

Combating religious militancy in Bangladesh

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IN the article entitled "Lal Masjid Showdown Lessons for Bangladesh" that appeared in the Daily Star on 21 July 2007, I have tried to show some similarities in socio-political environment behind the rise of Islamic political forces in Pakistan and Bangladesh. In both the countries, the Islamists were patronized by military regimes to thwart the pressure created by the secular democratic forces that were challenging their authority. Ironically in Bangladesh, even after the fall of the last military dictator in 1991, the elected political leaderships that emerged kept on courting the Islamists in order to checkmate their political rivals. Thus, the Islamists rode high on the shoulders of the so-called liberal democratic forces and by the 2001 national election, they were part of the winning coalition. In about a quarter century (1975-2001), the Islamists emerged from outright ban to partners in the Government.

Like Pakistan, increasing influence of the Islamist parties in national politics translated into increase of madrassas in Bangladesh. The number of Madrassas and their teachers and students has increased over the last three decades at a rate much faster than those in the mainstream education system. While in 1971 there were only about 1,000 madrassas of various types in the country, by 2005 the Government registered 'Aliya' madrassas alone totals about 29,000. There is no accurate figure for the 'Quomi' madrassas, but those are estimated to be around 25,000. Today more than 30% Bangladeshhi students go to madrassas and this percentage is increasing. While the Jamaat-e-

Islami's student front "Islami Chatra Shibir" (ICS) controls the Aliya Madrassas, the Quomi madrassas are under the control of the student wings of smaller religious parties.

Madrassa students have been the vanguard of all Islamist movement in the country. That some of the Islamists are turning into violent extremists and that many madrassas became their breeding ground were increasingly evident since 1999, when violent attacks were carried out against organizations or institutions known to be secular in nature, and against individuals whose activities appear to be anti-Islamic in the eyes of the extremists. We witnessed devastating attacks in cinema halls, circus shows, cultural programmes and political rallies. Even Mazars and Khankas came under attack for their supposedly 'deviant' activities. Although hundreds of people died, government of the time was in a denial mode refusing to admit the existence of Islamic militants in Bangladesh. While the government was anxious to show Bangladesh as a "Moderate Muslim State," the extremists were having a field day. The cases were not properly investigated, nor the perpetrators brought to justice. Meanwhile, the foreign governments and media had been warning us about the activities of organizations such as Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HUJI) and Jamaat-ul-Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB). After a spate of bombing, including suicide attacks, in August-September 2005, it finally became impossible for the government to deny the existence of Islamic militants in Bangladesh. The investigation, arrest, prosecution and the delivery of justice were done in a manner that had won back the support and confidence of everyone at home and



abroad. However, to conclude that we have finished the extremists off would be a blunder. While our law enforcement agencies did a good job in sending the top militants to the gallows, little has been done to formulate a long-term plan to deal with the militancy. Unless the root causes are addressed, the militancy might remain dormant for some time, but would raise its head again at the opportune moment. Simultaneous bomb-blasts on three major railway stations of the country on the May Day this year once again reminded us that the militants are just around the corner.

During the investigation into the militant activities, it became clear that most of the low-level activists were madrassa students, mainly of Quomi varieties. The extremist chose madrassas or mosques in remote locations to organize, motivate, train and plan their activities. Our madrassa education systems, especially the Quomi ones, are rooted in the past and quite out of tune with the modern world. Those passing out

from Quomi madrassas have little job opportunities other than becoming Imams in mosques or teachers in madrassas. No wonder, we have a proliferation of mosques and madrassas in Bangladesh. While some efforts have been made to update the Aliya madrassa education, there has been no progress on the Quomi ones. The government has no control or supervision on those. In fact, no accurate statistical data is available with the government about these institutions. Instead of modernizing the Quomi madrassa education, the last Coalition government, at the fag end of its tenure, hurriedly passed laws that made the Quomi degrees equivalent to those of the mainstream education, notwithstanding opposition from academics, intellectuals and general students. It was an unprecedented decision that has no parallel throughout the Islamic world. It was a shrewd move to win the "Madrassa Vote-Bank" at the cost of national interest clear and simple.

While the first generation militants had been from financially poor background, there is an increasing trend among the educated middle-class youth to turn to extreme religious views. In the recent past, Police arrested a group of youth belonging to Hizbut Tahrir a pan-Islamic party that is banned in the West as well as in most Muslim countries, but freely operating in Bangladesh for the past few years. The 'Tahrir' youths were from well-off families of the city studying in reputed Universities and colleges. 'Tahrir' preaches a utopian ideology of establishing an Islamic Caliphate across the globe. The organization preaches that all the Muslim majority countries of the world, including Bangladesh, are 'Daar-ul-Kuffar' Land of the Infidels because they follow un-Islamic laws and practices. 'Tahrir' wants to turn these Muslim countries into 'Daar-ul-Islam' first and then take on the non-Muslim ones who are according to them 'Daar-ul-Harb' Land of War (Interested readers may view www.khilafat.org for

details). Questions can be raised as to how the organization is allowed to operate freely in this country.

Islamic militancy is a serious internal security threat facing Bangladesh today. Continued arrests of JMB activists show that they are still active. Many elements conducive to the rise and growth of militancy are present in Bangladesh endemic poverty, economic and intellectual backwardness, lack of educational and employment opportunities, antiquated religious education system, widening rich-poor divide etc. are some of the issues.

A society based on strong democratic principles could provide some guarantees against rise of extremist ideologies. Here too Bangladesh is in a dark abyss. Despite enormous struggle and sacrifices made by the ordinary citizen of Bangladesh, democracy remains an elusive goal. Failure of democratic order strengthens the hands of those who advocate that democracy is a western concept and unsuitable for an Islamic

society. While we took pride in the early 1990s on the restoration of democracy and had been trying to establish ourselves as a functional democracy since then a rarity in the Islamic world, the socio-political disorder of the last few years had sent the country back to the period of uncertainty. One thing is, however, certain - if democracy fails in Bangladesh, the religious extremists will be the biggest beneficiaries. The question is "What do we do now?"

First of all, we need to restore democratic order in Bangladesh as early as possible. We then need to strengthen democratic institutions in the country. Freedom of speech, opinion and religious practices must be ensured by the state. In the long term, religion should be relegated to the private domain, with the state taking a secular character. Our society needs to modernize to be a member of the multi-cultural, multi-religious community of nations, rather than an exclusive, introvert society as preached by the extremists. Our political, social and religious leaders, intellectuals and academicians should come forward to emphasise that the current campaign of violence by the Islamic extremists is not a war as such against the West or Israel or the Zionists, but indeed it is a war against Islam itself. The silent majority must speak up. On the economic front, the government must provide physical and economic security to its citizen. The rich-poor divide needs to be narrowed down. Reform of madrassa education has been long overdue. Successive governments sought to compromise with the Madrassa Lobby sacrificing greater national interest. It is not generally known that the Madrassa system is peculiar to South Asia and a legacy of the Colonial era. In most

other Muslim countries, madrassas operate as specialized religious schools catering to those who wish to become religious scholars or Imams and Khatibs. Our reform efforts should be aimed at that direction making mainstream education available and affordable to the masses, while keeping Madrassa option available to those who wish to pursue higher religious learning. As a first step, we should introduce uniform curriculum up to at least eighth grade in all educational institutions. All 'Ebtedai' (Primary) madrassas should function as Government primary schools. The madrassas should be registered with the government; their course content and teaching methodology should be strictly supervised. On the cultural front, we need to encourage traditional Bengali culture and heritage that are secular and universal, and discourage divisive, exclusive practices and traditions. Government as well as local citizen committees should strictly ensure that the sanctity of mosques be preserved at all times. A mosque should be a place for prayer, meditation and contemplation, not a place to spread hatred and violence.

In this globalised world, no nation is an island; what happens in our neighbourhood affects us immediately. Growing Islamic militancy throughout the world and especially in South Asia should be a matter of worry for all of us. The fight against religious extremism will be a long drawn out affair. Use of force could only bring a temporary halt, but for a long-term solution we need to attack this many-headed Hydra from all directions.

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India-Bangladesh relations

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THE recently concluded Foreign Secretary level meeting between Bangladesh and India ended on a high note of expectations on both sides. Every time there had been such meetings, the expectation had soared high but then it fell at a much faster rate. There have been meetings at various levels in the past but there has not been any substantial progress in resolving the outstanding issues between the two countries. Indian media and elites have been putting the blame squarely on Bangladesh for not being able to resolve the issues. From the statements of the Indians one gets a feeling that Bangladesh have been very ungrateful towards India for what they did for Bangladesh in 1971.

To understand the internal dynamics of the Indo-Bangla relations one has to peep into the past to the days immediately after the independence. The relations between India and Bangladesh began at a very cordial level. There was a sincere feeling of gratefulness in the minds of the people of Bangladesh towards the Indian people and their leaders for supporting the Bangladesh liberation movement with men and material. India continued to provide support to the nascent country in all spheres of national life.

To show gratitude to the people of India for their support in the Liberation War, Bangbandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman visited Calcutta and addressed a public meeting in the presence of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. During this visit, Bangbandhu raised the question of India returning to Bangladesh the weapons and equipment captured from the Pakistani Army in Bangladesh. He also raised the question of resolving the pending issues inherited from India-Pakistan days, like the sharing of Ganges water, return of the enclaves belonging to Bangladesh.

Late Mr. J.N. Dixit, the first Deputy High Commissioner of India in Bangladesh has very succinctly discussed the state of Indo-Bangladesh relations. He writes in his book "Liberation and Beyond", "In any case, fissures began to appear in Indo-Bangladesh relations by the first quarter of 1973. They accentuated to critical level in 1974. The honeymoon phase of Indo-Bangladesh relations came to an end by spring of 1973." He further writes that some policy decisions of the Indian Government were detrimental to the improvement of bi-lateral relations between the two countries. In another place in the same book he writes, "With the benefit of hindsight I feel that we should have handed over all the captured Pakistani military equipment to Bangladesh instead of retaining it. It would have been emotionally and politically satisfying to Bangladesh. By not returning these equipment, we created an undercurrent of resentment about India in the newly emerging Bangladeshi military establishment."

In the initial years three crucial bilateral issues came up for consideration between Bangladesh and India. They were (a) sharing of the Ganges water on a permanent basis, (b) the issue of the enclaves on both sides and (c) the delimitation of the sea boundary in the Bay of Bengal. Given the relationship that existed between the leaders of the two countries, particularly between Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Mrs. Indira Gandhi, these issues should have been resolved. However that was not to be.

Barrister Harunur Rashid, in his book "Indo-Bangladesh Relations An Insider's View," gives a vivid description of the reasons why the relationship started plummeting so early. The relationship could never again go back to the early days; it has been a roller coaster ride all along. The Bangladeshi Government and the people got a shock when India decided to operate the Farraka Barrage in the dry

season of 1975. Earlier in a Joint Declaration in May 1974, the two Prime Ministers had agreed that the two sides would "arrive at a mutually acceptable allocation of the water available during the periods of minimum flow in the Ganges." Again in July 1974, at a Ministerial meeting India once again confirmed that they would arrive at a mutually accepted solution before operating the Barrage. This showed the value of a categorical commitment given by India at the highest level.

Similar fate was meted to the 'Agreement of Bangladesh-India Land Boundary 1974'. As per Article 5 of the Agreement, "This Agreement shall be subject to ratification by the Government of Bangladesh and India and the Instrument of Ratification shall be exchanged as early as possible. The Agreement shall take effect from the date of the exchange of the Instruments of Ratification." Till to date the Agreement has not been ratified by the



Indians whereas Bangladesh ratified the Agreement in 1974. Barrister Harun writes in above-mentioned Book, "India argued that the considerable delay was caused because the Agreement, in particular the lease of Indian Territory to Bangladesh was challenged in the Indian Courts. However, under rules of international law India cannot cite its internal laws as a justification of its failure to perform a treaty (article 26 of Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, 1969)."

The above two incidents clearly show that the warmth in the relationship between the top leaders of two countries in the early days of independence were artificial. There was no change in the overall policy in regards to the problems between India and Bangladesh. There was no sign of any softening of attitude of India in dealing with the bi-lateral issues with Bangladesh. Before the above-mentioned issues could be resolved, a new issue cropped up in South Talpatty.

The Indo-Bangladesh relations took a nosedive after the death of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Mrs. Indira Gandhi who was the Prime Minister of India took a very hard stand on Bangladesh. However, with the Janata Government coming to power in India, bi-lateral relations improved considerably between Bangladesh and India. Mr. Morarji Desai's Government tried to resolve the issues with India's neighbours. As a result 'The Ganges Water Agreement' was signed in November 1977. With the return of Mrs. Gandhi as Prime Minister of India the

relations cooled down again. However, this time Mrs. Gandhi was much more pragmatic and allowed the 'Ganges Water Agreement' to be extended by another five years although without the guarantee provision.

With the passage of time more issues started cropping up between India and Bangladesh. But none of them have been resolved. At present there are ten major issues that have to be resolved between the two countries. They are:

- Non-ratification of the Indo-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement of 1974.
- Handing over of Enclaves.
- Delimitation of the sea-boundary in the Bay of Bengal between India and Bangladesh.
- Settlement of the ownership of Talpatty Island.
- Border fencing.
- Sharing of waters of all common rivers.
- Transit facilities



- Trade deficit.
- Cross border militancy.
- Illegal migration.

Mr. Dixit has been candid in accepting that India has to play a major part if the pending issues between the two countries are to be resolved. I quote "As far as the relation with India goes it has been a roller coaster ride over the last 23 years. Despite all the professed mutual goodwill and declared commitments to bilateral cooperation by both countries, a number of issues dating back to the times of liberation still remain unsolved." India has to understand that unless there is reciprocity in dealing with the bilateral issues, these cannot be resolved. It cannot be that Bangladesh is always on the giving side. Bangladesh attaches great importance in having a friendly, working and cordial relationship with India. India has to realize that Bangladesh has developed regional and multi-lateral relationship with other countries, which are equally important. After all Bangladesh has also to look after her own national interest.

So far there has been much commitments on the Indian side but seldom have they been implemented. The onus is on the Indians; they have to act not as a big brother rather as an older brother and have to start rolling the balls so that Bangladesh can also reciprocate effectively.

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The tyranny of democratization

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AS an American citizen, even after having lived in Bangladesh for the past nine months, the words of United States' founding fathers still resound within. Against the present backdrop of a fear-infested, hellish world, the idea of a democracy founded on the basis that all "men" are created equal, with unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, sounds like a romantic ideal.

Democracy, to Americans in the United States, is more than just a preference of procedures in how to run government. It is infused into the American culture. Some would even say it is the United States' "official" secular religion. It is the American way of life.

Some Americans would go as far as promoting the expansive exportation of democracy in hopes of creating a "better world", or a unified democratic empire of sorts. So should the U.S. use its unrivaled power to spread democracy throughout the world?

No. There are several problems with a doctrine for democratizing other nations at the point of a gun, or using "our power" (if we prefer euphemisms). A doctrine like this exudes amoral arrogance, is self-serving, would place no limits or checks on what the U.S. could do, and the actual cost of creating this "new world" would be immense.

First, one must separate intention from perception and reality before tackling the issue of a seemingly arrogant democratizing doctrine. Intentions can be noble; however, good intentions and rhetoric alone do not suffice in considering complex, real-world dilemmas and consequences. Simply wanting to use our power to spread democracy may spawn from an intention to achieve a global utopia, but it overlooks the very nature of such a grandiose plan. Upon closer analysis one will find such a plan to exude blind arrogance.

"Arraogance? Not true," proponents of democratization would say. Look at what democracy has done for our country. Sure we may have problems, but our democratic system and culture allows us to evolve and overcome those problems. We have individual rights and liberties, we promote equality, we cherish diversity, and above all we value freedom. Why would other countries not want this?

When we export democracy, we are exporting "Americanism" (at the very least it is seen this way). Installing new governments necessarily leaves behind traces of the "liberator's" value-imprints which may be alien to the locale. Inherent in this desire to spread democracy is a "holier than thou" attitude, which may remind some of the saying from the Vietnam War era: "In every Vietnamese, there's an American waiting to come out." This outlook idealizes our own values while belittling those of other nations and cultures. This outlook lends itself to us justifying truly reprehensible acts.

We essentially forfeit our moral supremacy when imposing our myriad ideologies upon other nations. Have we forgotten our own roots? We built our democracy from the bottom-up, sculpting it around our own customs and values. We were not handed our democracy from the top-down by another "liberating force". Imposing democ-

racy is an oxymoron. Our own history tells us that a successful democracy must have had a strong cause to take root and evolve without intervention. Adhering to the democratic principle of "universality", we should then accept as tolerable a hypothetical bid by the Communist Republic of China to "liberate" nations and to recreate them in its own image. Perhaps they would want to "liberate" poor, failing capitalist democracies like Argentina. It is all a matter of perspective, without which we lend ourselves to unbridled arrogance.

Another concern lies in identifying the beneficiary as the United States wages wars, replacing governments. While proponents of the doctrine would of course rehash rhetoric about liberating people who crave freedom, critics note that the employment of this doctrine has conquered nations that lie wayside, becoming resourceful quasi-colonies of the U.S. It is self-serving in only benefiting the U.S.

The international community is confused. If we are truly concerned about liberating nations from tyranny and oppression, why only go into Iraq (assuming that some of the more outlandish allegations against Iraq were true), when North Korea's oppression is no secret, and while it overtly pursued nuclear armament? "We don't negotiate with terrorists," in Iraq's situation, yet we now negotiate and have talks with North Korea, which is a part of the infamous "Axis of Evil"? We allow the Saudi regime to oppress its women with a rigidly puritanical version of Islam, and we continue to support Israel, a bellicose nuclear power, while it illegally occupies Palestinian territory, suppressing innocent Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The inconsistencies in our purported policies lead other nations to conclude that our efforts at democratization really are self-serving. Sure we got rid of Saddam, but we also have unprecedented access to Iraq. Major American corporations and contractors are profiting at the expense of Iraqi lives. This is the Saddam-led Iraq we backed more than two decades ago to attack Iran after its democratic revolution, when the Shah, who we were in cozy cahoots with (having installed him in the first place), was overthrown. Meanwhile we do not attack North Korea because they are a real danger and could possibly strike back. We have major economic ties with Saudi Arabia and Israel, so as tyrannical as some of their actions may seem, we leave them be. This brand of democratization clearly contains gargantuan flaws and can validly be regarded self-serving.

Maybe the way the United States is executing its plan of democratization is just not complete. Let us not stop at easy targets like Iraq. Let us take on the entire world and use our might to impose democracy on every nation, one at a time, with a "Manifest Destiny" doctrinal approach. Proponents for such a plan might add that such a world would be in harmony and would coexist peacefully.

Doctrinally speaking, even this "adjustment" to democratization will not work because it conflicts with what we preach at home. How can we promote a system of checks and balances at home while playing monarch abroad? This idea of spreading democracy abroad is not equipped with

such checks especially when we are the ones who choose the "acceptable" democracies. Without boundaries what is to stop us from becoming the very tyrants we despise? What is to stop us from going to war when everything can be justified in the name of American democracy? In concept this is not unlike the totalitarian Nazi regime of Hitler. It justified its wanton aggression in the name of the German "Aryan" race and the German nation. It wanted this nation to be devoid of other impure races. With no limits and an obstinate ideology we run the grave risk of spreading ourselves too thin, subsequently collapsing from being unable to sustain the costs of grandeur, like other fallen empires of the past.

War hawks may deem the cost a necessary price to pay to reform the world to the way it "should" be. However, the real cost involves more than a dollar amount tagged to a few hundred military casualties. During the Cold War the United States, the Soviet Union, and China were involved in proxy wars all over the world in a race to achieve supremacy. The overwhelming majority of people who lost their lives in this race were non-combatant civilians. Entire villages of innocent people in parts of the world we consider remote and pay little attention to were eradicated. In our more recent bombing campaign in Iraq we killed countless civilians having missed many of our primary targets. Moreover, this kind of activity is now inspiring insurgents and terrorists to seek retribution since they see it as an attack on their culture and people...a culture and people we take very little time to understand before subjecting them to American justice at its finest. Now imagine this kind of strife continuing on for decades and maybe centuries or more because of a policy we have on spreading democracy essentially at the point of a gun. It seems pretty ridiculous that a nation as great as ours would want to engage in something like that, right?

The United States of America should be a beacon of hope and peace in the world, not a perpetual manufacturer of war and turmoil. Let us lead by example, not by imposition. We accommodate such a diverse population at home, so let us learn to accommodate a diverse world of nations abroad, shedding ourselves of arrogance. Let us exchange short term gains for long term gains by sharing and investing our wealth, helping impoverished nations with food, clothes, shelter, medicine, and education instead of using the same wealth to disproportionately and selfishly expand our sphere of influence and domination. Let us respect long lasting international coalitions and leagues and abide by their standards and limits, thereby setting an example for other nations seeking stability in such a coalition. "Diplomacy is the better part of valor" it is said. If we are mindful about the tremendous costs of war before recklessly undertaking military action, perhaps diplomacy will become the arena we shine in. The world would definitely be a better, more peaceful place. The onus rests with us.

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