

Time to forestall potential Banglabhais



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE cynics say that Bangla is a language of overstatement and that Bangladeshis are a very sensitive and sentimental lot. They also add that in the event of even minor accomplishment most Bangladeshis usually experience a heady sensation and start celebrating leaving aside their core functions. It was, therefore, not unusual to see the Bangladeshi establishment in an euphoric state following the capture of two dreaded extremist leaders last week. Thus when euphoria dominated, pragmatism took a deep plunge and perhaps it fell upon the British High Commissioner to Bangladesh to remind us that terrorism is never defeated in one single stroke. Not that those in charge of the affairs of the state are not practical enough to appreciate that but the sad reality is that those in authorities are not telling the nation that confronting the extremism of the bigots is an awesome task and that sustained efforts are necessary to tackle the menace root and branch.

Jubilation and premonition

The government may have cause to celebrate but such celebrations would be frustratingly short-lived if meticulous efforts are not made to go into the root of the so-called religious extremism and the tentacles that it has spread in different segments of our society. While in the short-term, the investigators are expected to be speedy and firm to

prove the culpability of the real wrongdoers, the policy makers in their long-term strategy should take measures that will put an effective brake on the preaching of ideas that run contrary to Islam and a civilised democratic polity. Surely, Bangladesh does not want to go through the painful internal strife and the shocks that the Algerian society had to experience. Similarly, we also do not want the ascendancy of the bigoted and the obscurantist elements in the political arena, as has been the case in parts of the sub-continent and adjacent territory.

Appreciation and action

According to apparently credible information, there are at least two dozen trained leaders for whose apprehension there does not seem to be any serious concerted effort. If one has to go by media reports then one would find that many hundreds of strongly motivated workers including suicide bombers are operating underground defying the security dragnet. The worrying part is that as per confessional statement of terrorist leaders, such fugitives can launch deadly attacks. In such a scenario, anti-extremist operations should be strengthened and a continued campaign is necessary to bust the terror network and destroy the menacing arsenal. It is also equally important to locate the origin of the arms supply and financial support and to hunt the patrons/harbourers of the so-called religious terrorists. Simultaneously, the apprehension of the members of the extended JMB network cannot be overlooked.

One has to bear in mind that the terrorists are so motivated that even one of them retains the ability to strike with a deadly impact. Any one individual of such outfit may turn into another Banglabhai. Therefore, the threat and fear of terrorist strike will not disappear if the terror-tree is not completely uprooted. In such an exercise we need long-term planning, diversified strategy and continuous actions. Unfortunately, how-

ever, some quarters are underplaying the power and capability of the terrorists. Some enforcement personnel have even gone to the length of forecasting that the terror network has been completely destroyed and terrorism has been wiped out. Such utterances, it is not realised, will only facilitate the fugitives and underground elements to regroup for launching further deadly attack. We cannot be oblivious of the fact that the terrorists displayed their potentials by carrying out simultaneous bomb attacks

reign of terror in those areas. Therefore, those areas where the JMB supremos conducted training and let loose a reign of terror to secure their command and influence must come under sustained enquiry. The active terrorists, their trainers and their patrons and collaborators and harbourers must be dealt with under the law, otherwise the anti-terrorist campaign will not achieve meaningful and durable success.

Global fundamentalism

and our ground reality

When so-called religious extremism has posed a threat to our national security, some quarters are wilfully pointing to the phenomenon of global fundamentalism to justify the accumulated inaction. However, the reality is that in the recent past, accusing fingers were raised towards some intellectuals, media and the major opposition political party whenever the religious extremists struck terror in meetings, cultural functions, cinema halls etc. Many innocent persons were

unnecessarily harassed and jailed. In fact, there was a pathetic and condemnable effort to confront a malaise by denying its very existence. Nothing could be more sad, ill-thought and myopic. The ominous rise of religious extremism in Bangladesh whose inhabitants suffered unprecedented sacrifices to de-link themselves from religion-based Pakistani state, remains a massive paradox of contemporary history. A dispassionate analysis and explanation of this contradiction may indicate the action that would

be necessary to counter and arrest the religious obscurantism of all descriptions and keep us steady on the tolerant democratic way.

The imperatives

Most terrorist activities are encouraged and sustained by an ideological inspiration. In other words, terrorism is not divorced from ideology. One has to look for the said ideological moorings. In this quest, in Bangladesh, it is strongly likely that there will be some accusatory finger-pointing towards some political party. In the event of such a possibility turning into reality, the government of the day has to take tough actions without bothering about the political fallout. That would demand political sagacity of a very high order and may be a tall asking in our perilously polarised polity.

There is no doubt that battle against extremism would be long. However, since the recent violence of the so-called religious extremists is a manifest attack on the long cherished values of the mainstream, our strategy and thought process should undergo substantial change in the following manner.

- Persons or institutions having an apparent religious or ecclesiastical appearance and activity must not be out of bound for the surveillance agencies. Those creating credible suspicions must come within the ambit of threat perception and appropriate legal action shall be started forthwith. Preempting their nefarious activities should engage the uppermost attention of regulatory authority.
- The aforementioned surveillance should ensure that no one is allowed to interpret and propagate a distorted version of the holy books. Our inherently religious folks must not be allowed to be misled.
- The so-called religious extremists committing violence should be treated like criminals and no element of respectability should

be accorded to them.

- Institutions not playing the national anthem and disrespecting the national language must come under adverse attention and be subjected to effective punitive measures.
- Institutions imparting religious training and the Madrasah should be a focal point for inspection and monitoring with a view to rendering their students into employable individuals.

The enemy combatants are now known. So there should not be any hesitation in venturing into sensitive and emotionally aligned places and institutions when reasonable suspicion and information so dictate. This is necessary to effectively shake off the suspected ambivalence of the enforcement personnel. The directives should be very clear and explicit. This aspect assumes special significance in view of the opposition allegation that the government has a politically biased view about the threat scenario. Therefore, let not political expediency cloud the corrective action.

The so-called religious extremism has not sprouted with its ugly fangs all on a sudden. So we should not be expecting instant solutions. However, deft political management ensuring pragmatic operational handling on an urgent basis can definitely lessen the harmful impact and energise the mainstream to counter the frontal attack on our democratic polity.

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Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former secretary and IGP.

STRAIGHT LINE

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at 63 districts and killing at least 35 persons in suicidal attacks. The nation has already paid a very heavy price by ignoring them or entertaining doubts about their mischief-making capability. There is, therefore, no room for complacency or inaction now.

Retrograde actions and use of force

It may be pertinent to remember that the JMB terror network had established several training centres in north and north-western Bangladesh. These training outfits have trained thousands who are reportedly waiting to see action. At present, there are daily reports of the previously committed horrendous acts of JMB operatives that show their authority and writ in those areas. They had the temerity to declare the activities of NGOs and cultural organisations illegal and at places did not allow the local people to observe national occasions. They compelled villagers to pay toll and grow beard. Virtually, they created a



The perpetrators of such attacks appear to be known now. So there should not be any hesitation to go after them.

Bangladesh: The perception outside

A K M SHAMSUDDIN

WILLIAM B Milam, former US Ambassador to Bangladesh is currently visiting Dhaka and giving a series of seminars. North South University and Centre for Democracy jointly organised such a seminar on the 15th instant where Ambassador Milam spoke on "US Perspectives on National Security, Peace, Governance and Development in South Asia." Currently a senior policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Centre at Washington, Mr. Milam started by quoting from his upcoming but yet un-titled book comparing Bangladesh and Pakistan, and he spoke from his notes too. Then there were a lot of interactions from the floor as well. Ambassador Milam's presentation and the animated discussion that followed can be summarized as under:

Post war Pakistan started off well, replacing a military government with a democratic one and having better indicators of progress. Political pundits, particularly the US, therefore, hedged their bets on Pakistan. Bangladesh, on the other hand, not only inherited a shattered

economy but had to start off in a state of deep shock and nerve shattering trauma, and naturally was branded a bottomless basket. Its leaning towards a socialistic system was not also acceptable to the western democracies.

India, because of its strong ties with the erstwhile USSR was not a darling of the western world either. Moreover, Pakistan was a strong component of the defence corridor around the communist block. Naturally, its dismemberment could not be a welcome reality to the anticommunist alliance. While the west took Pakistan as an ally against communism, Pakistan joined them for its defence against what it thought its only enemy -- India, although Pakistan maintained some kind of relationship with both USSR and China. The whole Muslim world was also leaning towards the west during that period.

Thirty-five years later, however, the dynamics are completely different now. Pakistan had to endure several military governments, its economic prospects did not come to fruition, and now it is unable to handle its ethnic diversity, rise of militancy and economic realities. Soviet block vanished in 1991 and

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communist China is vigorously pursuing capitalistic dreams.

Bangladesh succeeded in mending the tattered bottom, of its basket, establishing democracy, developing a conscious and active civil society, sustaining vibrant private entrepreneurship, and in making economic headway. Despite short term and intermittent instability, over a long term, Bangladesh progressed satisfactorily in economic, social, political and international arenas.

Come nine-eleven and our 20-20 vision suffered a twist. In the post cold war world there was harmony, trust and a mutually warm relationship among nations. Nine-eleven changed all that. The seed for this inevitable but tragic consequence was sown much before 1991 though. The Russian invasion of Afghanistan, covert funding of anti-Russian Islamite Taliban by the US and later US invasion of Afghanistan

are all a chain of events that may be called natural consequences of myopic political conventional wisdom.

During the middle of the last century (1950-1970) most young people from this region used to go to the west mostly for higher studies, and may be in some cases jobs. They used to bring back western culture and values to our society. This phenomenon, to a limited extent, materialised the aim of those who wanted to push us towards greater Islamisation. In the post independent period also this trend persisted.

During this period another phenomenon was developing and that was the huge need for cheap labor for the booming middle-eastern countries following the abnormal rise of oil prices. Many Bangladeshis, mostly of working class, found jobs in those countries.

Although the educated class from India and Pakistan also took jobs in the middle-east, Bangladeshi educated class was still looking west. Socialistic policy of the then government and the decreasing opportunity for the educated class to go to the west for higher studies started breeding frustration in the middle educated class. The working class on the other hand started importing middle-eastern culture home. Through their acquaintances funds started coming in for mosques and madrasas. Although not significantly overwhelming, this societal change made an infinitely small number of people ambitious otherwise.

Some of them, who even participated in some kind of wars abroad, thought that they might as well try to establish their brand of social philosophy -- call it in whatever name. The nine-eleven events gave a

boost to this class. It might be quite possible that those elements who want a weaker Bangladesh covertly helped these groups with materials and otherwise. Although initially these activities were by and large overlooked at home, the sad thing is that these incidents got external publicity in an out-of-proportion fashion. Bangladesh, slowly but steadily, started getting the label of "Islamic Extremism".

Books like, "Bangladesh -- the next Afghanistan?" and "God willing", etc. and articles of some scholars helped spread these perception globally. Neither our government, nor the media realized the gravity and the seriousness of the situation and did nothing about it. Milam's complaint was while above books and writings are painting a negative picture of Bangladesh abroad, the Bangladeshi intelligentsia is doing nothing. There is no rebuttal based

on well researched books or publications. Mere lip service or meek rejoinders would not wipe-off the perception that is building up around the globe about Bangladesh. Where are the hard facts to disprove the attempt to brand Bangladesh as a breeding ground for extremism and terrorism of whatever brand?

All these developments have also to be looked at from the perspective of the rise of conservatism globally. BJP came to power in India riding the 'Hindutva' band wagon. The Democratic Party in the US shed some of its welfare oriented stand-points, the policy difference between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party in the UK became blurred, governments in many other countries moved to the right, and of course there came 'reverend' George W Bush -- the savior. Theoretically therefore it could be possible that the extreme rightists in Bangladesh too saw the situation ripe to try it at. Fortunately the enlightened citizens of Bangladesh are always a step ahead in their wisdom and hence could foil whatever evil that came their way in the past and will do so in future as well.

We may argue, and rightly so,

that Ambassador Milam's view about the global perception of Bangladesh as a country breeding extremism is a betrayal of reality. But we cannot ignore his challenge to prove him wrong (and others too) with hard facts and well researched materials.

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Politicisation of administration: How much is enough?

ABMS ZAHUR

IT is most unfortunate for a democratic country when its administration is engaged in looking after mainly the interest of the ruling party or alliance and not of the people. In such a state, people are bound to lose interest in the affair of the country and political unrest starts increasing. At the same time, corruption and inefficiency also dominate. Do we not see such a situation in Bangladesh? In fact, nothing is working in Bangladesh even at the minimum acceptable level. Although we continue to hear about lots of achievements from the government.

It would not be just to put all the blames on the government. This desperate situation did not occur in a day. Weakening of administration started right from the beginning. Mujib government, by accepting the principle of 2-year ante-dated seniority to Mujibnagar employees as a reward to their patriotism rather dealt a blow to the morale of the employees who passed their days in great strain during the war of independence in Bangladesh. Some civil servants obtained unprecedented promotions or appreciations. Apart from Mujibnagar employees some close relation got unimaginable promotion (from a mere gazetted class II officer to that of the highly coveted additional secretary). Also we do not see any other reason for appointment of some known corrupt civil servants. If corrupt officials are placed at very critical positions, other civil servants naturally enough will feel encouraged to be less honest.

Even during Sheikh Hasina regime of 1996-2001 we saw enough politicisation. Regrettably, the said regime could not be benefited from such practice. The present regime of Khaleda, obviously, trust less on the older civil servants because of the sad experience of Janatar Mancha, a bureaucrat led rebellion of a group of government servants. Yet the present regime can hardly justify whimsical appointments of 150 officers for Election Commission from JCD cadres, or large scale promotion to the posts of additional/joint/deputy secretary ignoring seniority or appointments in certain high positions ignoring the recommendations of establishment division/cabinet sub-committee or unending extensions of contracts. These are certainly harmful for maintaining discipline in service.

A democratic government must express the will of the governed, that popularly elected representatives should have a major share of government, that the rule of law must regulate governmental procedure, that the governed should be informed of the decisions taken on their behalf. The very fact of the huge growth of public officials raises problems to which those principles give no direct answer.

Criteria such as accountability, responsibility, responsiveness or representativeness are held to be the appropriate standards implied by the values of democracy, to which public services must be kept offering a redefinition of public administration to include policy formulation. Those who believe that the policy-making functions of officials are insufficiently appreci-

Politicisation of administration to a certain extent may be tolerable. It is always wise to trust only few. Trusting too many may invite danger, the danger of inefficiency, corruption and betrayal. What is urgently needed is reform in administration and not politicisation so that the future bureaucracy can tackle successfully more and more complexities of administration.



The much talked about and criticised Janatar Mancha.

ated are more intent on developing the ideas of government expressing a basic popular will and a free flow of information between governors and the governed.

The public officials can exercise influence on decisions before they are made by giving advice of sifting information. The decision which is made may formally confer wide

discretionary powers on those who have to implement it, or such powers may be de facto come to exist because the decision is open to various interpretations.

The key condition for democratic administration is the existence of authoritative ways of instructing officials. The authoritative bodies in the United States are Congress and the President assisted by the central staff agencies and the courts. Limits are set in prescribing the tasks of administration which are made more real by specifying the nature of the organisation required and the finance available. Control over appointments, review and investigating procedures provide additional tolls for ensuring democratic administration.

There is considerable strength in the argument that there cannot be 'neutral administration'. Even if those who control officials are elected representatives. The results of persistent examination of the extent to which officials adhere to rules may very well be self-defeating, generating evasion, defensiveness and only minimally satisfactory performance. It is generally accepted that a responsible administrator is responsible both to public sentiment and to technical knowledge. Neither of these factors can be assured by decree. The commitment of the officials to democratic values is a more important safeguard for democracy than any formal system of control. Methods of

achieving this result includes a strong emphasis on professional competence and a recruitment policy which both selects persons of the right calibre and ensures that they have a ready sympathy for all sections of the community. In fact, professionalism and representativeness are expected to enhance public trust.

The modern public official is revealed as a paternalistic aristocrat. The public speaks, yet their formal system of control methods of achieving this result includes a strong emphasis on professional competence and a recruitment policy which both selects persons of the right calibre and ensures that their social background is such that they have a ready sympathy for all sections of the community. Professionalism and responsiveness are expected to enhance public trust and the result of this will be a decline in the demand for formal controls.

Max Weber suggested for 'partial self-government' in the service to inhibit public interference. To him the responsible administrator is one who is responsible both to public sentiment and to technical knowledge. Machiavelli urged the 'prince' to choose competent ministers, and to reward their fidelity so that they should not have to seek rewards from other services. Chinese administration was familiar with notions of seniority, merit ratings, official statistics and written reports.

It is generally assumed that though all men are members of interest groups a small number can see the interest of all. Democracy is held to be about this common interest. It has little to do with the locus of

political action. It is clear that the area of state action will continue to grow, that public officials will increase in numbers, that their calibre must always be improved because their decisions are becoming more complex. It is not the power of officials which presents a problem, but the way in which that power is used.

Like other democratic governments the Government of Bangladesh must express the will of the governed, that rule of law must regulate governmental procedure, that the governed should be informed of the decisions taken on their behalf. So far we have been seriously deprived of a good administration (not to speak of good governance). Politicisation of administration to a certain extent may be tolerable. The government must realise that despite swelling in the number of graduates every year it is difficult to find out good number of really good quality graduates in a highly politicised environment. It is always wise to trust only few. Trusting too many may invite danger, the danger of inefficiency, corruption and betrayal. What is urgently needed is reform in administration and not politicisation so that the future bureaucracy can tackle successfully more and more complexities of administration.

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