

'We need unity of all progressive forces on a broad ideological front to fight extremism'

Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury, a retired Air Commodore and an expert on security and strategic issues, talks with A.B.M. Shamsud Doza of The Daily Star on the rise of religious extremism in Bangladesh and the ways to tackle it.

The Daily Star (TDS): How do you look at the growing extremism, especially religious extremism in Bangladesh?

Ishfaq Ilahi Chowdhury (IIC): I see it as a grave concern for this country, at present and into the future. We have been facing the challenge of religious extremism on ad hoc basis -- when there is an emergency, we simply rush in there with the police, but we always avoid addressing the core issues. We need to recognise that this is ideological warfare, and on that front we have not done enough. I believe that right now there are two fronts: one being the underground Islamist activities such as the JMB, HUJI and HuT and the other front is the political one led by Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and its student front Islami Chatra Shibir (ICS). Both fronts are very well organised compared to our democratic forces, which are unable to counter this extremism. The time to adopt both short-term and long-term measures against extremism is long overdue.

TDS: But where are we heading from this point onwards?

IIC: Throughout the Islamic world, there has been an upsurge of Islamist politics from moderate to extreme forms. Events in Iran, Afghanistan and now Egypt have influenced Islamic politics in other countries as well. In Bangladesh, from the early '80s onwards, religious forces have been growing in strength, often with the support of the party in power or appeasement by the opposition.

Particularly, I would cite the Ershad regime for its attempt to placate the Islamists to gain political leverage. His crude attempts to Islamise the state and give it a religious colour had a very negative impact on our society. The thousands of *madrasas* that sprang up, and continue to

grow today, have deeply impacted politics in Bangladesh. Parallel to the JI, we have quite a few Islamist parties with Deobandi ideology that is no less extreme than the JI's.

Another factor is the Middle Eastern influence. The flow of money from Middle Eastern charities into our Islamic institutions brings along with it ideas that are alien to our understanding of Islam. Added to this is also the large number of migrant workers in the Middle East who are constantly exposed to and often converted to the Salafi version of Islam that is practised in the Middle East. Thus, traditional Islam in Bangladesh is gradually losing ground to a stricter form of Islam.

The influence of religious leaders in the affairs of the state has increased in Bangladesh, compared to even during the Pakistan era. The present government came with a clear mandate from the people to return to the 1972 constitution, to reform *madrasa* education and restore the secular character of the state. Beyond some cosmetic changes, it did nothing for fear of Islamist backlash. Those in power forgot that the policy of appeasement never pays. That the Islamists today are stronger is evident from the fact that while in the past we saw activists coming from rural *madrasas*, nowadays extremist ideologies have taken hold in elite schools and universities. If we lose our most promising youth to the extremists, this country will move towards being a militant state rather than a progressive democracy.

TDS: The government has formulated several laws regarding the prevention of religious extremism and financing. However, most of them remain on paper only. For instance, the Militancy Resistance and Prevention Committee is high in com-



Ishfaq Ilahi Chowdhury

position but low in resistance. They have not held a meeting in the last two years. How can our administration perform better in addressing religious extremism?

IIC: The government had set up a cumbersome committee that produced virtually nothing. Many good intentions died prematurely. For example, the government decided to register all the *Quomi madrasas* to take account of their numbers, monitor their financing, evaluate their standards and so on. The idea was good, but as soon as it was announced, thousands of *madrasa* students were brought to the city to agitate against the decision, and the government succumbed to pressure. Those who run the *madrasas* have huge economic interest because they are not accountable to anybody, whereas involving the government would mean bringing in inspectors to monitor the administration and finance. Therefore, naturally, the *madrasa* coterie opposed it.

It is rather too late, with election looming ahead, for the government to take any tough decisions, yet it should continue to take people into confidence, expose the dangers of religious extremism, curb extremist ideas and take strong police action against all extremist activities.

TDS: The government has passed several anti-terror acts and has even made some changes to these in 2011. Do you think the government can afford to fight religious extremism with acts and regulations?

IIC: You see, a lot of people have been arrested but how many have been prosecuted and how many have eventually ended up in jail? Not many, but still, overall, I would say that the scorecard for Bangladesh is much better than that of many other countries. We have been able to at least prosecute some key leaders. But what is important is that we need to isolate them while in prison, otherwise they will find new recruits among the prison inmates. They are not criminals in the sense that they are not thieves or pick-pockets -- they genuinely believe that they are doing something for Islam. There should have been some de-radicalisation programme in Bangladesh -- especially inside the jail -- so that when those extremists in prison come out they can play a useful role in society rather than going back to their original self. Overall, the intelligence, prosecution and police investigation needs to be strengthened. Also, we have often seen that once cases go to the court there is hardly any evidence, or people are afraid to appear as witnesses. So, we need to have a witness protection programme too.

TDS: You have talked about the social campaign side. The Islamic Foundation had prepared a sermon for Jummah prayer, which has been rejected by the imams. So our social campaign has failed to include imams.

IIC: Most *imams* are products of the *madrasa* education system that is steeped in obscurantist ideas. We have thousands of government aided *Alia madrasas*, but *imams* almost universally come from the *Quomi* system, and their ideas cannot change overnight. A fortnight-long training in Islamic Foundation cannot change anything much. Moreover, *imams* are not gov-

ernment employees, so the government has little control over what they say or do. When did you last hear an *imam* speaking out against extremism?

TDS: We find that the communal politics has often been sponsored by the main political parties. If the parties sponsor those involved in religious extremism, then it becomes really difficult to root out the religious extremists. What do you think?

IIC: The outcries that Bangladesh is being taken over by non-Islamic forces have been something that never appealed to the mass in the past. But my concern is that Islamists are stronger than ever before. Even in the 1970 election, when AL bagged a vast majority of the votes cast, the next party was not the PML or NAP; it was the JI that secured 6%. The mainstream political parties often appealed JI because it often became the deciding factor in politics. They are much stronger than their numbers because they are better organised, more disciplined, dedicated and they are absolutely sure of what they are doing. Communal harmony, of which we had been so proud, is shattered today. First the Buddhists and then the Hindus have been attacked by communal forces. Our members of parliament have an important role here, but they are not playing their part. Many are sitting in Dhaka leaving their constituencies. Why do not they go to their electorate? Why are they not with the people? Because, many of them have no links with the grassroots, they bought their nominations by paying to the party coffers. The result is a total delink with local leadership. Despite all the gloom, I still believe in the positive strength of our nation. I believe that the forces of extremism and obscurantism will be defeated by the progressive, democratic forces and in the end, a modern, democratic, multi-cultural Bangladesh will emerge. For this to happen, we need the unity of all progressive forces on a broad ideological front. I hope that will happen soon.

A country of *hartals*

M. SHAMSUR RABB KHAN

"HARTAL politics has become pervasive in Bangladesh. It has become part of our life. The frequent *hartals* and work stoppages have been viewed from different angles," says *A Survey on the Impact of Hartal on the Poor of Dhaka City* published in 2000 by ActionAid Bangladesh and Democracywatch. The survey was conducted on five categories of poor city dwellers such as rickshaw-pullers, footpath vendors, daily wage earners, slum dwellers/floating people and small shopkeepers/traders and shows how these people have been used by political parties and how their lives were badly affected by frequent *hartals*.

How could a country where 95% people speak the same language and share the same culture, and where 90% citizens follow the same religion and 98% people are of the same ethnic group be deeply divided into factions? This is Bangladesh, a country where normalcy seems a distant dream, and where *hartal* has become a way of life. People are so accustomed to *hartal* that they come out on the road on any sundry issue.

Both the major political parties -- whether the ruling party Awami league (AL) or the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) -- have used *hartal* as a major political weapon to create mass unrest in the country since 1991. If BNP is in power, the AL goes on to call *hartal* after *hartal*, and if AL is in power, the BNP gets busy calling *hartals*. The party in power does not consider the demands of the opposition as logically right to accept, while the same party in opposition does not consider the policies of the ruling party as genuine. Hence, a *hartal* is always the result.

Who pays the price? The people, and the nation of course, but it is the people, whether they are killed or injured or face economic loss, who bear the brunt of *hartal*. Those who are angry or fed up with BNP-led *hartals* in recent times must know that during BNP's rule from 2001 to 2006, the then-opposition AL called 173 days of *hartals*, while the BNP has called 17 *hartals* in the last three years.

The big question is: how can a country of 160 million people with a density of 1,000 people per square kilometre, and with more than 40% of the population still below the national poverty line, afford to undergo so many days without economic

activities? How can a poor economy like Bangladesh go without production in factories, and closure of schools and colleges, disruption of exams and missing of classes due to *hartals*? And how long will people suffer in their daily life when *hartal* cripples all walks of life? Do the AL and BNP ever think about the violence and killing of innocent people because of *hartals*?

What do the ordinary citizens and the poor people do during *hartals*? Of course, they stay indoors, fearing violence, and those who venture out certainly risk their lives. And what about the

Commerce, Bangladesh estimated that the country loses around \$200 million every *hartal* day. A 2005 study, *Beyond Hartals*, of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) shows the adverse impact of *hartal* on Bangladesh economy. During 1947-58 the average number of *hartals* per year was 1.5 days, which reached a whopping 173 days during 2001-2006. It is obvious that number of *hartals* shows an increasing trend, and the numbers are higher post-liberation than the numbers before.

Political instability and democratic uncertainty, says Akbar Ali Khan in his book *Friendly Fires, Humpty Dumpty Disorder and Other Essays*, is the big price that Bangladesh pays. This is dangerous. The destructive politics that has been played by both AL and BNP perhaps in order to soothe their respective egos, is taking huge toll of Bangladesh.

So, what is the alternative? Without doubt, democracy asks for criticism, complaint, and protest against the anti-people policies. There are ways, unlike Mahatma Gandhi's, who practiced *hartals* against British Imperialism, by which both AL and BNP can listen to the voice of sanity, sit down face to face and discuss issues of national importance. And much like the BJP in India, BNP has boycotted the Parliament, where it could have placed its viewpoints in a more convincing manner rather than opposing the abolition of caretaker government during elections.

Both the political parties must understand that, in democracy, the people understand and can differentiate between constructive work and destructive diatribe. Both AL and BNP must understand that they cannot fool all the people all the time. Dialogue, therefore, is the best means to sort out differences and resolve issues rather than indulging in negative politics and taking the country to the brink of danger.

Bangladesh is both lucky and unlucky to have two ladies as the prominent figures in the political arena; it is lucky in the sense that it shows how successfully democracy in a Muslim majority country flourishes, and unlucky because it suffers due to the super egos of the two ladies. The country cannot afford the national loss anymore, which is born out of the personal dislike of the two ladies.

The writer lives in New Delhi.



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daily wage earners? These poor people face the music the most, but both BNP and AL have been totally indifferent to their plight though, in their speeches, they take oath in the name of the poor. Think about readymade garment (RMG) industry of Bangladesh. It contributes \$23 billion, which is nearly 79% of the country's total export earnings in the fiscal year 2010-2011. Don't the economic advisors of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia tell them that *hartal* badly affects both domestic and foreign investments?

The politico-economic loss is worth noting. In a recent statement, the International Chamber of

When CFOs take over



I have serious bad news. News reports say that the recession has removed the power of Chief Operating Officers, the people who expand companies by investing in jobs and equipment. At the same time, it has raised the power of Chief Financial Officers,

the guys who go around destroying expansionist projects with large axes, sometimes literally.

This worries me. I know a CFO. He eats nails for breakfast, sometimes with bits of crucified former staff members still attached. What can we expect as people like him rise in power?

Here's the answer: *The Staff Manual, As Re-Written by The CFO: Dental Coverage*: To save costs, from now on, all tooth extractions will be done by the engineering department.

Blood Donation: Employees are reminded not to volunteer to donate blood. Blood donation will be considered Theft of Company Property.

Sick Leave: From now on, sick leave must be booked six weeks in advance. Nobody will be allowed to be sick without prior booking. The only exception with be death. Staff members who die need only give four weeks' notice.

Maternity Leave: We will maintain full maternity coverage for staff. However, all positions which come with pregnancy coverage will from now on be filled by men.

Coffee Breaks: The staff canteen will be closed. Staff are recommended to drink a day's worth of coffee before coming to the office.

Overtime Pay: Staff members who work more than the official number of working hours will be paid extra. However, the official number of working hours from now on will be 24 per day.

Child Labour: All underage workers on our factory lines have been sacked. However, the "Bring Your Daughter to Work Day" tradition will now be celebrated all year round, for both sexes. We suggest you drop your children off at the factory floor every morning at six a.m. and collect them at 6 p.m.

Minimum Wage: A competition will be held for all unit leaders to see who can pay their staff members the lowest wage. The winners will get their salaries on time.

Office Supplies: Auditors have calculated that 12,273 kilos of office supplies items are stolen by staff every year. Each staff member will therefore be required to bring 67 sheets of A4 paper and 20 paperclips from their home to the office every week.

Staff Insurance: Staff will be pleased to hear we have obtained fire and theft insurance. The insurance company will cover, in full, the cost of any items of staff property which have been stolen while on fire.

Compassionate Leave: This will no longer be allowed, as management is unable to understand this concept.

Toilet Breaks: To remove the temptation of wasting time in the toilets, all toilets have been removed. Please use the facilities at home before coming to work.

Conclusion: If any employee has any questions about the new arrangements, please write them on paper and deliver them to the factory furnace, where they will help to lower our heating bills. Thank you and enjoy your day.

For more "official" tips, visit: www.mrjam.typepad.com