

Religious terrorism and Bangladesh

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A Bangladeshi journalist working for a foreign radio station warned me recently against being complacent about Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh. I argued that despite its overwhelming Muslim population, Bangladesh has historically rejected political parties that have used Islam in elections. Jamaat-e-Islami, the best known among such parties, has never won even a handful of seats in elections, achieving the best of 14 seats in the 2001 elections as a result of its alliance with the BNP. I also argued that despite being predominantly Muslim, Bangladesh is the most liberal South Asian country where Islam has been influenced by Sufism with the least incidence of communal violence that are so endemic in other parts of this sub-continent.

Its liberal traditions notwithstanding, the two mainstream political parties earned for Bangladesh the label of a country that supports Islamic terrorism during the last BNP term. The BNP played the major part by allowing Jamaat-e-Islami indulgence to put a terrorist infrastructure in place as a payback for its votes that helped it win a 2/3 majority in the 2001 elections. The Jamaat-ul-Muhadeen Bangladesh (JMB) terrorists, who earned the maximum notoriety, was nurtured by BNP top leadership to help its leaders in northern Bangladesh win territorial control over the extreme leftist elements there and also to please Jamaat-e-Islami. The Awami League did its part by publicising abroad this evil nexus, labeling Bangladesh as Taliban that countries and interested groups abroad used to identify Bangladesh as a supporter of Islamic terrorism. The Indian media also played a role in projecting Bangladesh in a bad light, identifying it as a "locus of Islamic terrorism".

The former US Ambassador Harry Thomas had spared no efforts to warn the Government about the growing Frankenstein. India watched developments with understandable concern

and conveyed these to Secretary of State Condoliza Rice on her visit to New Delhi in March 2005. Rice told the press during the visit that Bangladesh could become the next Afghanistan and that India and USA would look after Bangladesh. The BNP Government remained unmoved and termed the concern over the Islamic fundamentalist forces as "media hype". Encouraged, these forces carried out nearly 500 simultaneous bomb blasts all over the country in August, 2005 that proved that these terrorists had a terrorist infrastructure in place and had also infiltrated the country's intelligence although the blasts caused little damage and just two deaths. Khaleda Zia cut short an official visit to China and returned home but did little to contain these forces except issue arrest warrants against leading JMB terrorists that were not pursued seriously.

The BNP finally acted only after the US Assistant Secretary Christina Rocca visited Dhaka in January 2006 and delivered a harsh ultimatum to the Government to rein in the JMB terrorists. Within weeks, Sheikh Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai with 4 others were incarcerated in a make believe manner that left little doubt that they had escaped being arrested earlier due to state sponsorship. In jail, these JMB terrorists were treated as VIPs, leading to speculation that they would be released at an appropriate time. The politics of the country then slipped into anarchy, leading to 1/11 when fate intervened. The JMB terrorists were executed by the Caretaker Government after due legal process but no act of revenge followed that went to prove that AL accusations and Indian media reports that Bangladesh was infested with Al Qaeda and Islamic terrorists was exaggerated and largely untrue. During this period, United States also did not find any evidence that Bangladesh's Islamic fundamentalist parties had Al Qaeda connections. Their concern was to contain the Islamic terrorism at home that was growing due to BNP Government's sponsorship.

Islamic terrorism has become

benign with the fall of the BNP Government at a time when internationally Islamic terrorist groups are weakening. Newsweek in its June 9th edition under the caption "New Face of Islam" writes that within the Islamic world, a critique of radicalism is growing. Moderate Islamic scholars who were silent before and after 9/11 are now beginning to speak out against Islamic terrorism. Clerics who had supported Bin Laden are now distancing themselves from him. Countries that have tolerated Islamic radicalism like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are now encouraging moderation. In Saudi Arabia, 10,000 Government paid imams have been asked by King Abdullah to restrain their zealous excesses. A new realisation is now afloat in the Islamic world that the "apocalyptic notion of holy war" that Laden had promoted contradicts the fundamental message of Islam, which is peace. Al Qaeda is now on the run in Iraq, its haven after US invasion of Afghanistan, where the US forces are winning. As a result of worldwide hunt, Al Qaeda is no longer in any position to encourage international terrorism as its finances and infrastructure have been considerably weakened.

These positive developments offer Bangladesh a great opportunity to re-establish its liberal traditions. The mainstream parties have the most critical role to play. The BNP must not repeat its past mistakes and must rein in Jamaat, with whom it is again very likely to form election alliance. It should also not allow Jamaat to nominate anyone for the next general elections with blood on its hands for its role in 1971, knowing how much the people detest the war criminals. The AL must fight Islamic radicalism in the country politically and refrain from giving the international media wrong impression about Bangladesh by talking of our internal politics abroad as it did during the BNP era. It must also be consistent in dealing with Islamic fundamentalist forces. It has not fully explained to the people its election alliance with

Khelafat-e-Majlis, a fundamentalist Islamic party that supports the fatwa, just before the postponed 2007 elections as well as its alliance during the first BNP term with the Jamaat to force the BNP out of power. It also needs to explain why during its tenure it did not deal with the war criminals.



the role of the civil societies and sector commanders of our liberation forces is critical here. Those who committed war crimes in 1971 should be tried under law as murderers and rapists, remembering that there

is no statute of limitation here.

Those in Jamaat-e-Islami who are war criminals must be brought under the law. Jamaat's opposition to Bangladesh's independence is a political issue and must be dealt politically. Unfortunately, in pursuing the war criminals, these groups have called for banning Jamaat as a political party, only indirectly labeling it as a party of war criminals. They have also used the secularism card in seeking to ban Jamaat because of its belief in Islam, claiming secularism as

fundamental to our statehood. In doing so, they have overlooked that democracy gives all political parties the right to address their beliefs to the people directly who as sovereign authority accept or reject them.

They have also insensitively set aside the importance of Islam as a way of life both in literal and spiritual sense to majority of Bangladeshis. Furthermore, the belief in Islam that helps people retain mental sanity in the face of extreme poverty and unbearable natural and manmade calamities

that they face regularly has also been over-looked. Islam based parties, particularly Jamaat, may thus be getting the benefit of over-kill with the secular card because a lot of people feel that those attacking the Jamaat are also targeting Islam.

Sadly, the detested war criminals may also be getting the reprieve by moves to ban Islam based parties from politics. The fact that the groups seeking to ban Jamaat are also supporters of the Awami League is also taking the wind out of the sail for trial of

the war criminals with which few people differ. Just as the West has made the mistake of putting Islam in the dock, because of Al Qaeda, those seeking trial of war criminals have similarly erred by bringing Islam into the equation. This could eventually lead to sympathy for Islamic parties arising from the perception that Islam is in peril. For tackling Islamic fundamentalism, these groups must therefore ensure that they do not put Islam and secularism in conflict for there is no reason to do so. Because of Bangladesh's liberal traditions and that in case of a conflict, Islam is going to get the majority nod over secularism.

History, internal politics and recent developments in the Islamic world do not therefore place Bangladesh in imminent danger of a takeover by fundamentalist Islamic forces. These notwithstanding, the next elected Government must bear in mind that there are 9000 Government registered madrasas and 15,000 Qawami madrasas and Islamic fundamentalist parties like Jagrato Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), Shahadat-e-al-Hikma, Al-Harakat-ul-Islamia, Harkatul-Jehad Islami and Al-Khidmat. These institutions and parties would need strict surveillance by the intelligence agencies to keep them on track which should not be difficult if the next Government is sincere about it.

Whether Bangladesh becomes a haven for international Islamic terrorists and whether Islamic fundamentalism plagues our politics will thus depend largely on the mainstream political parties and the civil societies. The Islamic parties by themselves have the ability to cause disturbances but little possibility of doing much more. It is time that the mainstream parties and the civil societies work together in the interest of the nation and ensure our liberal Islamic heritage. There is no reason for complacency about Islamic terrorism in Bangladesh but no reason to cry wolf either.

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Russia-EU new strategic partnership

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

RUSSIA and EU held a summit on 26th and 27th June. President of Russia Medvedev opened the summit.

Two years ago a Russia-EU summit took place in Sochi on the Black Sea coast, last year it took place in Samara region.

This year the summit was held in another of Russia's fast-growing regions-the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous District which is Russia's biggest oil and electricity producing region.

issues of common interest will also be discussed, in particular Iran and the Middle East, as well as the situation in Georgia and Moldova, and on going violence in Afghanistan".

Dynamics of Russia-EU Relations

Russia and European Union need each other. Europe gets one quarter of its requirement of oil and gas from Russia and Germany alone depends on Russia for 30% of its energy supplies. Russia is the EU's third biggest trading partner.

Russia, likewise, depends on European market and technology.

- (a) Expansion of NATO eastwards bordering Russia
- (b) Deployment of US missile defence system in the Czech Republic and Poland
- (c) Kosovo recognition of EU and US-EU growing influence in Ukraine and Georgia, backyard of Russia.
- (d) US-EU growing influence in Ukraine and Georgia, backyard of Russia.

Speaking in Berlin on 5th June, - on his first trip to the West since becoming Russian President, he raved a "shrinking of mutual understanding". Issues such as the US missile defence shield and NATO enlargement eastwards have dogged Russo-European relations.

US, as of January 1, 2006, Russia possessed 927 nuclear delivery vehicles and 4,279 nuclear warheads for strategic offensive weapons, while the United States owns 1,255 and 5,966, respectively, according to the Russian Defense Ministry.

On Kosovo issue, Russia vehemently opposes its independence and recognition by major European powers, and continues to claim Kosovo as a Serbian province, reflecting its historical ties with Orthodox Christian Serbia.

Russia considers that Kosovo's independence will boost the ethnic demands for greater autonomy or independence. It argues that recognizing the unilateral declaration of independence would legitimize the doctrine of imposing solution to ethnic conflicts.

Every would-be ethnic or religious separatist across Europe and around the world has been provided with a tool kit on how to achieve recognition.

Ukraine is caught between the West and Russia. Georgia leans toward the West but borders on Russia's soft underbelly. The uprisings like those in Ukraine, in Georgia in 2003 and in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, Russia suspects, are due to certain forces in the West trying to weaken Russia's influence with its neighbors. Russia has not been comfortable with the growing influence of the West in Georgia and Ukraine, its traditional backyard.

George Soros, American billionaire, in his book "The Age of Fallibility" (2006), concedes that his Foundations "do not hesitate to get involved in the internal affairs of countries after all democracy is an internal affair but they do it as the citizens of the country concerned".

Boris Berezovsky, the Russian billionaire, now living in London, has admitted to the media sometime ago that he also tried to wean Ukraine and Georgia away from the influence of "Putin's Russia" by pouring money to individuals and organisations in those countries.

EU-Russia Summit: 2008

The start of negotiations has been long delayed, amid strained ties under President Vladimir Putin. The new President Dmitry Medvedev agreed to hold the summit.

Prime Minister of Slovenia and President-in-office of the European Council Janez Jansa, in response to the President speech, reportedly has said that one of European Union's priorities is intercultural dialogue and EU has been working to ensure that the message sent out by the summit.

The chairman of the European

Commission Jose Manuel Barroso, (a former Prime Minister of Portugal), has said that the summit is taking place at a time of renewal. The EU is committed to joint efforts to modernize and innovate in the face of global challenges and Russia's membership to WTO should be the next important step in developing trade and economic relations with EU.

He further has pointed out that the summit should provide a chance to work effectively on issues concerning the Middle East, the Iranian nuclear issue and Afghanistan.

It is reported the European Union has raised the issue of Russia's relations with Georgia at the EU-Russia summit. The level of attention to Georgia within the EU is unprecedented and many West Europeans who previously looked away from the situation in Abkhazia are now seriously talking about it. Russia's entrenchment in Abkhazia appears to be the overall post-Soviet international order.

Analysts say Russia has firmed up its position on this issue against Georgia in the immediate run-up to the summit. Rather than trying to defuse the tension, Moscow has chosen to keep it high. At the same time, it has called for discussing the issues with Georgia on a bilateral basis, so as to minimize EU involvement.

Negotiations on the new agreement underpinning EU-Russia relations are scheduled to be launched at the beginning of July, if overall Russia and EU can see eye to eye at this Summit to replace the 1997 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.

The EU and Russia highlighted the importance of direct contacts between citizens as a basis for the strategic partnership. The summit has provided a good opportunity a dialogue on all strategic issues concerning development of relations between Russia and the EU. This summit has paved the way to review many positions and outline new areas for the future development of relations including coordinating efforts to counter the threats and respond to challenges affecting the international situation today.

There is a risk that Russia will distance itself from 'Europe' in its social and political development if EU does not provide Russia to play a role in Europe and international affairs, commensurating its economic and military power.

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Why US needs India

BILLY I AHMED

INDIA is one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has doubled in the last few years. The country is rich in natural resources and therefore, it has an enormous potential to grow.

It is the only, third world country capable of meeting the challenges posed by globalisation. Despite three major wars with the adjoining countries and rising internal unrest in the form of terrorism, the country has still progressed.

The thriving economy and advancement in information technology are now being realised as a major threat by America and its allies. India's natural resources, infrastructure and a liberal economy promises to open a new gateway to development.

Politically, India is well-established in central Asia. It shares its boundaries with China, Pakistan, Tibet, Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar, giving it political as well as economic significance.

After gaining independence from the British, India took a definite step towards development, and especially after liberalisation, it has achieved phenomenal progress in the socio-economic sphere.

Although India has never shared ideal relations with America it is now on its way to improve the relations. Going back to the roots of the history of Indo-US relations, there is a strong affirmation that America was never loyal to India. The ghost of American letdown still haunts India. And clearly America broke the ice because of its vested interests.

The deal between India and America in 1963 guaranteed a cache of enriched uranium to India. But after India conducted its first nuclear test at Pokhran in 1974, western

countries imposed sanctions against India. America blocked fuel flow to Tarapur, and said that its legislation prevented it from doing so.

Since then there has been a dust up as the agreement with America was an intergovernmental one. It was supported by the American government itself. So India was treated as a vagrant nuclear state by America and its allies. This was a notable disturbance in the political history of Indo-US relations.

The retracted, clone deal has appeared yet again with blessing and opportunities for America. According to the 'Collective Lawyer's' cover story of February 2007, Naom Chomsky in a recent interview confirmed it: "Washington's decision is openly dictated by commercial interests."

The American military industry sees India as a huge potential market and the same is true of the nuclear deal industry and others.

Ron Somers who heads the India-US Business Council, which represents the largest 250 American companies with trade interest and investment in India, has remarked that India's nuclear energy market has estimated the need of US\$ 100 billion in foreign direct investment, which till now had been a closed sector. It will be opened for American companies now, creating a potential of 270,000 American jobs in high technology and manufacturing over the next decade. India, in turn will chalk up less than 2.5 per cent of nuclear power generation it needs by 2015, at a hefty cost of natural resources if the deal comes through.

So, visibly there is no notable cream for India to sign this deal. Apart from this, the country will appear as a green pasture politically as well as economically for America. As it is said, "one who rules the Middle East can rule Asia and

the one who rules Asia can rule the whole world."

America has dictating presence in the Middle East and some Asian countries. According to the strategy of White House, it needs a huge presence of military and infrastructure to rule the roost in Asia and undermine the economy of the continent.

India can not only be trusted to support America's interests, but can also serve as a vital location for operations in the continent. This has been confirmed, in a report presented by the Department of Defence, entitled 'Indo-US military relationship: expectations and perceptions.'

An American Colonel is quoted as saying "the American navy wants a neutral territory on the opposite side of the world that can provide support for operation in the Middle East." India not only has a good infrastructure, the Indian navy has proved that it can fix and fuel American ships. India is a viable player in supporting all naval missions, including escorting and responding to regional crisis. So the report has proved that India will be the green pasture for America to engulf the third world countries and undermine their economies.

Once the 123 Agreement comes through, the arms race will speed up in the nuclear states of the sub-continent. After India, Pakistan has also proposed the same bid to America. Because of security reasons, America has turned down the bid.

But in turn, China has assured Pakistan of the sale of nuclear reactors at \$10 billion. So it is an obvious signal to America that China will not accept in America's plan to set up their presence in the region and make it a political market for White House, which will result in doubt and chaos.

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The venue speaks volume of Russia's energy resources and supplies to Europe. President Medvedev reportedly said: "It is here that the energy river that flow to Europe take their source and it is here that a large part of the Russian Federation's budget revenue is generated."

EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana reportedly disclosed the main agenda of the Summit of this year. He said: "The Summit will see the launch of negotiations for the new EU-Russia Agreement. In addition to EU-Russia relations, a number of international

Half of all Russian exports go to the EU. Russia needs enormous investments to modify its pipelines and other infrastructure. Technology is abundantly available in Europe for Russia.

The European Commission estimates Russia will need to invest in excess of 700 billion euros (\$905 billion) into its energy sector between now and 2020. Furthermore Russia's long-delayed effort to join the World Trade Organization could be realized with the cooperation with the EU.

There are four major issues, among others, that divide them:

He even questioned the continuing existence of NATO and its policy in the current global situation.

Russia dismisses the argument that the U.S. missile defense system in Central Europe is designed to protect U.S. and European national security interests. Russia does not see these plans make any political or military sense. Since there are no ICBMs in countries that the US describes 'axis of evil', so Russia poses question against what countries this system would be used, implying that they could be used against Russia.

To put into a perspective of Russian military power against the