More Nightmares to Come?

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The year 2013 began without the hope of better days in the New Year. Yet people welcomed 2013 amid fear of possible political unrest and violence. Political analysts and even many politicians had been warning the government and the major political parties--Awami League and BNP-- of the possibility of violence in the streets. They also had urged them to move towards resolving the looming crisis through talks and compromises for the sake of people and the country.

But no one paid much heed to such advice. The year 2013 started to become a string of nightmares for people. Half of 2013 has yet to be passed. Critical times are ahead with the next parliamentary election scheduled at the end of this year. Yet horrific incidents have shaken public confidence and replaced it with the uneasy feeling of more trouble ahead. Let us revisit some of those horrors.

Jamaat-Shibir men unleashed terror in parts of country for around a week from February 28 after a war crimes tribunal sentenced its leader Delwar Hossain Sayedee to death for committing war crimes during the country's liberation war in 1971. More than 70 people including eight policemen were killed in the clashes between law enforcers and Jamaat-Shibir men. In March and April, Jamaat-Shibir men also unleashed terror in some areas of the country, brutally attacking police. Things did not stop here. Grassroots-level activists of Jamaat-e-Islami have been preparing to unleash again vicious protests in the country sensing the international crimes tribunals may convict their former chief Ghulam Azam and leader Kamaruzzaman of war crimes charges. The war crimes tribunal may deliver verdicts any day in the two cases filed against Ghulam Azam and Kamaruzzaman.

The sudden rise of radical Islamists under the banner of Hefajat-e Islam now appears as another threat to the country's law and order and stability. They held a long march towards Dhaka on April 6 and subsequently a rally in the capital. A few lakh followers of Hefajat-e-Islam gathered at Shapla Chattar in the capital and gave the government a month's time to meet their 13-point demands. The law ministry in a careful review found none of the 13 points demands acceptable. Most of the demands run counter to the country's constitution. And if their demands are met, the country will be taken to the medieval period. So different quarters, particularly women have strongly denounced the Hefajat's demands. The Islmists then demanded that the government amend the constitution to meet their demands.

And after a month the Hefajat men returned on May 5 to the capital to lay siege to Dhaka. After the siege, they gathered at Shapla Chattar. This time many of them became violent and brutal. They struck terror. Several parts in downtown Dhaka resembled a burned-out, looted zone. The Hefajat men refused to leave the Shapla Chattar until their 13-points demands would be met. That prompted the government to use force to get them to leave the capital. Driven out from the capital, they engaged in fierce clashes with law enforcers in parts of the country the next day. Around 50 people including four law enforcers were killed in the clashes in the two days.

The turn of events has left people even more confused and insecure. The rising animosity between the ruling Awami League and main opposition BNP has continuously opened new windows of opportunity for extremist forces like Jamaat-Shibir and Hefajat to consolidate their strength to strike again and again. The BNP has openly extended their support to the Hefajat movement while the government had also made move to negotiate with them to foil BNP's effort to take political mileage from the Hefajat's agitation.

One thing is very clear however, even if all the Islamists forces become united they will not be able to assume state power by wining the electoral battles. Even a rough calculation says that at most their united strength may contribute to a maximum seven or eight percent of the total electorates. But they have made it clear that they are able to create unrest and instability, hampering the country's economic growth and social advancement. One