

BANGLADESH SCENARIO

Meeting the challenge of religious militancy

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It can no longer be business as usual or politics as usual. August 17 explosion of 500 time bombs at 350 targets in 63 out of 64 districts has changed all that.

The geographic expanse, meticulous planning and well-coordinated executions are comparable to military precision and proficiency. Selection of administrative headquarters, courts, banks and commercial areas as targets are significant.

Looking at it in totality, it will not be unreasonable to argue that it is not just a threat to national security, it is much more. The scale of operation amounts to a declaration of war against the state: the constitution, the democratic dispensation, the law making process and the judicial system.

Rhetoric will take us nowhere, but take the militants further ahead. The entire episode has to be put in a perspective. Truly this event has put Bangladesh at political cross roads, that of democracy and extremist Islam.

Militant organisation and strength

On August 17, there was no overt attempt to capture state power, true. But it may be showing only the tip of an iceberg. Their future actions are likely to unfold gradually according to their plan and their timings.

force. However, the base of recruitment is wide and the religious education is an open process. Media reported Kuwait based Revival of Islamic Heritage Society operating 800 mosques, madrasas and orphanages, each having 300 students or so.

How about the weapons? We have known about the recovery of nearly a hundred thousand-ball ammunitions, 10 truckloads of automatics, grenades, explosives and even antitank rockets and launchers.

About the organisation, its structure, its armaments and its political and military leadership—not much is known except few names. And some of these leaders are Islamic University and higher level madrasa educated people, both from home and abroad.

Islamic values Islam by itself is not a militant religion at all, though many see it that way. The truth is that any religion can be turned militant given the enabling environment.

Rise of militant Islam in Bangladesh is a recent phenomenon. It has both internal and external dimensions. A major external factor is creation of Israel as a theocratic state at a tremendous cost to the Arabs.

US policy of creating the Taliban and Saddam Hussein and later destroying them for oil and hegemony has caused the spread of militancy worldwide. It is really Samuel Huntington's clash of the Muslim and Christian civilisations or US policies and moves that are responsible?

These are difficult times, as difficult as the war times. War council or security council type of organisation will be needed. This is not the time to worry about the next election. Instead, the parties must put faith in the people. The ruling party has but one option -- breakup the alliance, put the blame of failure where it must. Keeping the Islamist alliance intact, no one can hope for opposition cooperation. Rather BNP's own existence could be at stake.



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recognised role in the USA, Hinduism in India, and still they are secular countries. How about the role and status of the Vatican in world politics? The point is, no believer can accept discrimination and dishonour of his religion.

Vulnerability of Bangladesh

Internally, over the decades, Bangladesh has become a weak state, a state vulnerable to militancy of any viable variety—religious or non-religious. Fundamental weaknesses are socio-economic: over population, abject poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, continuous price hike and underdevelopment.

Democracy has a hundred years of history in this region. Unfortunately, democratic values and practices have yet to grow its roots. There is a great divide among the democratic progressive forces. Basic to any democracy is rule of law. It is missing here. Policing system is breaking down.

elements of the alliance-government and cover up by them is commonly suspected.

The civil administration is politicised, serving party and not national interests. Even the higher judiciary is having a crisis of popular confidence. Party interests rule even here.

The election process has been corrupted by black money, muscle power and unethical official influence. The leadership it throws up fails to create a viable parliament. Practice of internal democracy within the parties is weak.

Government weaknesses

That is how in a nutshell, liberal Islam and liberal democracy are losing

ground to militant ideology, which is successfully building up its case against democracy, modern legislature and the judicial process—in one word, the constitution and its core values.

Underneath such a massive country-wide operation lies a high state of preparedness. Organisation and readiness of a large and well-trained force possibly matches military standards.

Since when are they at it? An informed guess could be that recruitment, weapon training, ideological motivation and education must have gone on for long. It takes about 10-12 years to prepare a child of madrasa-going age to become a good militant worker.

Primacy of party interests over national interests and unethical pursuit of power politics is a measure of weakness in our body politic. It is widely believed that the government is failing to deal with the bomb and grenade attacks, investigate, arrest the killers and uncover weapons and ammunition smuggling cases etc.

the next parliamentary elections. Here lies the major weakness of the government, which have been failing to take principled stand in public interest.

Recruitment, training and preparedness

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August 21, 2004 was a major operation and a milestone for them. Role of the police before, during and after remain suspect. Their aim possibly was to eliminate secularist democratic Awami League leadership and remove the party from the political scene for a long time.

Purpose of the militants

Groping in the dark about the militant's purpose is unnecessary. The overall scenario does point to a clear purpose: capture state power to make Bangladesh a Sharia based Islamic state having Wahabi core values.

Strategic factors

Geopolitical dimension of Bangladesh crisis has also to be borne in mind. Despite being small and poor, Bangladesh has a strategic position in the region. Bay of Bengal overlooks the eastern sea-lanes. It is in Bangladesh interest to maintain good neighbourly relations with SAARC countries and Myanmar.

It's not only Saudi or Kuwait influence—Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Syria and Iran all can impact on the rise of Islamic militancy some way or the other. Increase of international militancy may see proportional rise of internal militancy here. It was not so before.

Government inaction

How does one meet these challenges? It is a very intricate question. The leader of the opposition has proposed a set of reforms for free and fair elections. The government has not made any serious attempt to contact the main opposition.

number of militant organisations were not paid any attention to due to political considerations. Reportedly, Islamic partners sharing power have prevented the government from taking strong measures against Jamatul Mujahidin, Ahle Hadis Andolan Bangladesh, Harkatul Jihad, Jagrata Muslim Janata, Jamiat Ulamae Islam, Shahadate Hikma and so on.

Police is continuing business as usual, arrests and release and the people are getting worried. Only media is keeping the issue alive. Journalists will be coming under serious threat. Secular intellectual leaders, political activists, socio-cultural workers, civil societies, teachers, lawyers and so on will come under serious threat as well from the militants.

Meeting the challenge

The government alone cannot meet this gigantic challenge. The police, the intelligence, the military, cannot succeed by themselves. They will need bold political direction with unwavering commitment to safeguard the constitution and its values: the secular, progressive, democratic order.

The combination, to some, may sound odd. Bangladesh reality demands an ideology based on such thoughtful creative blend. Can the Four Party Alliance do that and salvage the nation from dire consequences? No, surely they need full support and cooperation of the opposition parties.

These are difficult times, as difficult as the war times. War council or security council type of organisation will be needed. This is not the time to worry about the next election. Instead, the parties must put faith in the people.

Opposition cooperation is essential, there is no other viable option. All those who matter in this country, all those who really love this country has this historic task—close ranks and unite the people to salvage our great traditions and values.

Maybe we still have time. Complacency, procrastination and political indecision will keep on increasing uncertainties and torturing the worried people and the thoughtful patriot. Nothing short of historic changes in the political scenario can assure the people of peace and progress in the country.

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Military occupations: Why they succeed or fail

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ONE of the more delusional arguments Bush acolytes peddled in 2002 about invading Iraq is that the US occupation would be a blessing for Iraqis as it was for Germans and Japanese post 1945.

Any middle aged Bangladeshi experiencing the delights of the Pakistani Occupation of 1971 could have told the Bushies that this expectation was a pipe dream.

And so it has come to pass. The US occupation has been a blistering experience for Iraqis and a searing one for Americans. Why did the Allied (read US) occupation of Germany and Japan succeed while the one in Iraq failed? In analyzing this subject, references to Bangladesh/Pakistan are also made to substantiate points.

Good vs Bad War

The heart of the matter is to adjudge the character of the 1939-1945 fighting. Germany and Japan launched wars of aggression, incurred international odium, lost the high moral ground and became perpetrators of a "bad" or unjust war.

after all, they had started the wars. By contrast, the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq was based on lies manipulated by an unprincipled US administration against extensive and intensive worldwide opposition. It was a "bad" or unjust war of aggression waged by militarily stronger parties against a weak foe.

This badness became evident after no WMDs were found the reason for invasion--and Bush started changing the war's rationale (fostering democracy; fighting terrorism, honouring the GIs sacrifice etc.) faster than you could cry "uncle."

Pakistan's occupation of Bangladesh in March 1971 was a one-off affair arising from the state's novel features. There, an ostensibly national army turned on the majority of its own citizens, lost their loyalty and became burdened with an illegitimate and unwinnable war.

Acceptance of Occupation

The vanquished population's acceptance of enemy occupation is correlated to the magnitude of defeat incurred. Utterly devastated Germany and Japan surrendered unconditionally to the Allied Powers in May 1945 and August 1945, respectively. Their scale of defeat forced the Germans and Japanese to conclude that their survival depended on the Allies' goodwill, accept the Occupation as a necessary evil and cooperate with the occupiers.

a Nazi redoubt in alpine Bavaria manned by "werewolves" (fanatic Nazis and Hitler Youths) was a chimera.

In Japan, imperial army soldiers with fixed bayonets on their backs to the road lined the route of the first planeload of US soldiers that landed in Tokyo to begin the Occupation.

The US and Japan have the dubious distinction of being the only countries with a "nuker" / "nukee" relationship. (Eisenhower considered using nukes in Vietnam in 1954 to save the French at Dien Bien Phu and Kennedy against PRC in the event of another India-China war after 1962).

The conventional war in Iraq lasted just over three weeks, with not much physical damage since the US wanted to be able to use those assets after Occupation. What's surprised the Bushies in particular, and the world in general, is the resistance by the Iraqis not known for their military prowess--against the US military Occupation that has dented Washington's ability to impose its will.

This performance is especially noteworthy as Iraq's flat terrain is not really suitable for partisan warfare. The resisters lack any worthwhile muscular state sponsor or sanctuary, two inputs, apart from motivation, considered essential to wage prolonged resistance. The validity of this conclusion isn't diminished by the resistance now targeting largely the foot-soldiers of the Americans Iraqi collaborators

and, at one remove, GIs when they design to venture on patrol from their heavily protected bases.

The Pakistan Army's crackdown on 26 March 1971 was a nasty affair. Islamabad was able to reestablish its control by end-April. But this was a Pyrrhic victory. It set the stage for a war of national liberation.

Exit Strategy

Where the occupier and occupied agree on and share a common external threat, the conditions for a successful occupation are enhanced, especially if the countries concerned are important geographically.

Thus, most Germans and Japanese regarded the USSR as a serious threat, willingly embraced the Americans security umbrella and tolerated the Occupation. The Bundeswehr and Self-Defence Forces made Germany and Japan armed front-line states in the Cold War. Japan became the base from which the US fought the Korean War.

The reconstruction of both these countries was facilitated by their large stock of knowledgeable and skilled manpower which lessened the costs of Occupation. Despite becoming sovereign nations, Germany and Japan still host large numbers of GIs. No threat scenario similar to the one perceived by Bonn and Tokyo existed for Iraq. In fact, Washington was the external threat as far as Baghdad was concerned. The US made its hostility to Iraq quite open

with debilitating sanctions and intrusive inspections under UN auspices.

Most Iraqis consider that the main reason US invaded is because it covets Iraq's oil especially its huge reserves. Getting back at an Arab state and, at one remove, Muslims for 9/11 and making things even safer for Israel are other factors.

That the Iraqis, out of sheer self-respect if nothing else, would resist the US Occupation was inevitable. But Iraq resistance's defining characteristic is that the majority of Iraqis/Shias and Kurds--are tacitly cooperating with the US to reclaim their country back from the invaders.

Washington is complicit in this exit strategy, boxed as it is into a corner and tarnished by the smelly odour of a "bad" war.

Thus, unlike Bangladesh or Vietnam, Iraqi resistance is not quite like a conventional war of national liberation. It's a project driven mainly by Sunnis inspired as much by patriotism as by the actual and prospective loss of privileges and status as the ruling class.

This has sharply polarized Iraq into contentious ethnic and sectarian factions as manifested in the ongoing fight over the draft constitution. The prospect exists that a federal Iraq with an anemic centre will emerge from the ashes of US invasion that will be radically different from Saddam's unitary state. Whether such an Iraqi state sticks together, becomes a de facto confederation or breaks up into

three parts remains to be seen. Iraq is essentially a construct manufactured at the Versailles Peace Conference of 1919 by the imperialist Europeans.

Since its present structure, like the former Yugoslavia, doesn't have natural sanctity, none of these possibilities can be ruled out. If Iraq like Yugoslavia were to disintegrate, it would be ironic indeed that an edifice built by British colonialism was torn asunder by its transatlantic cousin, American imperialism, and that too with help from London.

Whatever outcome eventually emerges may not be entirely displeasing to US (or Israel, for that matter) since it'll keep the Iraqis looking inwards for many years to come, and give Washington (and Tel Aviv) plenty of opportunity to fish in troubled waters, especially amongst Kurds.

For example, expect talks on the reactivation of the Mosul/Haifa oil pipeline, built in early 1930s but closed since 1948, to start in due course, particularly if a de facto independent Kurdistan is established.

But whether the new cartography will make the Americans more palatable or acceptable in the ME and what kind of legacy this will leave for Bushies very much up in the air. In Pakistan, Islamabad's civil and military rulers' had an abysmally poor knowledge of history. This is evident from their inept and inapt policies over many years and especially in 1971. Their cumulative impact was to

drive the conservative and pious Bengali Muslims whose predecessors one defining experience was the exploitation at the hands of the Hindu landed and professional elite into the arms of Delhi and generated forces that split Pakistan.

It's a moot point whether a small but influential section of Pakistan's ruling military junta together with its civilian allies concluded by 1971 that things had reached such a pass between the two wings that a breakup of the country would be in West Pakistan's basic interests.

This would avoid a flow of resources from west to east and make Pakistan's nightmarish security problem more coherent and thereby better manageable. Circumstantial and anecdotal evidence points to this possibility but hard or empirical data are lacking. This is a subject that awaits further historical research.

But if this hypothesis has any validity, then Niazi's surrender on 16 December 1971 would seem to suggest that Dhaka experienced a sense of liberation and Islamabad a feeling of relief from a stifling relationship that had degenerated into unremitting bickering.

Summing Up

Military occupations are undertaken to secure the occupying powers interests and to prevent the occupied territory becoming a source of instability. The goals of the occupiers may be nation building, fostering democracy or promoting free market economies but these remain

subordinate to security considerations.

Fighting a "just" war and extensive devastation that breaks the will of the vanquished populations promote resigned even willing acceptance of the occupation, especially when the subjugated share or acquiesce in a common external threat.

Measures to promote economic reconstruction at first under direct rule and later through local proxies can yield favourable results and form the basis of an exit strategy provided they are carried out over a fairly long duration. A major factor contributing to a successful occupation is the skill levels of the occupied population that reduces the burden on the occupiers.

These factors were present in Germany and Japan. Hence, US military occupation was successful in those countries.

Because these factors were conspicuous by their absence in Iraq, the American occupation there has not achieved all the goals the Bush Administration had set for itself. In that sense, the US occupation of Iraq is a failure.

This outcome is in keeping with the historical record. More occupations fail than succeed.

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