



...the threat from within

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usurped power changed the constitution to allow religion-based parties to resurface. Parties, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, who collaborated with the Pakistan Army in genocidal violence in 1971, came back with a bang. The Islamist parties, awash with funds raised from home and abroad, have their tentacles deep into Bangladesh. Anyone daring to challenge their political and social agenda faces intimidation and violence from organised cadres of party workers. Today, the Islamist parties, with their affiliated banks, insurance, hospitals, schools, madrassas, industrial units and trading houses, are the most well-organised sector in the political arena. While Islamist parties profess to believe in ballots rather than bullets for coming to power, the social order which they profess to establish has no room for political parties, election or any mode of expressing dissent. Election, if they happen to win once, will be the last.

The Islamic militants who had been active in Bangladesh since the mid-1990s are mostly off-shoots of the Islamist Parties that oper-

ate in the open. Although, the militant groups, such as the Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) or Harkatul Jihad al-Islami (HUJI), became autonomous in their operations, their umbilical cords with the mother parties were never snapped. The militants aim to establish an Islamic state in Bangladesh with violent means, if necessary. To this end, they directed their attacks on NGOs, cultural organizations, women and civil rights bodies and intellectuals who hold secular views. In 1999-2005, more than 100 persons died and many more were injured in about a dozen bomb attacks across the country. The targets in all these attacks were individuals, organizations or events considered "un-Islamic" by the militants. Yet the Government remained in a denial mode, arguing those to be the attempts by the opposition to destabilize the government and to tarnish the image of Bangladesh abroad. The "eyewash" was so blatant that the Judicial Enquiry set up after the 22 August 2004 grenade attack on AL rally exonerated the Islamists and blamed it on an unnamed "foreign power."

The truth is only now being revealed. On 17 August 2005, the JMB militants came out in the open by exploding series of home-made bombs all across the country in about an hour's time. It was apparent that without a nationwide network of organisation and support such acts were impossible. Further proof of their strength and the degree of indoctrination of their members were evident in the deadly suicide bombings in crowded courthouses at various places that followed a few months later. Under enormous domestic and international pressure the government had to move into action and by March 2006, JMB leaders along with a large number of activists had been arrested, prosecuted and in about one year most of the leadership walked to the gallows. Meanwhile, HUJI, a terrorist organization with links to Pakistan and India, was banned and its local leader Mufti Hannan was arrested in October 2005. HUJI was accused of a number of bomb attacks including planting bomb in 1995 to kill the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Other organizations with terrorist link that sur-

faced were: Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB) and Hizb-ut-Tawhid (HuT). Although many of the terrorist leaders and party workers have been arrested, the ideological roots behind religious fanaticism remain intact. In fact, the critics point out that the government could only nab the low and middle rank activists, but the kingpins are still at large. Incidents of recovery of militant books and pamphlets, arms and explosives and arrest of militant gangs every now and then proves the point that the militants are there, may be hibernating now, waiting to come out at the opportune moment.

So far, most of the militants arrested were madrasa educated youth from the rural areas who could be easily motivated and brainwashed. But more worrisome has been the recent arrival of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT), the "new kids on the block". HuT is a Pan-Islamic organization that aims to establish a Caliphate, first in the Islamic world and ultimately the world over. Its manifesto divides the countries of the world into three categories: Dar ul-Islam (Land of Islam), Dar ul-Kuffar (Land of the Non-believers)

and Dar ul-Harb (Land of War). The HuT terms Muslim majority countries, including Bangladesh as Dar ul-Kuffar. HuT believes that these states must first be turned into Dar ul-Islam. Eventually the non-Muslim majority countries, which are Dar ul-Harb, would be turned into the Dar ul-Islam. In this process, if peaceful persuasion (Dawa) fails, 'Jihad' will be resorted to. Interestingly, youths from middle and upper class background with mainstream education are joining the HuT. Although the party does not recognize the sovereignty of Bangladesh, the HuT has been allowed to open offices, publish books and pamphlets, and hold rallies in the capital even at a time of emergency. Another example of benign neglect!

Islamic militants in Bangladesh, like others across the globe believe that they are engaged in a just struggle to establish an Islamic order, first in their own state and then in the whole world; violence is only a means to that end. The militants are trying to hijack the peaceful edifice of Islam; this we cannot allow to happen. We, therefore, need to formulate a comprehensive

strategy to counter the threat of militancy. Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI), a non-profit research body, has done some pioneering task in this regard. A BEI sponsored Think-Tank, which included this writer, have prepared a Counter Terrorism Strategy Paper and submitted it to the Government for their consideration. The salient features of the action plan are:

- Anti-money Laundering Act and related infrastructures
- Protect the public, Key national infrastructures and national interests from terrorist attacks.
- Physical protection of people, property and interest
- Border control and immigration
- Monitoring movement of arms and explosives
- Prepare to manage the aftereffect of a terrorist attack.
- Introduce Terror Alert Levels
- Rapid response to crisis
- Damage Control and recovery mechanism

The Counter Terrorism Strategy Paper is an important tool based on which detailed national plan could be drawn out to counter the Islamic militants in Bangladesh. Unless we take the threat of creeping religious extremism seriously and plan effective countermeasures, it could jeopardize our future as a prosperous, modern, democratic nation. Need for the hour is to unite against all forms of religious extremism and violence.

The writer is Air Cdr Retd.

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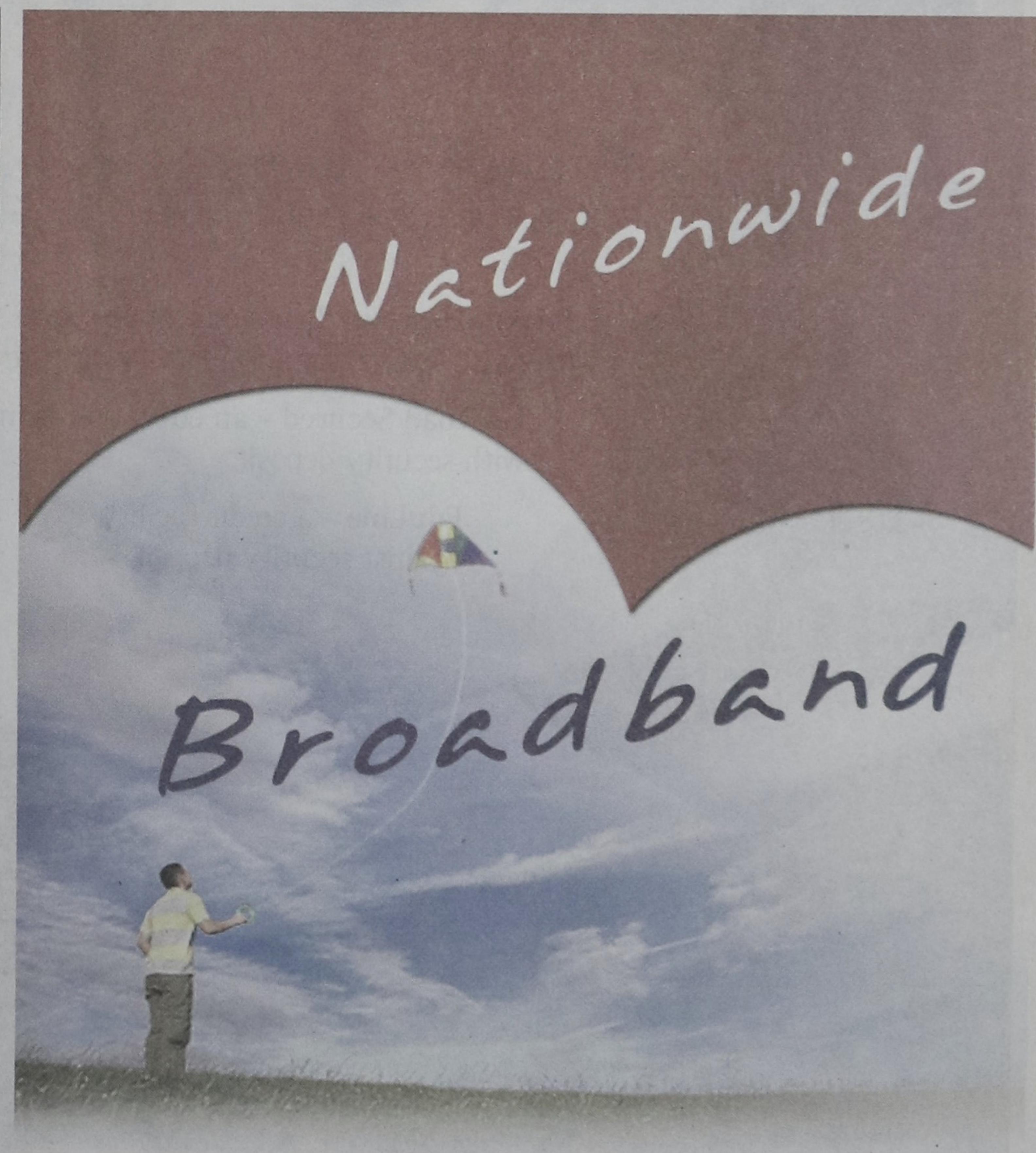
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