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BOMB SQUAD

Religious extremism: A threat to democratic polity

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WITH the advent of 2009, Bangladesh has entered into a new era of democratic order. In the general election held on December 29, 2008, the people of Bangladesh gave a clear verdict in favour of a peaceful, progressive and democratic political order. The people voted to power a government that promised positive changes in the society. The Awami League (AL) that won sweeping victory promised, among other things, to fight religious extremism, to counter those who exploit religion for political ends and to promote a non-communal social order in the country. The election resulted in total debacle for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its ally the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). The fall of JI was particularly striking in view of their much-vaunted claim to represent the Islamic forces in Bangladesh. In a 300-seat parliament, the JI got only two seats; half dozen other Islamist parties got none. People unequivocally rejected the Islamist politics. It was a peaceful revolution through ballots, more powerful than bullets. Despite popular verdict, people are worried once again as the law-enforcing agencies keep unearthing huge caches of weapons and explosives, books and pamphlets, and arresting militants planning to carry out terrorist activities. It was clear that despite a nation-wide rejection of Islamist ideology, the hard-core

among them remains active and organised. The aim of the militants continues to be the establishment of a theocratic state in Bangladesh, by violent means, if necessary.

Today, the threat of Islamic militancy is the top-most security concern of the state. Since mid-1990, the militants, in the name of Islam, have killed hundreds of innocent people and maimed many more. It had cast its long shadow on the national image. Bangladesh was being viewed as a state sliding into the chaos of militant activities. This was quite in contrary to our age-old liberal traditions. Politics in Bangladesh was essentially democratic, secular and non-communal. The spirit of the Nation was epitomised in the Constitution (1972) that adopted secularism as a state principle and prohibited the use to religion as a tool of political expediency. The Constitution declared that the state could not declare any religion as state religion. However, it all changed after the killing of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and many of the top-ranking political leaders in 1975. Those who seized power at the time found the Islamists as their political ally and started Islamising the society and the state. They revived Islamist parties and declared Islam as the state religion.

Over the next three decades, the Islamists made deep inroads into different spheres of our life. The power elites established thousands of madrassas that produced religiously indoctrinated youths who

We have a multi-cultural, multi-religious society based on tolerance and pluralism. In fact, the people reacted to the militant threat to cultural traditions by even greater participation in those events. For example, since the bombing of the Bangla New Year Celebration on April 14, 2001, there has been a far greater participation of people in the celebrations every year. This was people's answer to the militant threat. Bangladesh represents a vibrant nation poised to take the challenges of the future.

would be the front-line activists for Islamic movements. Madrassa students, especially of the Quomi (traditional) varieties, had extremely limited job prospect. Thus, a huge pool of youth was available who had no job and no skill worth selling. Either as an armed wing or as a splinter group of an Islamist party, these youth groups joined the so-called Jihadi cadre. The organisations such as Harkatul Jihad Al-Islam (HUJI) or Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) were born during the 1990s. Members of these organisations believe that the government of countries such as Bangladesh are fashioned in western (Christian) model and that a Taliban-style government must replace these ones.

Despite warning from many quarters, the government at the time adopted a policy of denial on the question of religious extremism and militancy. Starting from 1999 to 2005, the militants targeted temples,

churches, political rallies, cultural functions, cinema halls etc. In fact, they carried out bomb attacks on anything that in their interpretation of Islam was un-Islamic. The BNP-JI coalition government kept on blaming the opposition for those attacks. Even when grenade attacks were made on the AL rally in Dhaka on August 22, 2004 killing 22 people and injuring AL chief Sheikh Hasina, the government came up with a sordid explanation that AL bombed itself to draw public sympathy. The series bombing on August 17, 2005 finally broke the governmental stupor. In 2006-07, we saw a series of arrests, prosecution and handing down of sentences, including death sentences, on some of the terror foot soldiers as well as kingpins.

From 2007 onward, the governmental efforts against the militants were limited to police action and court proceedings. Many terrorist cells were broken up, large caches of

weapons and explosives were found, and much Jihadi literature seized. However, it was apparent that new terror cells were emerging all the time. They had no shortage of manpower; money and weapons were easily available, too. Money was available from internal donations and external assistance; weapons could be procured from the clandestine arms bazaar. While our law enforcing agencies had been successful in pre-empting the terrorists before they could actually launch their attacks, they have often not been able to find the underlying supply lines -- where the weapons are traded, bombs are made and the books and pamphlets are printed. We may well remember seizure of a truckload of ammunition in Bogra on June 27, 2003 or capture of 10-truck load of sophisticated weapons in Chittagong on April 2, 2004. Both cases remained

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