

Uproot militants from their dens

Extremist threats still persist

It is alarming to learn that militants belonging to the group known as Ansar Al Islam are being trained in secret hideouts within Bangladesh, with the nefarious plan to strike at the opportune moment. According to a report from the country's intelligence agencies, this terror group categorises progressive people and atheists as their "soft targets," and organisations promoting Hindutva and foreign missions as "hard targets." The masterminds, the intelligence reports say, have no plans to attack the law enforcers right away as it believes such attacks will ultimately lead to a major confrontation with the latter, which will weaken its strength.

This outfit, once known as Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), was banned under the Anti-Terrorism Act. It is known to be the Bangladesh chapter of al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which is finalising a list of its future targets. The outfit has been banned following its involvement in some attacks on secular bloggers and writers in the country. According to the law enforcers, during investigation, they found Ansarullah Bangla Team's involvement in the killing of writer-blogger Avijit Roy in broad daylight—a despicable act that received wide international coverage. The ban came at a time when three more bloggers and writers were also killed within the span of less than three months.

We may recall that ABT was the sixth such organisation to be outlawed for militant and anti-state activities in the country. The other five are: Hizb ut-Tahrir, Jama'at ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Harkatul Jihad Bangladesh (Huji), Jagrata Muslim Janata of Bangladesh, and Shahadat-e al-Hikma.

It is doubly distressing to learn that the banned outfits Hizb ut-Tahrir, JMB and Huji are still active in the country, secretly working with little-known militant organisations to reach their goals. The counterterrorism officials further revealed that the hiring and initial training of Ansar Al Islam were being done online, whereas advanced training for the outfit's military wing is given in person in some remote areas of the country. The outfit considers Kashmir as a possible shelter and the Rohingya community in Bangladesh as a source for new members. The report also said a group of new Ansar Al Islam recruits tried to go to Afghanistan and Kashmir through the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Cox's Bazar. The group plans to build dens in the Indo-Bangla border areas, so that they can operate smoothly from there.

It becomes evident from the intelligence reports that the recruits and trainers of the militant groups are conducting their activities inside the country. They cannot conduct training in remote areas all by themselves. It is obvious that they are being provided with shelter and basic logistics by people who sympathise with their cause. We believe, through widening their intelligence network, our law enforcers should be able to apprehend the sympathisers and destroy the nexus with greater success.

We wish you all a Merry Christmas

Let the teachings of Jesus prevail over selfishness

AS Christians around the world celebrate today as the day when Jesus Christ was born, in a world where bigotry and hatred seem to be on the rise, the message that he taught now seems more relevant than ever. The teachings of Jesus on love, humility and humanity are universal. They are similar to the ones shared by all the great religions of the world. The love that Christ showed for humanity, his compassion towards those who were less fortunate, and his tendency to forgive are traits that we can all learn from.

Sadly, what we are witnessing today is how the teachings of these great religions are being forgotten. In many instances, they are being misinterpreted and misused. Whereas all the great religions—Christianity included—advocate the importance of inclusivity and tolerance, today, people around the world are using their names to promote or do the opposite. That is why it is particularly important on days like today for us to remind ourselves of the true teachings of these religions, and how beneficial they could be for humanity.

In our country, we have seen intolerance towards non-dominant religions and groups increase in recent times. Given the ideals on which this country was founded, that is a travesty of immeasurable proportions. Therefore, it is time for all of us to reaffirm our commitments to increase interfaith understanding and to live with each other in peace and with mutual respect.

In line with that, it is also time for religion to be depoliticised—for the use of religion to increase hate for personal benefit to stop. We must remember that all the great religions of humanity showed us how to grow spiritually, to become better individuals, and to treat others better.

Today, let us all embody the spirit of Christmas and be united in our efforts to combat the Covid-19 pandemic by showing the best part of our humanity, extending a hand to those who need it. We wish all our Christian brothers and sisters a safe, joyous and peaceful Christmas.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Bangladesh at 50!

As we celebrate our 50th Victory Day, one cannot help feeling a certain sense of bitter-sweet emotions. Yes, we have come a long way in terms of economic emancipation—even though there are still many who are trapped in the poverty cycle. However, the ideals that once freed this country have gone missing somewhere along the path. Without them, the dreams of those who sacrificed so much to give us a free country will never become a reality.

Habibullah, Dhaka



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND
IN October 2019, *The Guardian* featured an article titled "The rise and rise of Bangladesh" with a string attached in its title, asking, "But is life getting any better?" The story mostly focused on the "factory generation" comprising 4.5 million textile workers who, for the UK-based daily, have changed the fame and fortunes of a country that has travelled 50 years, and is now all set to become a developing country powered mostly by its hard-working women. While referring to our working bees who are making the buzz,

content nuggets, we can easily know how others are reacting to our success. I have been watching various Indian and Pakistani news content, where pundits are seen explaining the marvellous rise of Bangladesh. They do so with a sign of admiration (perhaps with a sigh of regret) that a country that was lagging behind them in all social indicators has now leapfrogged ahead of them. In their search for the secret sauce that brewed our success, they detect the comparatively high level of female participation in the workforce as well as high enrolment of girls in primary education. The once ignored part of the society is, thus, contributing more to our social growth than those in our former "cousins." Success for them has come from the unexpected gender corner. They attempt to ignore the strategic interventions or

so far. The women's team has done it before—they have done it once more to make our celebration of Victory Day even more beautiful.

The "dry leaf" shot of Anai Mogini drifted into the Indian goal post when nobody was expecting it—the pressure was on, expectations were high during the SAFF final, and our U-19 women's team delivered once again in the regional tourney. Even before the match, these women were confident of a win as they had done the same in the regulation match. They were donning their red and green jerseys probably sewn by women of their own age. They had the pride of wearing the red colour of sacrifices that were once done by their previous generations. They had the pride of wearing the green colour of youthful exuberance found in our natural

the way the team has come together to lift the trophy in the final is a reflection of our aspirational identity.

The country started on a secular stride, hoping all the communities would come together as a nation. It was heart-warming to see a bearded man in a cap vigorously waving the national flag to cheer for the national women's team. Yes, I know I am harping on religious stereotypes! But this is the beauty of Bangladesh at 50: women sports being supported by religious men; a minority girl being cheered by others; contact sports being shared on virtual platforms. The team captain Ripa made a back pass to set up the ball for Anai to go for the goal. That's team play—that's Bangladesh at 50.

It will be painful if these girls are not given the right incentives (as suggested by the light trophy). I was watching the way the players and staff were lifting the trophy—it seemed very light (I could be very wrong; maybe the ones who were lifting it were either very strong or very casual). I don't know what went into the making of that trophy ... but for me, it was the heaviest trophy that has ever been lifted by Bangladesh. It is made out of the dedication and hard work of the indomitable girls who wanted to give us victory on the occasion of the glorious 50th Victory Day.

Earlier, we saw how the U-16 team were sent on public buses to go back to the hill tracts after their international win in 2016. The argument given was that these girls were not used to air-conditioned buses. It was a national scandal, to say the least. We did not show respect to our heroes.

I came across an internet image of an 11-year-old girl from the Philippines. She taped up her feet and wrote Nike in black ink as her father could not afford to buy her a pair of shoes. Still, the girl ran at the school track and field contest in her imaginary Nike shoes, and won the race. Watching our girls speak, I had a similar realisation. Our girls are no different. We need to incentivise them. This is the Bangladesh that we need to pay attention to, not the icons who whine about not being able to spend more time with families ... and run away from the battles wishing their peers good luck! We know the kind. We have seen them in 1971.

Let's bet on the true winners!

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is the pro-vice-chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).



These girls who raised our flag after winning the final of the SAFF U-19 Women's Championship, are the face of Bangladesh.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

the article throws a sting by highlighting a case study of an unnamed garment worker, quizzing, "Or is she a sickening example of an exploited labourer, who ruins her health for companies making high margins, and consumers who buy cheap jeans?"

There is an uneasy reception of our success story. Thanks to social media

policy implementations of the public and the private sectors. Their focus seems mostly to encourage their own policymakers to replicate our success.

Bangladesh at 50 is a mythical golden Bengal. For me, the victory of the Bangladesh U-19 women's football team just a week after our 50th Victory Day epitomises whatever we have achieved

landscape that once made the previous generations lock horns against a mighty opponent. Bangladesh at 50 is not a black and white image of trails of refugees or under-equipped guerrilla fighters. Words are not enough to thank these young girls who have given us an occasion to celebrate our national unity. We can dismiss it as an imagined community, but

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The Battle for Boric's Soul



JORGE G. CASTANEDA

CHILE has long been something of a bellwether in Latin America. So, when Chilean voters elected the left-wing Gabriel Boric, a 35-year-old former student leader, as president on December 19, the rest of Latin America wanted to know: What does this mean for Chile—and for us?

First, it is worth taking a closer look at the result itself. With nearly 56 percent of the vote, Boric won by a margin of more than 10 percentage points—huge by Chilean standards. Since 1989, when democracy was restored, most presidents have secured only four- or five-point leads. And yet, the far-right runner-up, Jose Antonio Kast, not only won the election's first round, but also secured a substantial 44 percent of the vote in the run-off.

In fact, the results of the latest election mirror those of the 1988 plebiscite on whether Chile's dictator since 1973, Augusto Pinochet, could extend his rule for another eight years. Pinochet's supporters lost, but the country's far right was—and remains—alive and well. Run-off elections are always polarising, but the split among Chileans seems particularly sharp, fairly even, and remarkably durable.

But it is the implications for the Chilean and Latin American left that might be the most significant. In the first round, Boric allied with a heterogeneous group comprising the Communist Party, the so-called Broad Front (composed of left-wing parties and movements apart from the Socialist Party), and various environmental, feminist, and LGBTQ groups.

In the second round, however, Boric broadened this coalition further, adding the socialists, the centre-left Party for Democracy, the Christian Democrats, and a few other centrist organisations. So, as the Chilean political scientist Patricio Navia asks, which of the two alliances will govern, and on which platform will the Boric government stand?

Any prediction here requires us to look back to 2019, when Chileans took to the streets to protest a broad array of issues, including low wages, inadequate housing, a privatised pension system, an expensive and complex healthcare system, environmental degradation, and violations of the rights of women

and indigenous people. Before long, the protests boiled down to a fight against inequality.

For many Chileans, it seemed that, despite a significant drop in poverty, the gains of the country's economic "miracle" had not been shared equitably. And yet, the Gini coefficient—the most widely used metric of inequality, with zero indicating perfect equality, and one signifying perfect inequality—suggests that inequality in Chile had declined over the preceding 20 years: from 0.55 in 2000 to 0.51 in 2019 (despite an uptick from 0.48 in 2015).

In any case, Boric's original platform addressed many of the protesters' specific grievances. He promised to deliver universal health insurance, overhaul the pension system, raise the minimum wage, eliminate student debt, and shorten the work week. He would finance higher social expenditure by increasing government revenues—especially by taxing big companies and wealthy individuals—by eight percent of GDP.

While it was not a revolutionary programme, it was certainly ambitious. And much of it may align with the positions of the left-leaning constitutional assembly elected earlier this year. (The 155-member body was created after the 2019 demonstrations, with the mandate of drafting a new constitution based on the protesters' demands.)

But Boric softened his approach in the second round, when he went from

victory not only to his more moderate, traditional, older constituents, but also to his younger, more radical supporters. That means a battle for the millennial president's political soul may be brewing.

The tension Boric likely feels mirrors a broader phenomenon, which I examined 15 years ago. Since the turn of the century, Latin America has had two distinct political "lefts": a moderate, democratic, globalised, modern left; and



Chile's President-elect Gabriel Boric gestures as he celebrates with supporters after winning the presidential election in Santiago, Chile, on December 19, 2021.

an anachronistic, statist, nationalist, and authoritarian left.

The more moderate group is exemplified by the Chilean and Uruguayan governments of the last 20 years, and the Brazilian government during President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's two terms (despite its corruption). To a lesser extent, Bolivian President Evo Morales' first-term government and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front's rule in El Salvador (again, despite its corruption) also fit into this category.

The radical left is exemplified by Venezuela's late president, Hugo Chavez, and his hand-picked successor Nicolas Maduro, Ecuador's Rafael Correa, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, and the Castro regime in Cuba. It is tougher to categorise Mexico's Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, Peru's Pedro Castillo, and Argentina's Nestor Kirchner, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, and Alberto Fernandez, though they have all tended towards the doctrines and policies of the past.

and the Cuban regime's suppression of a scheduled protest forced responses from the Boric coalition's members. While the Communist Party and others ultimately decided (after some internal disagreement) to congratulate Ortega and Maduro, and backed the Castro regime in Havana, neither Boric nor his second-round allies joined them.

Add to that Chile's recent history, the results of the second round, and the composition of the governing coalition, and there is a good reason to think that Boric might not govern like a typical Latin American left-wing populist. Instead, he might operate more like a European social democrat, akin to Felipe Gonzalez, Spain's first socialist prime minister after that country's return to democracy in the 1970s. For Chile's sake—and for Latin America's—one certainly hopes so.

Jorge G. Castaneda, a former foreign minister of Mexico, is a professor at New York University. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2021 www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

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blaming the political coalition that had administered Chile's economic miracle, the *Concertacion*, to reaching out to its former presidents, Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet. His second-round platform was still highly reformist, including versions of many of his original promises, but less radical. Ultimately, however, Boric owes his