

Radicalised Bangladeshis in Singapore

Crucial need for bilateral cooperation

WE take the developments regarding Bangladeshis' involvement in terrorism in Singapore very seriously, for though the conspiracy—for which six Bangladeshi workers have been charged with terror financing—was hatched in Singapore, it dealt with the alleged toppling of the government in Bangladesh. In fact, Bangladesh owes Singapore a debt of gratitude for unearthing the ominous plot to destabilise the country, and must fully cooperate with the latter in providing whatever intel its agencies have. We must also establish a formal collaboration between the two countries to unearth terror outfits with a regional reach.

What is unfortunate is that our first reaction always seems to be that of denial and of downplaying the threat posed by these extremist groups, even as we vow to get to the bottom of the militant activities in the country. Whether or not the groups in question have ties to ISIS or Al Qaeda, there is enough evidence to suggest that militant organisations in the country do have international links, and the sooner we wake up to this reality the better it would enable us to tackle the issue of rising extremism head-on.

This is not the first time that Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore have been accused of extremism. On January of this year, 26 Bangladeshis were arrested for allegedly supporting a jihadi terror cell and later deported to Bangladesh. Upon their arrival, however, 12 of them were allowed to go free. We cannot help but wonder if sufficient action is being taken on the ground here to uncover the complicity of Bangladeshis in orchestrating terror from abroad.

Meanwhile, as these alleged extremists are tried in court, we urge the Singapore government to ensure that its repercussions do not fall on the rest of the dedicated Bangladeshi workers who may now be marked for their origins, even though they have no ties to extremists.

Decisive victory of Mamata

An opportunity to strengthen ties

MAMATA Banerjee has proven how a committed leader can sweep the polls against veteran rival, the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) that had ruled the State for decades. We note how effectively she has countered communal forces in West Bengal. The relationship between Bangladesh and West Bengal is very special and Ms. Banerjee has shown her political acumen by wasting no time in inviting our prime minister to pay a visit to Kolkata upon her reelection for a second term to public office. Trinamool Congress's latest win puts the party squarely at the helm of affairs and has changed the political landscape of India which was evident by the presence of so many important leaders from the centre at the swearing in ceremony.

With this victory, we must assert the need for vital cooperation on issues that are crucial for Bangladesh such as the Teesta river water sharing agreement and concerns that linger over the Tipaimukh dam. It should be noted that Mamata's opposition to water sharing of Teesta led to a rather public spat between the two neighbouring countries and soured our relations with Delhi. Being a lower riverine country, Bangladesh must have its due share of water, and we can only hope that with the acceptance of Mamata's invitation to our Prime Minister to visit West Bengal, these sticky issues will be resolved expeditiously. It is our sincerest hope that Ms. Banerjee will move away from her earlier stance and take a more pragmatic one on these issues and others which

COMMENTS

"Traffic goes haywire"
 (May 26, 2016)

CM Kalim

Nothing is going to change unless traffic law is obeyed by all.

Iqbal Ahmed

Cycling could be an effective way to reduce the traffic jam. But we need separate lanes for the cyclists.

Trans-Pacific Partnership

Will US elections sound the death knell for TPP?

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE US presidential election campaign is a fascinating case study on how politics overwhelms better judgment. The case in point is how the short term needs of an election campaign can wipe out years of careful work and good judgment of economists that went into the drafting of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement. TPP is now gasping for breath and has been severely mauled and wounded by the top candidates. Congress has to pass the agreement in the next five months, since the dynamics will change after the US presidential elections on November 8, 2016. After the new president is elected, and considering the fact that all the front-runners have voiced reservations about TPP, it would be impossible for Congress to pass a treaty that was negotiated under the watch of President Obama, who leaves office in less than three months after the election, but most importantly one that is potentially opposed by the newly-elected president.

US President Obama signed the TPP on February 3, 2016 but House Speaker Paul Ryan immediately announced that there were not enough votes to pass it. The main obstacle to approval, Republican leaders say, is that there is not enough support to approve the agreement because of concerns raised by financial services, pharmaceutical and tobacco companies. As the primary season got under way earlier this year, opposition to TPP grew. And, to borrow from a well-known speech in *Julius Caesar* by Shakespeare, all TPP opponents are parroting Marc Antony in one voice: "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him". And, as Marc Antony later laments, in this electioneering season good judgment has taken leave of politicians who are fighting for the coveted chair in the White House. Call all this xenophobic, or "irrational" as economists would, it has a strong hold on the current US political discourse.

There are several next steps needed before Congress votes on a TPP implementation bill, including a review of the United States International Trade Commission (USITC) report. USITC is an independent, bipartisan, quasi-judicial, federal agency of the United States that provides trade expertise to both the legislative and executive branches. The 800-page evaluation based on a dynamic CGE model offers a lukewarm support for TPP, and basically reinforces what many of the pact's detractors had suspected, viz. the gain in GDP, employment and exports would be minuscule. Congress is not likely to consider the bill before reviewing this report, so the agreement could be voted on late this summer. Once the TPP implementation bill goes to Congress, the House must vote on the bill within 60 legislative days and the Senate must vote within 15 days after the House votes. The clock starts ticking for the US

elections, and if Congress has not approved the bill by July 2, the last day of the Republican National Convention, it would be tough for the Republican dominated House to pass the bill with Donald Trump as the Republican nominee.

So what is the roadblock? As can be expected, the current election cycle brought up the fissures along the US body politic in relation to trade pacts. And the ghost of a past pact seems to have cast a very deep shadow. Even though study after study shows that NAFTA benefits US consumers, and the overall gain for the US economy outweighs the losses due to job losses and outsourcing, almost the entirety of the US electorate believe that NAFTA is 'bad'. Recent opinions polls found that almost two-thirds of US voters favour restrictions on foreign trade and view free trade with deep suspicion, even if they have

were completed last year. During the February 4, 2016 presidential debate, Clinton said she opposed the trade deal because, "We have failed to provide the basic safety net support that American workers need in order to be able to compete and win in the global economy." Then in May, she said Congress shouldn't take up the agreement as it is currently written, either this year or even next year if she is elected. Let us look at a couple of scenarios. If Trump wins, the Senate majority leader Senator Mitch McConnell would be too happy to delay the debate until President Trump is sworn-in. On the other hand, if Clinton wins, she will be in no mood to let the Republican-dominated Congress pass the bill, and her position has hardened as she is trying to please the Sanders supporters. She recently reiterated that she would oppose any new trade deal unless they meet her three-point test of creating US jobs, raising wages and improving national security.

So, I do not foresee that TPP will have an easy sailing notwithstanding President Obama, who during a trip to Vietnam said on May 23 that Congress will approve TPP before the elections. However, since several studies show that economic gains for the US in key areas is small, whether voter sentiment will change as they see the benefits of cheaper goods, digital commerce, and global investment opportunities, is moot. The trade deal would hurt manufacturing and reduce the sector's growth by one-fifth. According to a report by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, "The lost manufacturing jobs will be offset by higher employment in service and "primary goods" industries that rely on exports, like agriculture and forestry." These jobs, according to this study, pay higher wages than the jobs lost. The authors note that "workers in specific locations, industries, or with skill shortages may experience serious transition costs," but compensation for displaced individuals could be extracted from "a fraction of the total US gains." The billion dollar questions remains: Would Congress be keen on taking initiatives on these ideas? Meanwhile, another voice against plurilateral trade pacts, such as TPP, is Jagdish Bhagwati. He, as always, favours free trade but not the kind that TPP codifies. As a true believer, he uses the standard "Gains from Trade" framework and points the finger at TPP for its role in trade diversion rather than trade creation. Jagdish Bhagwati argues that "so-called free trade agreements (FTAs)", which he maintains are in fact preferential trade agreements (PTAs) involving two or more countries, "actually set back the cause of free trade and undermine the multilateral trading system" propounded by the Doha Round of WTO negotiations.

The writer is an economist, and his most recent book, *Economics Is Fun* is a collection of essays published in *The Daily Star*.

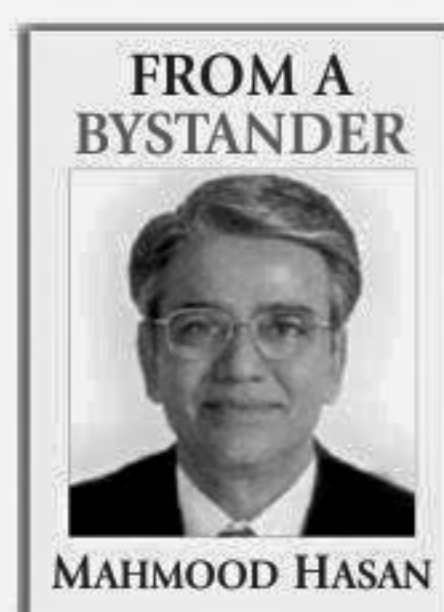


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to pay a penalty in the form of higher prices. And the rationale is pretty simple: protecting domestic jobs is considered a higher priority over less expensive imports. More jobs over lower price. "It's perhaps the only thing that businessman Donald Trump and democratic socialist Bernie Sanders agree on: free trade. Both say that if elected president, they'll get out of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which they say floods the American market with inexpensive goods, produced with cheap foreign labour, in turn making American-made goods – and jobs – disappear."

And, what about Hillary Clinton? While serving as Obama's Secretary of State, she was supportive of TPP and the Obama Administration's efforts until she left office in January 2013. She switched her allegiance and announced her opposition to TPP after negotiations

State Assembly Elections in India Of Triumphs and Losses



MAHMOOD HASAN

FROM A BYSTANDER

STATE Assembly Elections were recently held in five states of India – Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala, Assam, and Puducherry. Let us look at West Bengal and Assam – two bordering states of Bangladesh. Despite conflicting predictions, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee (61) has retained leadership of West Bengal. Her Trinamool Congress (TMC) won an overwhelming 212 seats in the 294-seat Vidhan Sabha. Mamata split from the Indian National Congress and formed the Trinamool Congress in 1998. Since then, a determined Mamata made inroads in West Bengal politics and finally won a historic majority in the State Assembly Elections in 2011, winning 184 seats and ousting the 34-year old deeply embedded CPI(M)-led Left-front government (1977-2011).

This time, the confident Mamata did not go for any electoral alliance with any party. She single-handedly took on the Congress-CPI(M) alliance. Congress-CPI got only 70 seats, while the BJP managed only 3. Compared to 2011, her victory this time bears significance as she has come back with a larger mandate. Her victory can be assigned to several factors. Though there were smear campaigns against her, people believe that she is "honest" and "clean". The Saradha scam and the Narada scandal could not dent her clean image. Analysts say that TMC's better organisation and

Mamata's efforts to deliver good governance and her "pro-people and pro-rural programme" helped her win rural votes. After the election result, she said, "Despite the best efforts of all opposition to malign us, the blessings of *Ma, Mati, Manush* [mother, land, people] have reinstated us in power". Even the BJP paid compliments to Mamata, saying that the landslide victory was due to Mamata's "clean image".

However, Mamata will face challenges from several fronts – she has to meet the rising expectations of her voters; reign in supporters committing violence; repay the Rs. 3 billion central government debt, which will curtail development projects; attract investments to the state; and forestall Congress and BJP conspiracies to unseat her government.

Mamata's relations with Bangladesh appear to be good. She visited Bangladesh twice – once in February 2015 to attend the Mother Language Day commemoration, and again in June 2015 with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

During her visit, she assured Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to have "trust" in her, apparently over the Teesta Treaty. Can she convert that assurance into reality, keeping in mind that the Teesta Treaty is a central government issue? It is well-known that Mamata was against signing the treaty.

Mamata Banerjee was sworn-in as Chief Minister on May 27 for the second term at a colourful ceremony, where Industries Minister Amir Hossain Amu represented Bangladesh.

The BJP-led alliance made significant inroads in the otherwise strong Congress bastion in Assam, winning 86 seats in the 126-seat House. BJP, for the first

time, is leading the state government after it ousted Congress, which held power without interruption for 15 years.

BJP did not make the mistakes it committed in Bihar in November 2015. BJP has a tie-up with Asom Gono Parishad (AGP) since 2001, and this time the local party Bodoland People's Front (BPF) was also on board. It also chose tribal millionaire Sarbananda Sonowal as its Chief Minister candidate. He was sworn-in on May 24.

Assamese politics has always revolved around the so-called immigration from Bangladesh. Thus what potentially ensured BJP's victory was the anti-immigrant (immigrant here mainly refers to Bangladeshis) slogan. Formed in 1985, AGP raised the bogey of "illegal migrants from Bangladesh", when Prafulla Kumar Mohanta became the Chief Minister of the state.

Apart from exploiting Congress' corruption scandals and misrule in Assam, the saffron alliance rode on the same narrow communal slogan and a mellowed Hindutva agenda. Playing on the fear that Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh will inundate Assam and take over the land helped consolidate the Hindus of Assamese, and Bengali and people of tribal origins under the saffron flag.

Prime Minister Modi and Home Minister Rajnath Singh have assured Assamese that the Indo-Bangladesh border will be sealed to end the problem of infiltration. India has already built a 3,406 kilometres-long fence on the 4,097 kilometres border – a large part of which is electrified. Only a few kilometres of the 263-km Assam-Bangladesh border remain unfenced. What surprised many is that given the

current level of understanding between Delhi and Dhaka, the BJP chose to play the cheap anti-Bangladesh card to win elections in a bordering state of Bangladesh.

People actually migrate to richer pastures, not to economically poor lands, where sectarian violence is common and prone to insurgency. The North Eastern States of India are a neglected region and much poorer than Bangladesh.

It must be reiterated here that Bangla-speaking Muslims in Assam have not been regularly migrating to Assam since the Partition of 1947. But that is another narrative for some other time. One only hopes that the basic rights of 35 percent of the minority Muslims will not be denied under the new state government.

In Tamil Nadu, the AIADMK party of J. Jayalalitha won 134 seats in the 232-seat Assembly and shall form the government for the sixth time. In Kerala, the CPM-led Left Democratic Front took 91 seats in the 140-seat Assembly. The Congress-DMK coalition won 17 seats in the 30-seat Union Territory, Puducherry.

Results show that the Congress is unable to convert its share of votes (percentage of votes has remained same) into numbers in the assemblies. BJP, by making alliances of convenience, has got the numbers in Assam. BJP now controls more states than Congress and its allies in India's 29 states.

After regional parties won the Delhi and Bihar elections in 2015, regional leaders were talking to form a third front to oppose BJP. Now with TMC winning West Bengal, will a third front emerge to halt the Hindutva bandwagon?

The writer is a former Ambassador and Secretary.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The power of consumers

In developed countries when the price of a food item goes up, consumers do not buy it for a week or so and ultimately the price falls. Stores cut down the price, sometimes less than 50 percent, if it is a perishable item.

Food prices are on the rise in our country. What if we don't buy an item which has been made expensive overnight? During the Holy month of Ramadan, what if we do not consume foods made with pulses, onions, etc for a week? We should give it a try and let's see what happens.

As consumers, we can certainly control the prices of essentials in kitchen markets. Just don't buy or buy less if absolutely necessary.

Ziauddin Ahmed
 On e-mail

Begging rising

Begging is a serious problem in our country as it is. Unfortunately, the number of beggars seems to increase during the Holy month of Ramadan. Many able-bodied people are seen begging for alms as they expect to earn more during this month. The authorities should undertake rehabilitation programmes for these people to solve this problem.

Mabbubuddin Chowdhury
 Gandaria, Dhaka



PHOTO: STAR

Make the price of salt reasonable

Just a few months ago, the price of refined salt was Taka 25 per kg. Now the price has gone up to Taka 35-40. What is the reason behind this price hike? Is there suddenly a scarcity of salt in the market? We are drawing the attention of the authority concerned to look into this matter seriously.

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