

# The rise of Islamist extremism

## Are mainstream Muslims blameless?

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

THE country is finally awakening to the reality of Islamist extremism. To be sure we still hear a Government minister saying that the August 17, 2005 bombings were not "such a big deal". We also heard an "intellectual" saying the other day that the extremists who were behind the bomb attacks had as much right to extremism as those of our countrymen who fought for liberation of the country in 1971. One can never be sure that these statements can be dismissed merely as an expression of political expediency, in the first case, or crass idiosyncrasy, in the second. Nevertheless, after years of denial, the political establishment has finally acknowledged that Islamist extremism existed in the country. Never before have we seen such an emergence of consensus on the threat the extremists pose.

This of course has not been followed by a consensus on what to do to meet the extremist threat. The differences of approach to the problem go beyond the existing political blame game that by itself can seriously weaken any resolve to fight Islamist extremism. It has been suggested, for example, that while the problem is real, it is fairly easily containable. For one thing, it has been argued, that the soil of Bangladesh is not fertile enough for a sustainable growth of extremism; the present spate of violence will die down. The argument amounts to little more than wishful thinking, but it has been made and I believe the view is fairly widely shared. Others recognize the problem but feel that strengthened law enforcement is all that is needed. Yet others have been less sanguine and have felt that the threat of extremists is serious enough to call for extraordinary anti-terrorist measures such as setting up of a "war council". In general, the present surge of extremism has so far been seen as a law and order problem. I think this is a grave error of judgment. To combat Islamist extremism, we need to look at the roots of the problem. Going to the roots may sound like a cliché, but we can do with this one.

Terrorism and violence, like just about anything else, do not grow out of thin air. They need an environment to thrive. I believe 'mainstream' Muslims themselves supply an important part of that environment. This would almost certainly raise a

huge number of eyebrows. But it is time we talked about the issue.

First, I need a working definition of 'mainstream' Muslim. While I accept that no definition can be fully satisfactory here, by a 'mainstream' Muslim I mean someone who believes in one God, Koran and His Prophet (pbuh) even if he, or she, does not always abide by all that He has ordained. He prays daily, even if not five times a day, prescribed by the holy books. He normally goes to the mosque for the Friday congregation. He is expected to fast during the month of Ramadan. He spends for charity, even if what he spends may not add up to the proportion of his wealth that he is supposed to spend under the rules of *zakat*. He considers a once in a lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca an obligation, even though he often finds arguments to avoid it as long as he can. He is reverential to religious leaders and listens to their

had been at bay. Ordinary Muslims do not go about killing people.

Yet mainstream Muslims bear a large share of responsibility for the surge of Islamist terrorism. In many cases this may be unwitting, an act of omission rather than commission; the consequences, nevertheless, are the same. The culpability of mainstream Muslims derives largely from their lack of will or power to openly ask searching questions in matters of religion. This is perhaps the most important factor that creates an environment where Islamist extremism thrives. There surely are instances of exceptional individual heterodoxy. But a large majority of Muslims do not make searching inquiries in matters of religion or challenge dogma. Their equanimity and reticence have some major ramifications.

Take, for instance, the sermons he hears in the local mosque, at the

It is important to examine some of the ways the critical spirit is thwarted, and fanaticism spread, and see where the mainstream Muslim stands. It has of late been recognised that *madrasas*, or religious schools, have been a potent breeding ground for religious hatred and intolerance. The Taliban in Afghanistan were actually the eponymous *madrasa* students, mostly raised in Pakistan. This is an obvious example, an extreme one too. But tens of thousands of these *madrasas* are scattered across the Islamic world and they certainly do not spread the message of tolerance to dissent or of universal brotherhood. Yet Muslims in general do not speak against the spread of *madrasa* education, though there has been some criticism from them in recent times. It looks as if it is a matter of impiety to criticize *madrasa* education

On the other hand, the role of the

from the mosques in many parts of the Muslim world, including Dhaka and elsewhere in the country. But the tilt to religious fundamentalism has continued in parallel with, if not independently of, loud rhetoric. It has been quietly achieving what rousing sermons may not always have been able to do: the closing of the mind to critical inquiry and rational thinking.

And the very same mosques attended by the extremists are also the ones that mainstream Muslims attend. Extremists do not have mosques of their own. They share the house of God with other Muslims. These Muslims do not protest fiery speeches and the prospective young fanatic does not hear the protest. They do not question the orthodoxy and Muslim youths do not hear the question. The passivity of mainstream Muslims is not born simply of fear of retribution, though such fear may be real enough in some cases. An important reason why they

other communities around the world. If the extremist thinks in the circumstance that he has the support of the mainstream Muslim, the latter is not entirely without blame.

In his equanimity as a Muslim, the mainstream Muslim often ignores the danger signs which should have told him to stop, think and talk. It is hardly conceivable that the scores or so of the extremists who planted the 500 bombs throughout Bangladesh in August this year did not pray in the same local mosque where other Muslims prayed hours or days before the attacks. They may even have rubbed shoulders against each other as they stood in serried ranks before God the Merciful. The mainstream Muslims might not have known about extremist designs but they must have known the fundamentalist streak that the extremist proudly show. But they never talked to each other in any meaningful way. Mainstream Muslims never drew the fundamentalists into a debate about their ideas, ideologies, and the reasons for their rage.

Clandestine activities designed for violence and terror cannot long survive in open societies. And an open society is one where people ask question, inquire into things long taken for granted, and where sacred cows are few and far between. It is time mainstream Muslims left their reticence behind and worked towards creating a truly open society. The longer they postpone it, the more likely will it be that extremists will triumph.

This is not to suggest that a dihard core of Islamist extremists cannot create havoc in almost any society. The danger from terrorists who are willing to kill themselves in order to kill others for what they consider true Islam is all too real. The danger increases in a world where, like most other phenomena, extremism is globalised and local forces of terror can count on support from rich and powerful allies abroad. Neither should one underestimate the ability of a determined band of Islamist political activists to exploit people's religious susceptibilities to achieve their objective. Nonetheless, we can ignore only at our peril the responsibility of mainstream Muslims for the present upsurge of extremism in the country, and the role they can play in combating it.

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# The matchless month of Ramadan

KAZI AULAD HUSSAIN

BY Ramadan we mean the month of self-purification. In the Islamic calendar the eighth lunar month of Shaban reminds the Muslims all over the world the advent of the glorious month of Ramadan. The month of Ramadan begins immediately after the expiry of the month of Shaban. And why it is called a month of self-purification? How a Muslim can purify himself? How self-purification is possible during this holy month of Ramadan? Yes self-purification is certainly possible through meticulous observance of Siam or Fasting for full thirty days from dawn to dusk during Ramadan.

Now the pertinent question is why the Muslims are required to fast for full thirty days during the month of Ramadan? "Siam", it may be mentioned here, is one of the five "Rokons" (pillars) of the grand edifice of Islam. And of the five pillars position of "Siam" is second just after "Salat", that is formal 5-time daily prayers. In this context we may refer to Ayats (Verse) 183 and 184 of Sura Baqara or the Heifer of the holy Qur-an. In these two Ayats Almighty Allah declares:

Ayat 183: "O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed as it was prescribed to those before you, that you may (learn) self-restraint."

Ayat 184: "Fasting for a fixed number of days, but if any one of you is ill or on a journey, the prescribed number (should be made up) from days later. For those who can do it (with hardship) is a ransom the feeding of one that is indigent. But he that will give more of his free will, it is better for him. And it is better for you that ye fast, if ye only knew."

Siam or Fasting in the month of Ramadan also reminds us of breaking of fast every day in the evening besides offering of extended special prayers called "Tarabih" immediately after usual "Isha" (night) prayer. The whole holy Qur-an is recited by "Hafizun"/" Huffaz" (persons who have learnt the whole Qur-an by heart) in course of 30 days.

Fasting not only teaches a Muslim to abstain himself from all kinds of unjust, evil and shameful deeds during the holy month of Ramadan, it also teaches him to abstain himself from all kinds of unjust and shameful deeds during the remaining eleven months of the year. In fact such commendable practice of abstinence should continue till the last days of his life for Merciful and Bounteous Allah will certainly bestow His Bounties on His pious bandas (servants) in the Hereafter. We all must remember that Muslim fast is not merely self-torture. A Muslim not only endeavours to restrain him-self from food, drink and sex, he simultaneously tries his best to abstain himself from all kinds of evil and shameful deeds.

Great importance of the holy month of Ramadan can also be gauged from the fact that not only all the Books including Injil (Bible) and Taurat (Tora) were revealed in the month of Ramadan, the greatest and last of all the Books the Qur-an was also revealed on the greatest of all men and all Prophets Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh). And when the first three verses of Sura Alaq of the Holy Qur-an, were revealed? The first three Ayats of the Noble Qur-an were revealed according to a highly authentic source, on Monday, 21<sup>st</sup> Ramadan at night, that is, August 10, 610 AD with Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) exactly 40 years, 6 months and 12 days of age. I may quote here the three verses: "Read! In the name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exists), has created man from a clot (a blob of thick coagulated blood) "Read! and your Lord is the Most Generous". (96: 1-3).

Again the holy month of Ramadan gives unique opportunity to Muslim to rectify amend his past mistakes as well as his monumental blunders. Here I would like to cite just one concrete example how a Muslim can purify or rectify himself in one particular field of his daily life. A rich and resourceful Muslim contemplates to ensuring Eid-ul-Fitr holidays with his family and close relatives in a fabulous manner. Since Benign Allah has given him money, materials and opportunity to enjoy his Eid-ul-Fitr holidays in a grand way. But does he ever think for a moment that one of his close relatives may be suffering from a serious ailment in a remote village and languishing due to want to medicine and proper diet? A fraction of the huge amount of the aforesaid rich man's holiday budget could be spent, inter alia, for giving the patient the much needed relief. And in that case Almighty and Benign Allah would be pleased with him. In Ayat 7 of Sura Hadid (Iron) Lord creator declares:

"Believe in Allah and His Messenger, and spend of that whereof He has made you trustees; and such of you as believe and spend (aright) theirs will be good reward."

Let our tycoons and traders, and the rich and resourceful persons hailing from the upper strata of the society ponder whether they should do something for the indigent and poor persons of the society. Let us learn lesson from the holy month of Ramadan. A moneyed man is not actually the owner of his money, he is nearly a trustee of the huge amount he might have earned by the "sweat of his brow" as clearly indicated in the aforesaid Ayat of the Holy Qur-an.

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sermons as a matter of piety. He accepts the Koran as the word of God, and neither questions its edicts nor sees any contradiction in it. He knows at least the rudiments of the Koran by heart, sometimes recites them or hears them recited. He recites the Koran or hears the recitation, without the understanding it, but has little difficulty in accepting a translation offered to him by traditional interpreters of the Book.

There is little in him to suggest that he is prone to violence and would certainly shudder at the thought of himself as an Islamist suicide bomber. He does not participate in terrorist acts. I take issue with those who claim that the terrorists are a 'tiny minority' among Muslims, if by this it is meant that there are only a handful of individuals who are engaged in acts of terrorism. The number of terrorists world-wide is not longer small. Nevertheless, in the Islamic world as a whole, mainstream Muslims, defined broadly as above, would vastly outnumber those whom we can call Islamist terrorists. They would certainly far outnumber terrorists in countries like Bangladesh where, till recently, Islamist terrorism

Friday congregations, and elsewhere. In many cases, along with calls for piety, the sermons will call for solidarity of the Muslim *ummah*, as if it has been under attack all over the world. It is strange that over fourteen hundred years after it was born, after it long established itself as one of the major organized faiths, now with a billion adherents to it, Islam is still presented as a religion under threat from infidels. Often *imams* in mosques still end their supplication to God with *Fa-ansurna ala al qaumilkaafireen* -- "Help us against the community of non-believers"

And the mainstream Muslim never thinks it proper to ask why is it still necessary to call for divine protection for Islam and whether denunciation of the *kafirs* is still called for. He probably does not also ask himself what the impact of the relentless anti-infidel rhetoric may be on young and excitable Muslim minds in the congregation. The example of Islam - in - danger sermons is an important one in the present context, because here is an issue where mainstream Muslims could ask pertinent questions. But there are many other examples of mainstream reticence.

mosque in the spread of Islamic extremism has still to be adequately recognised by mainstream Muslims. It is only after the London suicide bombings of July 2005 that their role came to public attention. An often repeated argument of apologists eager to dismiss any Islamic connection of some of the acts of terror in recent times has been that the terrorists were 'modern educated' and were not products of *madrasas*. But many of them were regular visitors to mosque and in all probability avid listeners of fiery sermons from their *imams*. This was true of the London bombers.

But fiery sermons are only one potential ingredient of extremism. Growing religious fundamentalism in general, through *madrasa* education and other ways, has been a powerful contributing factor. In fact rousing calls for *jihad* are relatively rare in the country and fanatical preachers like Omar Bakri or al-Masri of London probably have no counterpart in Bangladesh, though one can never rule this out. Fiery rhetoric is not absent though. It is only necessary to remember that the rout of the Taliban was followed by loud denunciations of the United States and call for *jihad*

do not protest against extremist sermons in mosques is that it is not in their tradition and training to ask critical questions about the major precepts of Islam. They can discuss matters of religion as much as they like so long as the discussion strengthens their Faith and are in the nature of piety or devotion, but they may not ask probing questions that sound like criticism of Islam.

There are also areas where the stances of mainstream Muslims have the undesired effect of bolstering those of the Islamist extremists. Many mainstream Muslims are often, and rightly, sympathetic to causes that extremists also promote and are eager to die for. There are regions of the world where Muslims have suffered gross injustices at the hands of foreign powers. The Middle East is an obvious example. Many extremists have taken up the cause of the oppressed there and elsewhere. Mainstream Muslims have also voiced protest and frustration at these injustices. It is not, however, usual for them to make it abundantly clear that their support for the cause of the oppressed has nothing to do with religion, or that they would protest with equal vigour injustices to

## WORLD TEACHERS' DAY

# Voice of teachers be heard

MA BARI

MORE than 150 countries of the world will celebrate the 12th World Teachers' Day today (5th October). This day was proclaimed in 1993 by UNESCO at Geneva in an International Conference on Education to recognise the contribution and achievements of teachers. It was launched by the then Director General of UNESCO Federico Mayer. Later this resolution was confirmed in general conference of UNESCO in Paris in 1996. The date 5th October was chosen because of the fact that in 1966 on this date UNESCO adopted some recommendations concerning the status of teachers in a special inter-governmental conference in Paris in co-operation with ILO. In this conference they adopted 146 recommendations concerning the status of all teachers starting from kindergarten to higher secondary stages in both public and private educational institutions including those providing technical, vocational and art education.

In a joint message on the occasion of World Teachers' Day UNESCO, ILO, UNDP and UNICEF paid attention to the service of teachers. The message was signed by Koichiro Matsuura, Director General, UNESCO, Juan Somavia, Director General, ILO, Kemal Dervis, Administrator, UNDP and Ann M. Veneman, Executive Director UNICEF. They said teachers make a tremendous contribution to sustainable development by building its human foundation -- Developing a Child's capacity and desire to learn. They reminded of the challenge for teachers of imparting good education to pupils based on high learning standards, and of making schools a welcoming, encouraging, and inclusive place in which all are treated with dignity and every child was the opportunity to reach his or her full potential. They urged that the voice of teachers be heard in shaping the educational decisions which they themselves have

to carry out.

On this day, this year the UNESCO General Conference is in session in its headquarters, Paris (3-21 October). We know that ministers representing their countries are attending this conference. It will be good if they implement the recommendations and resolutions passed in the conference while they are back in their home countries. World Federation of Teachers unions (in French Federation International Sindical Dela Ensenanza (FISE) has sent a sizable delegation to participate in this conference. Prof Dr. Akhtaruzzaman, Senior Vice President of FISE and President of Bangladesh College-University Teachers' Associa-

goods and not a commodity.

In Bangladesh there are about seven million people in teaching profession. Polarisation of teachers' organisation in consideration of affiliation to national politics is very much spectacular. Lack of awareness of teachers in professionalism and because of affinity of teachers' organisations to political parties teachers are very much reluctant to become member of any teachers' organisation. As such even with right demand teachers' organisations cannot pursue movement and draw attention of the authority.

In our country some recommenda-

**Teaching may be considered as the predecessor of all other professions and can be called mother profession. It is based on skills. Beginner teachers must have an opportunity to learn about the practical requirements of the profession from experienced mentors. Provision of ongoing in-service education and professional development in the process should be properly maintained. Teachers training -- both initial and in-service -- should be integrated in the national policies.**

tion will lead the delegation.

The biggest challenge before the teaching community today is the relentless attack against the tenure and security of service. In most of the countries permanent teaching posts are being abolished or kept vacant for an indefinite period. Teachers are being appointed on a contractual basis or on an ad-hoc basis. Thus teacher-student ratio has become variable and sometimes is on the negative. There is a trend of making education a tradable commodity. Across the globe millions of children in hardship with inadequate food and shelter face towering odds in acquiring basic education.

We should keep in mind that all young children are entitled to good quality education. Education is a social

tions on the "status of teachers" adopted by UNESCO deserve ratification:

λ Teachers organisation should be recognised as a force which can contribute greatly to educational advancement and should be associated with the determination of educational policy.

λ Working conditions of teachers should be such as promote effective learning and enable teachers to concentrate on their professional tasks.

λ Teachers and their organisations should participate in the development of new course text books and teaching aids.

λ Teachers should be granted study leave on full or partial pay at intervals.

λ Salary of teachers should be reviewed periodically to take into account such factors as rise in the cost of living, increased productivity leading to high standard of living in the country or a general upward movement in wage or salary levels.

λ Every teacher should enjoy equitable safeguards at each stage of any disciplinary procedure and, in particular, the right to defend himself and, defended by a representative of his choice.

In today's changing world of jobs and working conditions a society requires to draw special attention upon education, not only in terms of making base of knowledge but also in terms of skills and aptitude that would allow the learner to adapt to the changes taking place every now and then. There is a question swirling in the air, who should teach? The answer is clear, "the best should teach." Because teachers are the curator of yesterday and architect of tomorrow, always they accomplish their mission through the minds and talents of others.

Teaching may be considered as the predecessor of all other professions and can be called mother profession. It is based on skills. Beginner teachers must have an opportunity to learn about the practical requirements of the profession from experienced mentors. Provision of ongoing in-service education and professional development in the process should be properly maintained.

Teachers in Bangladesh at present are passing through a very difficult time in discharging their professional obligations in the backdrop of harassment, political repression and vengeance, termination etc. The Education Ministry is continuously violating the provisions at large, of the recommendations, especially of Nos 9, 45, 46, 47, 49, 61, 62, 63, 71, 72, 73, 82, 89, 90, 115, 117, of "ILO/ UNESCO concerning the status of teachers.

Tactics are adopted to harass the targeted teachers and employees who fight for the rightful causes and aspirations of the teachers and employees. Charges and complaints are brought in such a that one gets a very bad impression at the outset and teachers and employees are frightened in a manner so that they can not

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# Education deserves appropriate state attention

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WORLD Teachers' Day is being observed today by half a million teachers in Bangladesh along with their counterparts (about 60 millions) in other countries. October 5 is a day of celebration for the teaching community throughout the globe, in view of the adoption by the ILO and UNESCO of the recommendations concerning the status of teachers on that date in 1966 in Paris at a special intergovernmental conference followed by a special session of the Committee of Experts (joint ILO/UNESCO Committee) in Paris from 15 to 18 September 1997 which approved and adopted the recommendations. For the teachers of Bangladesh, this year's "World Teachers' Day" has particular connotation. It has come in the backdrop of series of Education Ministry measures considered repressive by the teachers.

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raise their heads and voices of protest. Knowing that the charges cannot be proved because of their baselessness, a dilly-dallying tactic is also followed so that the incumbent especially the elderly persons who would retire within a year or two, cannot draw any benefit. There are many instances of foul play victimise, terminate, dislodge teachers and employees.

The whole education system is now faced with crises never seen before. The Education Ministry is taking decisions without any consultation with the teachers' representa-

institutions every year.

The National Front of Teachers and Employees (NFTE) submitted 8-point Charter of Demands to the government. Their demands include 10 percent enhancement of the initial government salary as per election commitment of the ruling party, reinstatement of 2000 teachers and employees terminated illegally and out of political vengeance, introduction of Service Rule for the non-govt. non-teaching employees, reasonable house rent, festival bonus and other allowances, implementation of UNESCO-ILO recommendations

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tives, in clear violation of the ILO/UNESCO Recommendations. Even a major decision to change the 43-year old existing secondary education system has also been taken without any consultation with the teachers' representatives and beyond the knowledge of the grass-roots level teachers who are supposed to implement it.

Government claims highest allocation in education though the non-govt. teachers and employees get only Tk. 100 (less than 2 US dollars) as monthly house rent and there is no allocation for libraries and laboratories. Actually the allocation is decreasing every year in view of increase in number of educational

concerning the status of teachers. But the government has not initiated any step for alleviating the grievances of the teachers and employees.

Under the circumstances, the NFTE made written communications with the ILO and UNESCO headquarters based in Geneva and Paris. In response, the two international bodies under the United Nations have already apprised the Bangladesh Govt. in regard to violation of the status of teachers as approved by them. The last letter from ILO dated 11<sup>th</sup> July of this year has intimated that the allegations brought by NFTE will be examined and appropriate measures would be taken.

In America, former President Bill Clinton during his second term, called on the Congress to increase federal spending on education by one-fifth and urged Americans to put aside politics when it comes to children. "Education is a critical national security issue for our future and politics must stop at the school house door," Clinton said. But politicisation is so rampant in Bangladesh, that it is also very much there in the education sector, from recruitment to retirement of teachers, though there is no dearth of the cry for quality education. It is very relevant to mention what Jacques Delors said about this. International Commission on Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century headed by Jacques Delors has stressed in its report to UNESCO: "Improving the quality of education depends on first improving the recruitment, training, social status and conditions of work of teachers" "They need the appropriate knowledge and skills, personal characteristics, professional prospects and motivation if they are to meet the expectations placed upon them."

Teachers in Bangladesh observe the "World Teachers' Day" with the expectation and forward-looking conviction that teachers would be duly consulted in the educational matters, and their creativity and innovative ideas as well as their skill and experience fully utilised, by the authorities in the greater perspective and interest of human development. Teachers in Bangladesh today, raise their voices high for implementation of the ILO-UNESCO "Recommendations on the status of teachers.

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