After Bhola

Five takes on the proliferation of fake news to instigate communal unrest and its larger political implications

ALI RIAZ
Professor
of Political Science
Illinois State University, USA

Ask "who benefits" from unleashing the violence

Violence in Bhola preceded with a familiar pattern of events, blaming a member of a religious minority for demeaning Islam, creating a frenzy and then mobilising the angry people to the street. While those who hacked the Facebook of an individual, circulated this post and organised the demonstration must be held responsible, what allows this kind of situations to emerge can't be simply overlooked. Deep-seated problems of the society, polity and governance have produced the situation. The recurrence of the familiar process testifies to the structural aspect. A predatory majoritarian Muslim Bengali identity is now enshrined in the constitution; it is reproduced in the political discourses on an everyday basis, which provides religio-political forces an advantage. When the ruling party leaders—from the top to the bottom—adore the religious garbs and frequently use religious rhetoric to prove their religious credentials, when the ruling party succumbs to the pressure of retrograde religio-political forces on many occasions—the message becomes loud and clear. What prompts the ruling party to capitulate is not difficult to understand—the lack of moral legitimacy. Popular mandate earned through a fair election is the fundamental basis of the moral legitimacy of the ruling party in democratic governance. Since 2014, the moral legitimacy of the incumbent has remained tenuous at its best, absent at its worst.

This is accompanied with growing intolerance—of dissent and diversity. Draconian laws and extrajudicial measures have been employed by the state and ruling party for the past years to silence critics and anyone who allegedly "hurt religious sentiment". This has become a license to all who want to muzzle what they consider "objectionable". Intolerance has permeated the entire society; extremists of all shades are in the driver's seat. Frequent

At least four people were killed and more than a hundred others injured during a clash in Bhola's Borhanuddin upazila.

and disproportionate use of force has become the hallmark of governance. This has normalised violence and created an environment for others to use violence to achieve their objectives. In the absence of an open political environment, those who can use violence gain a prominent position. The response of the members of the law enforcing agencies, which cost four lives in this instance, has become an issue of controversy. Whether they acted slowly over a two days period to prevent the situation from deteriorating and then used force to control the situation is a question many are asking. To find answers to these, a speedy and independent enquiry of the entire incident is necessary; the civil society organisations should act expeditiously.

We need to confront two deliberate campaigns as well: blaming the social media, particularly Facebook as the source of the mayhem, and the claim that the entire episode of violence was a spontaneous act of a group of people. Despite instances of abuse of Facebook to foment hatred—in Bangladesh as much as elsewhere in the world—this should not be used as pretext to limit access to social media and further shrink freedom of expression. The situation in this regard is already very alarming. Acts of collective violence are rarely spontaneous, particularly when the issue of religion is involved. The violence in Bhola, like all other previous incidents, is a result of some forms of organising. Always there are entrepreneurs of violence, with specific objectives. That's why it is imperative to ask "who benefits" from unleashing the violence and whether it serves to reinforce preconceived ideas about the victims and the perpetrators.