

Islamic militancy: Threat from within



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BANGLADESH has been passing through a difficult period over the last few years. Political violence, pervasive corruption, poor governance and failure of political leadership had plunged the country in a state of chaos. The anti-democratic extremist forces: the Islamic Militants on the right, and the Maoist forces on the left, took advantage of the situation and consolidated their positions. The nation got a respite on 11 January 2007 when a Military-backed caretaker government was installed to put the "derailed statecraft back on rail". This gave us time to reflect on how best to restore and consolidate the democratic institutions that were deliberately weakened. A return to democracy and strengthening of democratic institutions are our best insurance against rise of extremist forces in the country. We are looking forward to a quick return to democratic order through a free and fair election.

Longer the nation remains in a state of uncertainty, greater the opportunity for the extremist forces to exploit the situation.

While the Maoists have been active in the rural areas of western Bangladesh, the main challenge to the internal security comes from the Islamic militants spread across the country. Government's efforts, so far, have remained limited to punitive actions against the extremists, which are temporary measures at best. There is a need for concerted effort by the Government, political parties, NGOs and the Civil Society. We need to study why and how the Islamic militancy took its root in Bangladesh. We need to examine the factors that encouraged and nurtured the extremist ideology? If prevention is better than cure, then we need to take measures to prevent people from becoming extremists rather than waiting to capture and prosecute them when they become one.

The Islamic militancy is the product of an ideology which is alien to Bangladesh's main-

stream Islam. Islam in Bangladesh, as had been preached and practiced by the Sufi saints for more than a thousand years, had an inclusive character. It adapted to local customs and traditions and evolved through assimilation and amalgamation. Islam's spirituality appealed strongly to the local populace and they converted to Islam in large numbers. This was challenged in the 19th Century by Haji Shariat Ullah (d. 1840) who during his pilgrimage to Mecca came in contact with the Wahhabi traditions. Shariat Ullah's "Faraizi Movement" was aimed at ridding Islam of what he termed 'Hindu practices'. Shariat Ullah's son Dudu Mian (d.1862) took up the campaign after him, joined soon by the graduates from Darul Uloom, Deoband (established 1866), known as the 'Deobandis'. As the 20th century dawned, efforts to politicize the Indian Muslims led to the formation of the Muslim League (founded 1906), demand for separate electorate, job quota etc. Hindu reviv-

alist movements and communal riots only widened the religious divide. The British policy of "Divide and Rule" fitted well into this arrangement. By the end of the colonial rule in 1947, the Bengali Muslims were in the vanguard of the movement for Pakistan. Despite occasional tryst with exclusiveness and Puritanism, the Muslims in Bengal largely remained non-communal in their day to day life and in their political outlook. Thus, as the movement for political autonomy gathered steam that led to the War of Liberation and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the political culture was overwhelmingly secular in character. Indeed, secularism was enshrined as one of the State Principles in the Bangladesh Constitution in 1972. The constitution had prohibited communalism in all its forms, had proscribed the state from declaring any religion as state religion and had outlawed use of religion for political ends. However, after the changeover in August 1975, those who

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