by the orthodox Islamists demanding punishment for 'atheist bloggers,' and an anti-blasphemy law appeared in the political scene, highlighting the extant schism in society. Against this backdrop, a self-proclaimed atheist blogger was hacked to death in February 2013. Two years later, deadly attacks on bloggers resumed with another killing. As of the end of May 2016, the Tribunal has delivered 26 verdicts including ten against the chief leaders of the BJI. Eight of them have been given the death sentence. One BNP leader and four BJI leaders have been executed.

What's in a Name?

The denial of the government about the presence of IS and AQIS warrants a close reading. It has not claimed that the militants are non-existent but characterised them as homegrown. This is not a semantic issue. Acknowledgment of the presence of the international "terrorists" in the midst will be an explicit admission of the failure of its "counterterrorism" efforts and will raise questions about the causes; it also may have adverse impacts on its relationship with global powers. But, the argument that the militancy is homegrown deliberately disregards the fact that Bangladeshi militants had regional and extra-regional connections since their inception in the mid-1990s. The genesis of Islamist militants can be traced back to the Afghan War in the late 1980s.⁽¹¹⁾ Operatives of Pakistani and Indian militant groups were arrested in Bangladesh as early as 2008.

It should also be noted that in the age of globalization, the exportation of extremism does not require the physical presence of the operatives of international extremist groups. There are too many ways of indoctrination and recruitment. Ideas of extremism to identification of targets can easily be coordinated from distant lands. A number of attacks in various parts of the world have already demonstrated that the internet as a vehicle is quite effective. As such, the characterisation of the ongoing militancy as a 'glocal' phenomenon – a combination of global and local - is apt.(12)

There is no denying that there are Bangladeshi citizens who are willing to join the 'Global Jihad' and bring it home. A survey of newspaper reports published between July 2014 and June 2015 showed that law enforcing agencies arrested 112 alleged 'militants'. Of these, 22 were identified as either connected to or aspiring to be connected to ISIS.(13) Arrests in Singapore also show that expatriates can also become vehicles for radicalisation.

The Politics of Expediency?

Why the supposedly secular Awami League government has not condemned these attacks unequivocally and acted forcefully to bring the perpetrators to justice has confounded many analysts at home and abroad. But it appears that politics of expediency is driving the decision of the ruling party. It serves both domestic and external, especially Western, audiences. The ruling party has successfully undermined the most prominent Islamist party of the country – the Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami (BJI) – by prosecuting its leaders for war crimes in 1971, cancelling the party's registration with the Election Commission, and using deadly force as the BJI activists resorted to street agitations. Once the kingmaker, the BJI is now been pushed to the margin of the political landscape. The ruling party, however, does not want to be seen as anti-Islamic; it would rather like to see other Islamists as antidotes to the BJI. Additionally, a low intensity militancy that is not a mortal challenge to the regime will help the ruling party be portrayed as the bulwark against rising Islamism in a Muslim majority country. This provides justification to the Western world for extending unqualified support to the government, and 'the ostensible need for sweeping powers to curb such religious violence enables the regime to further aggrandize its political power'.(14)

Economic Growth, Pillage and Social Impacts

Despite shrinking democratic space, restrictions on the freedom of expression, recent spates of targeted killings and a palpable fear among members of various sections of the society, daily lives seem to be continuing at a normal pace thanks to the healthy economic growth of the past decades. The country has succeeded in maintaining a growth rate over 6 percent since 1991 when the country was ruled alternatively by two parties, namely, the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). They assumed power through fair elections every five years. Dysfunctional

politics, poor governance, acrimonious relationships between the two parties and periodic violence marked the period. The economic growth of the past decades can primarily be attributed to two sectors of the economy: readymade garments (RMG) and the remittances from short term labor. For example, in the first nine months of the current fiscal year (2015-16), the RMG sector which employs about 4.2 million workers, earned \$22.12 billion.(15) The unskilled and semi-skilled short-term migrants from Bangladesh, numbering more than 555 thousand, who work in countries in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and Southeast Asia had sent home \$15.27 Billion in 2015.(16) These along with the other emerging export sectors have created a vibrant economy and a new middle class.(17) The economic success, however, has not been shared equally: income disparity is on the rise. Equally important is the alarming rate of capital flight from the country. In the decade between 2004 and 2014, more than \$56 billion was siphoned off from Bangladesh, according to the US-based thinktank 'Global Financial Integrity (GFI)'.(18) Unbridled corruption and political patronage have allowed the pillage of millions of dollars from the state-owned banks (SOBs) with no consequences for the banks or the perpetrators.(19)

The country has also made remarkable progress in achieving various millennium development goals (MDGs): it is ahead of its neighbours in social indices such as reducing child mortality and maternal deaths and increasing life expectancy and providing education to girls.

In some measures, these successes have led to a sense of complacency among the urban middle class who were previously at the forefront of the democratic movement, especially in the 1980s, against the military rulers. Leaders of the ruling party have indicated their preference for Singapore and/or Malaysia as the development model which are akin to a de facto one-party state. The debate has been framed as 'development versus democracy' to suggest that democracy is expendable.(20)

Absence of an Alternative?

The apparent economic growth is one factor for the absence of resistance to the growing authoritarian bent of the ruling party; the other is the abject failure of the main opposition party, the BNP, to present itself as a viable alternative. The experience of its mal-governance during its last term (2001-2006) has remained in the public memory. But, more importantly, political miscalculation, wrong strategy, and inept tactics have plagued the party since then. Adoption of violence as a political tactic prior to the 2014 election and in early 2015 has weakened its public appeal while providing the ruling party with the opportunity to use heavy-handed measures. Persecution of its leaders by the government(21) and charges brought against the party chief, Khaleda Zia, is intended to decimate the party and the ruling party seems to be succeeding, at least in

the short term.(22) However, the question remains: who will fill in the vacuum when the legitimate constitutional opposition as an alternative is decimated?

The Worrying Signs

With the opposition parties, particularly the BNP, significantly weakened, the ruling party is trying to further tighten its grip over all other avenues of dissent. The 2006 Information and Communication Technology Act, as amended in 2013, has provided enormous power to clamp down on online activities. In the past years, section 57 of the act has been abused to incarcerate critics of the government and for allegedly hurting religious sentiments. But as if this was not enough, the government has moved to enact three new laws with draconian power and a plan to establish a new center to monitor all internet activities.

The proposed laws are the 'Digital Security Act-2016,'(23) the 'Bangladesh Liberation War (Denial, Distortion, Opposition) Crime Law','(24) and the 'Foreign Donations Regulation (Amendment) Act.'(25) The Digital Security Act stipulates that 'anyone spreading negative propaganda against the Liberation War or the Father of the Nation, using digital devices, will risk being sentenced to life in prison'. The act also stipulates two-year imprisonment for "deliberately" defaming someone or hurting anyone's religious sentiment by publishing or broadcasting something through digital devices. The idea of the 'Bangladesh Liberation War (Denial, Distortion, Opposition) Crime Law' originated to counter any denial of the genocide perpetrated by the Pakistani Army and its local collaborators in 1971, a law akin to the Holocaust Denial Laws prevailing in various countries in Europe. But it has been expanded to incorporate the entire gamut of history of Bangladesh and any diversion from the official narrative is proposed to be criminalised. One of the key elements added to the proposed Foreign Donations Regulations (Amendment) Act is the power to take actions against any non-government organization (NGO) for 'insulting or derogatory remarks' on constitutional bodies. The proposed act had already incorporated significant restrictions on NGO activities. This new proviso will silence organisations such as Transparency International Bangladesh, which has been acting as a watchdog.

The government has also decided to set up a center called the Cyber Threat Detection and Response Network which will allow the government to track all online activities, remove any content and even block any sites at any time. In fact, the government had previously blocked messaging services, Facebook, You Tube and various websites.(26)

Taken together, these will place serious restrictions on freedom of expression. It is indeed appropriate to ask whether such restrictions will leave any space for dissent, particularly when the mainstream media are either co-opted or muzzled through various means including intimidation and indirect economic pressure.(27)

Conclusion: Where to?

The current situation begs the question, "Where is Bangladeshi politics heading?" The recent targeted killings are symptomatic of a deteriorating law and order situation and reveals the weakness of the governance. But there are more weaknesses than our eyes meet. Even those who concur with the government that transnational 'terrorist' groups are not present in Bangladesh will have to acknowledge that the situation has the potential for opening space for transnational extremist groups or allow Bangladeshis to become connected to the transnational extremists. As such, it deserves to be confronted in earnest.

The menacing acts of these groups should not divert the attention of the observers of Bangladeshi politics from the worrying signs within the mainstream politics. As a recent report of the International Crisis Group (ICG) has noted, "If mainstream dissent remains closed, more and more government opponents may come to view violence and violent groups as their only recourse."⁽²⁸⁾ Closing avenues of dissent, repressive measures against legitimate political opposition, or trying to take advantage of the situation for immediate political ends will not benefit the country in the long run.

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