

# Super-national Islamic fundamentalism?

AHM KISHOWAR HOSSAIN

WHILE the origin of the term "fundamentalism" has a fairly simple history, the movement itself has a more confused origin. There was no individual founder, nor was there a single event that precipitated its advent. Fundamentalism is nothing but a continuation of religious orthodoxy. In Christianity, fundamentalism flourished for three centuries after Christ, went underground for twelve hundred years, surfaced again with the Reformation in West Europe, took its knocks from various sources, and was alternately prominent or diminished in its influence and visibility. In short, fundamentalism always has been the Christian remnant; the faithful who remain after the rest of Christianity has fallen into apostasy.

Islamic revivalism is not a new phenomenon. It dates back, at least, to Imam Muhammad Ghazali (1058-1111). The term "Islamist" in a broad sense can encompass three quite different categories of people. Included in the first category are apolitical groups or individuals, including clerics and jurists, or their lay followers, whose activities are limited to seminary schools, mosques, and other religious institutions. This group's main concerns are religious. Apart from innumerable Sunni clerics, the majority of Shi' clerics in Iran and Iraq historically fall into this category. They are normally referred to as "quietists." Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Kazim Shariatmadari, a member of this group, declared that clerics were beyond politics and they should not involve themselves in the running of the state.

The second category of Islamists is Islamic liberal reformers. These individuals try to reform their societies according to precepts of Islam and at the same time to adjust Islam to needs of modern times. In

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The face of super-national Islamic fundamentalism?

contemporary Iran, Ayatollah Taleghani and Mehdi Bazargan's Freedom Movement present good examples of Islamist reformers.

Finally, the third category of Islamists covers the fundamentalists. These are all new movements, with almost no precedent in the Islamic world, with the exception of the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia. Included in this category are the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and in other Muslim countries; Jama'at Islami in India and Pakistan; Velayet-e-Faqih and Khomeinism in Iran; the Hezbollah and Hamas movements in Lebanon and the Palestine; the National Islamic Front in Sudan; the Taliban in Afghanistan; and the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria. Participants in these movements felt threatened by the erosion in their countries of traditional beliefs and practices and the growing cultural

influence of the West, and attempted to mobilise the Muslim masses around these issues.

The notion of a pan-Islamic movement, which aims to recreate the *ummah*, can be said to be consistent with traditional Muslim theology. The ultra-traditional Sunnis' emphasis on the implementation of the *shariat* as the only criterion for the Islamic state is another example. In this mind-set, national boarder means little. On the whole, today's Islamists have a clear political agenda, one which by necessity involves state power. But despite their claim to being super-national, most of the Islamist movements have been shaped by national particularities; sooner or later they tend to express either the interests of the national ruling class or the masses' desire for national self-determination. They want a share of political power. Indeed,

where they have become more significant players in domestic opposition, governments in the region, secular and Muslim, have tended to implement a policy of "official Islamisation" in order to undercut the Islamist opposition. In Pakistan, various *shariat* bills were passed by parliament in the late 1970 and 1980s; the 1984 Family Law in Algeria reintroduced some *shariat* elements; in Turkey, religious teachings were again made compulsory in schools in 1983. All these states attempted to co-opt the *ulamas* and assert an official (state-controlled) Islamisation via, for instance, the appointment of an official *mufti* or a state council of religious affairs.

On the other hand, relatively stateless international networks like al-Qaeda, despite their attention-grabbing attacks, are actually marginal in world politics. Domestically, they have little impact inside the main Middle Eastern countries. Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network does not have social base. Unlike Hizbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in Palestine, it does not challenge for leadership of the masses' aspiration for national liberation.

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Any fundamentalist group holds three common characteristics. These are, anti-modernity, anti-democracy, and anti-feminism. The fundamentalist are against the ideas and ideals of modernity but they are not against the products of modernisation. So, there is a clear dilemma among fundamentalists. Fundamentalists are anti-democracy by virtue of their exclusionary stance. But some fundamentalist parties participate in democratic process, for example Jama'at Islami in India and Pakistan, others do not. There are different views about democracy among fundamentalist groups. So, common Muslims are easily confused about their ideologies.

Fundamentalists share a common sense of threat from changes in gender relations, triggered by the spread of modernism and feminism. Muslim women are now progressing in the modernisation process and many Muslim clerics help to do so. The perfect examples are Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Turkey, Egypt, and Islamic countries in Europe. Since fundamentalists cannot firmly establish their basic three elements -- anti-modernity, anti-democracy, anti-feminism -- they may not be able to create a super-national or Pan-Islamic movement.

Terrorist actions can exact a painful price from western oppressors and help the terrorist organisations gain popularity for a time. But this just conceals the fact that these groups do not have a political program for fundamental change. The actions may temporarily raise the morale of the oppressed, but the masses soon succumb again to the reality of poverty and oppression and have to suffer the reprisals.

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# Time to take crisis seriously

Let there be not even the slightest doubt in anybody's mind about the fact that the country is in great danger. It is high time for all of us to wake up and resist these extremist groups who are out to drag us to the medieval age and destroy not only our already fragile economy, democracy, and social fabric, but also the image of Islam.

CAPT. HUSSAIN IMAM

ON July 1, 2003, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia told the parliament that no al-Qaeda men existed in Bangladesh. On September 6, 2003, in a conference of the Ulemas, she declared that there were no fundamentalists or zealots in the country, and ever since then, she and her government have been persistently telling the nation that the talk of fundamentalists or Islamic extremists having roots or gaining strength in the country was nothing but propaganda and conspiracy by the opposition parties, mainly the Awami League, supported by the media, to defame the image of her government as well as that of the country.

Now, after the August 17 serial bomb blasts at as many as 459 points in 63 out of 64 districts of the country in a most planned and precise manner, what has the Prime Minister to say? Would it be too unkind or harsh to say that the Prime Minister was not telling the truth? Knowingly or unknowingly she was misleading the nation. In either case, as head of the government, she has to take the full responsibility.

It is now proved beyond doubt that the reports by local as well as foreign media of possible existence of religious extremist groups and sharp rise of fundamentalism in Bangladesh were not baseless as had been continuously claimed by BNP-Jamaat coalition Govt. to suit their strategic stand in the game of power politics. According to media reports, as many as 30 religious militant organisations have set up their network across the country with the central objective of establishing an Islamic state based

on sharia law. By their own claim they have some 10 lakh members all over the country, and according to intelligence reports 80,000 of them have training in arms and explosives. Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, one such group, only recently banned by the government for subversive activities using religious sentiment, has now struck.

Let there be not even the slightest doubt in anybody's mind about the fact that the country is in great danger. It is high time for all of us to wake up and resist these extremist groups who are out to drag us to the medieval age and destroy not only our already fragile economy, democracy, and social fabric, but also the image of Islam as a religion of peace, harmony, and brotherhood. Let there be no illusion in anybody's mind that BNP, having partners like Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikya Jote in their coalition government, will or can take effective measures to prevent these terrorist groups from striking again or to stem the rise of fundamentalism in the country.

Jamata Islami, the principal partner in the BNP-led coalition government, now denies having any knowledge of these extremist groups, let alone admitting to having connection with them, whereas according to the recently conducted investigation report of The Daily Star, many of the JMB and JMJB cadres were in the past members of Islamic Chitra Shibir, the student front of Jamaat-e-Islami, not to mention Maolana Farid Uddin Masud, former Islamic Foundation director, now detained for suspected involvement in the August 17 bomb blasts, pointing fingers to the leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami.

The leaders of Islami Oikya Jote,

another partner of the BNP in its coalition government, made no secret of their intention. They told a public meeting as early as in 1999: "We are for Osama (bin-Laden) and we are for the Taleban. Bangladesh would become Afghanistan." And on March 1 this year they declared their intention of staging Islamic revolution through the Quomi madrasas.

Mr. Abdul Hannan, former press counsellor, Bangladesh UN mission in New York, in his article titled Keep the Wolf Far Hence (Daily Star, Aug 24) wrote: "The nation is confronted with a challenge. It is a choice between democracy and theocracy. What is needed at this critical time is concerted and collective response by the government, the opposition, the civil society, and the public to confront and pre-empt the crisis."

No patriotic and democratic-minded sensible citizen can disagree with him. I would only like to add a few lines. Dialogue between the mainstream political parties with civil society working as a moderator would probably be the best option to overcome this crisis.

The objective of such a dialogue would be to achieve a broad-based consensus on the following: (a) to apprehend and bring to justice those who have masterminded and executed this attack, (b) to legislate a ban on religion based politics, (c) to reform the entire election system including the caretaker government, and (d) stepping down of the coalition government to pave the way for an early free and fair election, if need be, under the supervision of the UN.

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# Is migration inevitable?

MD ZAHIRUL ISLAM

THE buzzword "immigration" has been playing a pioneering role in the socio-economic order of the country, primarily from the 1980s, though its importance remains paramount today. The term "immigration" was formalised most probably from the time when Christopher Columbus accidentally discovered the present-day America while searching for the Indian subcontinent. From the time of his discovery the new world, billions of people have been migrating across the whole world.

In the sphere of migration, a remarkable matter is the recent trend of emigration from the East to the West. The West, with its proportionately low population density, high economic growth, decent law and order situation, social safety net, developed and modern infrastructure, and so on, has been appealing to the people of the East, who are, both at national and marginal levels, squeezed between innumerable cruxes including unfulfilled elementary needs, deteriorating law and order situation, lack of social security, appalling unemployment crisis, etc.

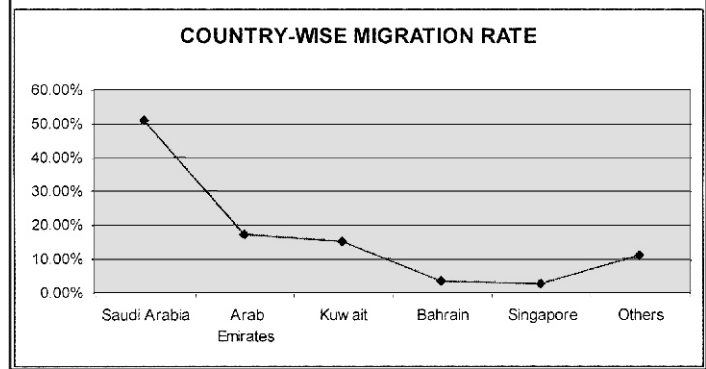
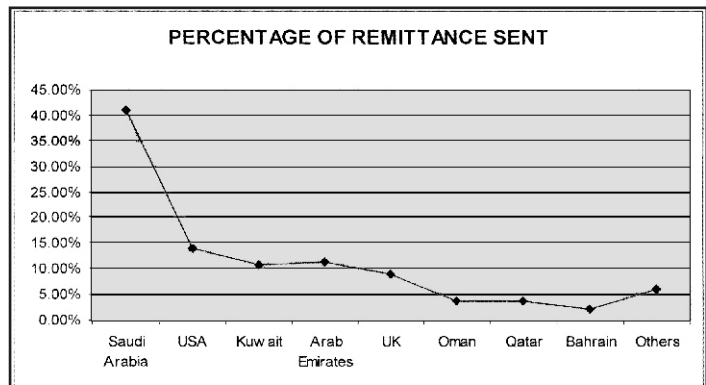
Not until a number of highly educated and consequently skilled fortune-hunters started emigrating to the West progressively in the 1980s had the recent inclination to emigrate been so popular among the highly educated strata of society. Before this, migration was fashionable mostly among people from uneducated or underprivileged socio-economic and familial milieu. Many critics may raise a question: what, in fact, happened in the 1980s that made migration so popular.

Until the 1980s, the socio-economic trend of Bangladesh was austerity-based. Most people at the marginal level were, on average, satisfied with what they had and what they could earn. Very few people were more ambitious, unable to eke out their earnings. But the flutter of globalisation created such a generation-gap between the preceding and the following generations that the new generation began to be more and more ambitious as well as unsteady -- which impelled it to abandon itself to a spendthrift attitude.

One should not deem workforce-export and migration as the same thing. The process of workforce-export is, in fact, not such a significant matter that can influence the incumbent socio-economic order by any means, whilst the process of "migration" can do that. Although almost all the sojourners -- more or less -- tend to contribute to the country's economy by remittance, yet, the exported workforces are weightier than the emigrants are in this sphere.

Exported workforces are those who have gone to foreign countries -- especially to the Middle East -- just temporarily, paid not too much in comparison with their average

Irrespective, both in legal and illegal ways, even bearing life-threatening risks, many fortune-hunters are nowadays desperate to emigrate. Austerity-based patriotism practiced by the foregoing generation, especially during the 1960s to 1970s, is now trounced by ambitious fortune-hunters of the prevailing new generation, for whom their own aspirations are more valuable than the hollow chauvinistic shibboleths of the past.



earning possibilities in Bangladesh, while emigrants are, in contrast, those who have settled down in the industrialised countries. The latter category has, no doubt, been coining a snobbish trend throughout the entire socio-economic order of the country, notwithstanding playing an imperative role in the country's economy.

Whether remittance is popular is, no doubt, a dilemma we may often be confronted with. Statistics express that remittance has been playing an affirmative role in the country's economy. The Bangladesh Economic Survey, 2005 states that the remittance sent from foreign countries to Bangladesh in the fiscal year 2003-04 amounted to \$3.372 billion, while it amounted to \$3.197 billion up to April 2005 in the fiscal year 2004-05. The following diagrams may, however, express an overall illustration of remittance sent to Bangladesh from several countries in the fiscal year 2003-04 and country-wise migration rate in 2004.

The first diagram shows that in the fiscal year 2003-04 the highest amount of foreign currency came to Bangladesh from Saudi Arabia (41 percent). Although the next position belongs to the US (14 percent), yet the difference is noteworthy. In contrast, the UK, in which the Bangladeshi emigrants are assumed to be living with great influence, has a very small contribution in the sphere of remittance (9 percent only). The

emigrants not only in the UK but also in all other industrialised countries (e.g. Canada, Australia, Japan, and so on) too seem to be playing just a trifling role in sending foreign currency to Bangladesh. Except for the US and UK, no other industrialised countries have even been individually presented in the above-referenced economic survey; they may be included in "Others" category. On the contrary, the second diagram also shows that in 2004 the greatest number of migrants went to Saudi Arabia (51 percent), Arab Emirates (17 percent), and Kuwait (15 percent), not presenting individually how many migrants, in fact, emigrated to the industrialised countries.

Sending foreign currency is deemed as the leading contribution of the emigrants. As both "balance of trade" and "balance of payment" have always been against Bangladesh because of its hard-up financial condition, the Taka has also been always undervalued. Consequently, whatever amount of foreign currency is remitted to Bangladesh turns to be a remarkable amount, which enables the emigrants to lead a showy lifestyle while they are visiting Bangladesh. Even a blue-collar worker serving abroad can earn much more than a white-collar worker serving in Bangladesh can, because of the poor quality of the Taka in comparison with foreign currencies.

Among emigrants, the blue-collar workers, no doubt, outnumber the



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white-collar workers. Yet, the inclination of emigration has been increasing continuously. Here a question may rise: why this is happening. The answer is implied in the tug-of-war between austerity and snobbery, which started via petrodollars coming from the Middle East and is now institutionalised as well as intellectualised in the new economic world order now run by the Western bloc. The more days are passing, the more snobbish human lifestyles are becoming. Unlike in the past, most people, at present, can no longer remain satisfied with what they have already had and what they can earn, as they now can realise that they are living in an outstandingly opulent world, of a kind that would have hardly even been imagined just a few years ago. The sumptuous lifestyles of various developed countries are now brought into everyone's homes, since by dint of the extreme amelioration of knowledge, science, and technology -- especially of information technology -- the different regions of the globe are today more closely interlinked than they have ever been.

Only statistical calculations, of course, cannot present how much Bangladesh indeed gains from migration. The direct contribution that Bangladesh gains from migration is remittance, which increases and/or stabilises the reserve of foreign currencies. Remittance is obviously a popular contribution with some unpopular consequences. Anyone cherishing

a positive outlook toward migration as well as remittance may soliloquise about the unpopular consequences of remittance. One cannot but ponder remittance just as a statistical contribution, if one mulls over the non-economic elements emerging from remittance, which manipulates the

country's socio-economic condition. For instance, first, remittance, regardless of its contribution to the reserve of foreign currency, plays an inextricable function in augmenting inflation. Second, remittance may be liable for hurting the socio-economic stability of the country, owing to the substantial difference in value between Taka and foreign currencies. Third, remittance has been fashioning a snobbish trend in the socio-economic orderliness.

Nevertheless, the more days are passing, the more interested people from various quarters are becoming in migration, as we have, in the Third World, been living in a condition beleaguered with incredible paucity and deprivation, unfulfilled elementary needs, infringement of rudimentary political freedoms as well as of basic socio-economic liberties, and so on.

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# Advantage to Koizumi

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WHEN Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi dissolved the lower house of the Japanese Diet on August 4 and called snap elections, analysts were puzzled by this bold step, as he went ahead with the decision despite strong opposition from senior party members. Many thought the step suicidal, as in recent years the main ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was increasingly losing ground, particularly in urban Japan, giving way mostly to the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

As a result, it was an obvious calculation many resorted to that the Prime Minister was handing over a precious gift to the leadership of the DPJ. It was more because the main issue surrounding the dissolution of the lower house was postal reform, a matter that affects directly the well-being of rural Japan, the traditional support base of the LDP. Moreover, the rebellion within the LDP had virtually split the party, which too was seen by many as an important factor for the opposition to gain most out of the untimely election.

But as the people Japan are getting ready to cast their ballots in one of the most significant elections in recent years, it is becoming clearer that the gamble Koizumi had taken by calling snap elections at a difficult time is probably going to bring hefty benefits for him. Japan watchers are as a result deeply confused by the possible outcome, and pondering over the important question of what made Koizumi sound so magical that he not only was able to liquidate the threat of rebellion within the party, but also could successfully corner his main rival the DPJ, to the extent that the main opposition's own existence now might come under serious scrutiny.

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the LDP. Japan's two right-wing conservative parties of the early 1950s, the Democrats and the Liberals, decided to merge their parties in an effort to counter the growing popularity of the Socialists and formed the Liberal Democratic Party in 1955. Ever since, the party has been in power, with the exception of a brief period spanning less than a year in 1993, when a coalition of other parties formed a government that did not last for long. Subsequently LDP regained its position of power by forming coalitions, first with the Social Democratic Party of Japan, and then with Komeito, a political party closely associated with the lay Buddhist organisation known as

CLOSE UP JAPAN

Despite creating a deep rift within the party by his high-handed attitude in dealing with the dissidents, Koizumi now looks not only capable of filling the vacuum of those who left the party by winning over support from the opposition DPJ, but also seems to be heading towards a victory that would allow him to depend less on the junior coalition partner.

Soka Gakkai. The second coalition is still functioning, not only in the process of forming the government, but also in the electoral contest as well.

This past scenario gives a clear picture of the influence of LDP in Japanese politics. Holding the position of power for half a century in an advanced democracy itself can be considered a record. If we include the period when Democrats and Liberals alternated power sharing in post war Japan until 1955, then the span moves further to engulf virtually the whole post World War II period.

Traditionally this was made possible due to the party's expansion of support base in rural Japan. While LDP's main rival was busy expanding its support base in industrial belts with the idea of winning support of the working class, LDP systematically initiated land reform policy that benefited farmers and rural population who eventually became the main pillars of the party's strongholds throughout the country.

In urban centres, the party targeted the middle class who benefited most out of its policy of economic growth. The set-up of this support base for the ruling and the opposition camps in Japan continued until the busting of Japan's bubble economy in late 1980s that exposed the shaky foundation of the country's economic might. Since then the LDP has been gradually losing support in urban Japan, particularly among the middle class, who were hit hardest by the declining economy that saw an increase in jobless rate and a sharp fall in land, property, and stock prices. The period also coincided with the massive increase in the number of urban population. Rural Japan, on the other hand, started to feel the effects of depopulation. The situation was supposed to give a big boost to the position of Japan's opposition political parties. But this didn't happen for several reasons.

First, Japan's political opposition throughout the Cold War period was dominated by the prominence of the Socialist Party of Japan. Other smaller opposition parties like the Communist Party of Japan and Komeito were largely confined within their limited support bases, the limited support that they still enjoy. The end of the Cold War and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union dealt a severe blow to the ideological footings of the Socialists, and the party, by failing to address various issues during the crucial transitional period, has eventually been marginalised to the extent that it could win only four seats in the last general election.

Many of its prominent members left the party and joined hands with the deserters from the LDP to form a new party in 1993 that briefly came to power under the leadership of Morihiro Hosokawa. The deserters from two of Japan's largest political groups are trying since then to form a viable opposition capable of dislodging the LDP from its position of power. But the rift within the leadership as well as rank and file of newly emerging opposition blocks, of which DPJ is the latest version, after going through several earlier attempts, remains as wide as ever, and hence they have so far failed to prove that they represent a viable opposition capable of running the country more efficiently than the ruling coalition.

Second, on several crucial issues, most importantly on the issue of postal privatisation the merits of which Koizumi is trying relentlessly to convince people of, the DPJ has failed miserably to provide an alternative. The party in effect supports the privatisation, but failed to convince people why in that case it opposed the bills in the Diet. The result is a gradual shifting of public opinion, particularly of those undecided voters who were earlier tilting towards the DPJ, to the Koizumi camp.

Koizumi, on the other hand, has successfully proved himself to be one of the greatest manipulators in Japanese politics in recent days. Despite creating a deep rift within the party by his high-handed attitude in dealing with the dissidents, he now looks not only capable of filling the vacuum of those who left the party by winning over support from the opposition DPJ, but also seems to be heading towards a victory that would allow him to depend less on the junior coalition partner.

According to various opinion polls, LDP is almost set to win a majority in the lower house. The biggest loser will no doubt be the main opposition DPJ, which, according to predictions, might lose as many as 20 seats.

This would no doubt put Japan's largest opposition into the process of new soul searching, which might lead to another stage of trial and error, delaying further the emergence of a true democratic atmosphere in Japan, in which an alteration of parties in power allows voters, at least overtly, to think that they are an essential component of the political game.