

Islamist terrorism: An oxymoron

MONAEM SARKER

ISLAM is a religion of peace. Unfortunately, the word Islam has become synonymous with terrorism. A deeper analysis and examination is required to understand why this has happened. Global politics have led to the birth of certain issues which have always been witnessing the volcanic eruption of terrorism, which was described as Islamist terrorism.

The trouble did not originate from preaching of religion. Let us cite the example of Palestine. For more than six decades the Middle East has witnessed violent clashes between Israel and Palestine, which have been described by the western press as Islamist terrorism. Palestine is an ancient land in Southern Asia on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. It is known as the holy land of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Palestine changed hands many times in the long period of its existence. Finally, it fell to the Muslims in 636-40 AD. The region was absorbed into the Arab world and Jerusalem became an important city for Muslims. During World War I British troops under General Allenby occupied Palestine, ending 400 years of Turkish rule. Immediately after occupation the British government issued the Balfour Declaration in 1917 pledging its support for a Jewish national home in Palestine. The League of Nations made Palestine a British mandate in 1922.

After the Balfour Declaration about 300,000 Jews immigrated to Palestine between 1922 and 1939 and bought Arab-owned land. The Arab majority feared a Zionist plan to dispossess them and make Palestine a Jewish state. During Second World War, as Nazi destruction of European Jews proceeded, Zionist leaders pressed for a Jewish state and unrestricted immigration into Palestine.

In May 1948, as the British mandate ended, Jewish leaders proclaimed the state of Israel. David Ben-Gurion became the first prime minister. This is how the seed of conflict was sown in the Middle-East, and from then on it has been an area of armed struggle and a permanent threat to world peace. Moreover, frustration grew among the Arab youths, particularly those who had become homeless due to Jewish occupation and were compelled to take shelter under various armed organisations. These organisations cropped up because of political conflict and not religious preaching.

The perpetrators of 9/11 were once the blue eyed boys of the US. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan focused several discrete strategic agenda. The US saw it as a way of bleeding the Russians by using Afghan proxies. Afghanistan is estimated to have cost the Soviet Union some \$45 billion by the time the Russians retreated, leaving a million Afghans dead at the expense of fifteen thousand Red Army casualties. The US gave all-out support to the Afghan Mujahideen, the resistance movement against Soviet occupation.

In fact, the Afghan issue led to the growth of hydra-headed terrorist organisations. The US patronised all Muslim organisations that came forward to fight the Soviet invasion. The US indiscriminately inspired and instigated Muslims to join the war and provided them



with arms and money. During this period, an organisation called al-Qaeda flourished under the charismatic leadership of Osama Bin Laden. He was Yemeni by birth, settled in Saudi Arabia, and an engineer by profession. He was a billionaire too. Al-Qaeda opened an office in the affluent Peshawar suburb of Hyatabad.

The rise of so-called Islamist terrorism in many Muslim states was due to the misrule, corruption and authoritarian behaviour of the rulers. In Somalia, a group of leftist army officers led by Maj. Gen. Mohammad Siad Barre seized power in 1969. Masquerading as a socialist ideology, he imposed dictatorship. In 1991, Barre was overthrown by a coalition of rebel groups. These groups lacked a unified command. As a result, Somalia has been

a victim of factional war. Every group has been spreading in its own way. Somalia has attained notoriety for piracy in the ships passing through the Horn of Africa.

In Algeria, the democratic leader Ahmed Ben Bella was deposed by his friend in 1965 and control of the country was taken over by Hourie Boumediene, who pursued a policy of socialism. He died in 1978 and was succeeded by Col. Benjedid Chadhli. The army and FLN (the organisation which fought for liberation) leadership constantly harped on their heroic revolutionary role in the liberation struggle in 1950 through 60. Meanwhile, the leadership moved away from socialism and encouraged private ownership. These corrupt leaders used privatisation of land to build luxury villas and private factories. Money earned from oil and gas was transferred to Swiss banks, leaving the common people in abject poverty. Deep frustration was created among the young people who helped accelerate the rise of Islamists, and they assured justice and elimination of corruption. This resulted in direct clash between the rulers and the Islamists, causing loss of innumerable lives.

Turkey became a secular country when Kemal Ataturk shut down all kinds of madrasas. But in 1950s, the US government threatened to stop all aid to Turkey if it did not open a limited number of madrasas.

Meanwhile, the world was torn by the Cold War between two superpowers -- United States and USSR. US would create a green belt around the world to stop the advent of the red power. So they were ready to rouse the religious sentiment of the people, which was easy to do among the poor and less educated people. The US religiously followed this dictum.

What do we learn from the above discourse? Conflicts arose due to the Cold War, or misrule and corruption. They had nothing to do with religion. If we read the history of Islam, we will find that it was spread mainly by Sufis and the Ulama. In this subcontinent the Muslims ruled for more than seven hundred years. But most of the rulers did not play any dominant role in converting people of other religion into Islam. Islamic saints, Sufis and Ulama were able to impress the people and there was peaceful conversion. Due to misconception or deliberate attempt by a section of the media, the misguided people who became terrorists being are dubbed as Islamist terrorists.

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Right to say 'NO'

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

THE High Court on Sunday asked for explanation from the government and Election Commission why they should not be directed to bring necessary amendments to the RPO to re-introduce the provision of 'no' vote.

This is a welcome step. If re-introduced, the provision would not only empower voters but also accelerate effective public participation in the democratic process. From the public perspective, it is no less important than the caretaker issue. If a caretaker government ensures free and fair elections, an empowered citizenry can make the right choice.

The idea of 'no' vote is very simple and democratic. In case a voter does not find any suitable candidate, there must be a provision to register 'no' vote, i.e. none could be found worthy of being elected. It is based on the principle that consent requires the ability to withhold consent. That means you have the right to say 'yes' only when you have the right to say 'no'. This is the pre-requisite of building any democratic institution. A democratic institution creates space for the voters to safeguard their rights and fight the tyranny of brute majority. And our democracy is suffering from this anemia due to the absence of democratic institutions.

The incumbent Awami League-led government came to power with a landslide victory. Then why did it have to scrap the provision of 'no' vote? In the 9th general elections, 0.55% voters opted for 'no vote'. The number amounts to almost four lakh voters. It appears the winning party could not tolerate the tiny amount of opposition in fear that one day this aggrieved minority could turn out to be a majority. The opposition BNP-led alliance also did not lodge any protest against this undemocratic decision of the incumbent.

The irony is that we have choices but only to choose organised greed that always defeats our disorganised democracy. Once they come to power, they become absolute rulers and corrupt absolutely. Why do we need an elected king?

If we look at other democracies, there are provisions of no vote in 14 countries. India is going to apply this provision in five provinces in the upcoming elections. The observation of the Supreme Court of India in this regard is worth quoting: "It (NOTA Indian version of 'no vote') would lead to a systemic change in polls and political parties will be forced to project clean candidates". The observation is equally, if not more, relevant for us.

Finally, our political parties could not have mocked the democratic values if so many of us did not insist on our right to remain ignorant and blindly agreeable. We want to come out of the submissiveness. So we want to get back our right to 'no vote'.

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Slow progress in getting back GSP facility

SULTANA YESMIN

THE US suspended GSP facility for Bangladesh on June 27, 2013. Following the Rana Plaza incident in April 2013 and, before that, the fire in the Tazreen Fashions in November 2012, the US decided to postpone duty-free access for Bangladesh's specialised products in the US.

According to the US authorities, the major causes behind the cancellation of GSP were mainly the incidents in garment factories; the increasing number of deaths of garment workers; unsafe working conditions; human rights violation; harassment of labour organisers; poor salary etc.

Immediately after the decision, the US added some preconditions for the revival of GSP facility. The new terms and conditions were improvement of labour situation; safety standards for garment factory workers; assurance of security in the workplace; formulation of comprehensive, concrete and coordinated plan to ensure worker's safety and secure workers' rights, etc. The authority also added that it would analyse the situation again after six months, following which the GSP suspension would be reviewed.

However, the US gave an Action Plan citing the measures for protecting workers' rights and fulfilling preconditions for getting back the GSP facility. The Action Plan calls on Bangladesh to significantly increase the number of labour, fire and building inspectors and to improve their training. It also recommends imposition of stiffer penalties for the violation of labour law, with particular focus on building safety standards.

In response to this attempt, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina urged the US to withdraw the suspension of GSP. In order to regain GSP facility, the government has already taken some initiatives. For example, Bangladesh has adopted the 'Labour Law 2013' in order to protect the rights of the workers. The government has also initiated an attempt for the appointment of as many as 200 workers and the setting up of 7 fire fighting stations to improve the safety of factories. Moreover, the government has also amended the 2006 Labour Act to ease the conditions of trade union in the garment sector, though it has not yet been passed.

Despite all these initiatives, the recent unrest in garment industries due to low wage and unsafe working conditions, confrontation between owners and workers may bring about severe challenges for the country in getting back the GSP facility. Bangladesh has not yet been

successful in ensuring safe working environment and human rights in garment factories. The wage board fixed an amount of Tk.3,500 for garment workers on November 21, 2013. The workers were not satisfied with this scale, and demanded Tk.8,000 as the minimum wage. The International Labor Organization (ILO) report titled "Bangladesh: Seeking better employment conditions for better socioeconomic outcomes" expressed grave concern about the human rights of the workers. The report said that Bangladeshi garment workers earn less than workers in Vietnam, India or Pakistan.

Will Bangladesh be able to fulfill the preconditions for the revival of GSP facility? How can the country restore its preferential access to the world's largest single market? Though many experts and policy makers have reaffirmed the chances of getting back the facility, it cannot be surely said that it would be easy for Bangladesh to get back the opportunity very soon.

Will Bangladesh be able to fulfill the preconditions for the revival of GSP facility? How can the country restore its preferential access to the world's largest single market? Though many experts and policy makers have reaffirmed the chances of getting back the facility, it cannot be surely said that it would be easy for Bangladesh to get back the opportunity very soon.

In a hearing titled "Bangladesh in Turmoil: A Nation on the Brink" held on November 20, 2013 in Washington D.C., and arranged by Committee on Foreign Affairs and Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, John Stifton, Asia Advocacy Director of Human Rights Watch said: "Worker rights and worker safety have been in the spotlight in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza factory collapse and Tazreen factory fire, and small improvements have been observed in the ability of workers to organise."

Cancellation of GSP will damage United States-Bangladesh bilateral trade relations. Bangladesh may also lose foreign investment in the long run. Many experts also warn that if Bangladesh failed to satisfy the US, it may also face losing the same kind of preference from the European Union (EU) as well, which still provides huge support to Bangladeshi apparel products. The other possi-

ble challenges might be the loss of Bangladesh's competitiveness in the world market, rise of duty in exports, reduction of bilateral trade, and so on.

Bangladesh still has the chance to regain the GSP facility as the US has given six months for making visible improvements in the garment sectors and has also added some preconditions for the revival of GSP facility. The government should immediately take necessary attempts for sustaining the country's economic privileges in the world market. The government should formulate safety codes, stop harassment and arrest of workers, improve working conditions, and ensure non-discriminatory treatment under the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as soon as possible.

Unless Bangladesh is able to fulfil the requirements of getting back the GSP, the future of its garment sector along with all other industrial products will suffer in the long run. The latest report of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) warned: "Unless a comprehensive set of labour market and social policies are introduced, Bangladesh will be unable to maintain its economic momentum and improve living standards in a sustainable way."

GSP is a tool for providing economic privilege to 'most-favoured nation' in order to promote economic growth around the globe. The world's poorest countries are getting economic privileges from developed countries from 1976. Under the GSP programme, 127 beneficiary developing countries, including 44 least-developed countries get duty-free treatment up to 5,000 types of products during the export to the US. The major objectives of GSP are to advance international economic development by lowering the costs of imported goods and reducing the tariffs of exported goods.

The GSP facilities allow duty-free access for some 5,000 products to enter the US market from least developed countries. LDCs are benefited as they can export up to 5,000 types of products free of duty to the US. Bangladesh, among more than 125 countries, receives economic privileges on United States tariffs under a World Trade Organisation (WTO) programme. Bangladesh gets preferences from the US on tobacco, sports equipment, porcelain china and plastic products. Around 5,000 Bangladeshi products are accorded as duty-free access to the US market.

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By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Kilt pattern game
7 Con game
11 On the beach
12 Mama's mate
13 Uncredited author
15 Indian lute
16 Detective's find
18 Look upon
21 Fellow
22 Traveler's complaint
24 Assist
25 Calf creation
26 "For shame!"
27 Bit of shot
29 Bee's home
30 Accomplishment
31 Window piece
32 Skating category
34 Dr. Venkman, for one
40 Top-notch
41 Moon-struck
42 Some summer babies
43 Appeared

DOWN

1 Play-ground game
2 Fire remnant
3 Pi follower
4 Even chance
5 Band-leader
6 Small amphibian
7 Apparition
8 Witch's familiar
9 Big galoot
10 Disfigure
14 Ominous bird
16 Primary
17 Soup server
19 Mischievous
20 Do away with
21 Beanie or barefoot
22 Stick out
23 "My word!"
25 Suggest
28 Slippage
29 Nuisance
31 Trim the topiary
33 Sacred bird of Egypt
34 Lass
35 Garden tool
36 Music's Yoko
37 Huck's pal
38 All Hallows'—
39 Blood color

Yesterday's answer

10-24 CRYPTOQUOTE
OI XYE JTZGC XYES VBYPZ
POIZ VFOMOGU IYS MBZ
JMYSK, XYE'PP GZQZS ZGLYX
MBZ JEGJBOGZ. — KYSSOJ
V Z J M

YESTERDAY'S CRYPTOQUOTE:
IT IS THE GREATEST OF ALL ADVANTAGES TO ENJOY NO ADVANTAGE AT ALL.
-HENRY DAVID THOREAU

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

On letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

10-24 CRYPTOQUOTE
OI XYE JTZGC XYES VBYPZ
POIZ VFOMOGU IYS MBZ
JMYSK, XYE'PP GZQZS ZGLYX
MBZ JEGJBOGZ. — KYSSOJ
V Z J M

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BEETLE BAILEY

ARE YOU SURE THIS IS THE RIGHT WAY, SARGE?

ARE YOU SAYING I CAN'T FIND MY WAY?

YOU'LL SEE! WE'LL BE BACK IN CAMP IN A MINUTE

HENRY

VISIT INDIA

by Mort Walker

by Don Trachte

QUOTABLE Quote

"Time is neutral and does not change things. With courage and initiative, leaders change things."

Jesse Jackson