

ISAS Brief

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Bangladesh: Not in crisis, but at cross roads?

Bangladesh has long had a tradition of religious tolerance. Recently, however, it has experienced some incidents of extremist violence reflecting the possibilities of radical change in the evolutionary trajectory unless the trend is recognized, challenged and stopped. The essay analyses some possible antidotes.

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Bangladeshis, 160 million of them, are poised to welcome yet another new year in the Bengali calendar. The entire nation is in a celebratory mood. There is an important significance of this event in the Bengali cultural paradigm. It carries far more meaning than dropping of the incandescent crystal ball at Times Square in New York at the final moments of any given year. In Bangladesh these festivities, soothingly colourful, reflect the mosaic of the diverse intellectual, ideological and religious values that all Bangladeshis share. Some see this as the essence that defines the nationhood, including the predilections for a sense of tolerance that is its essential component. This year, the mood is different, which calls for a pause for national self-reflection, in this third largest Muslim majority country in the world. Recently, a number of incidents have threatened to tarnish Bangladesh's otherwise impeccable reputation for communal harmony. Some places of worship of the minority communities have been bombed in the recent past, though damages have been minimal. Christian pastors have been attacked.

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And six secular bloggers have been hacked to death. These are incidents that can be ignored only at great peril.

A cursory observation, or ‘casual empiricism’ (to use an expression of Bill Milam, an American retired diplomat and political analyst) of daily life in the cities and villages of Bangladesh will show an element of vibrancy that is absent in many parts of contemporary South Asia. Over years there has been a steady rate of economic growth of around 6 %. In social indices such as child mortality, and women’s empowerment the statistics are either better than or comparable to the neighbouring states. There are overall signs of macro-economic stability and poverty alleviation. Despite a Court order retaining Islam as the ‘State *religion*’ (*perhaps a prudent decision to avoid a trigger of unwarranted societal upheaval*), Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina leads a governance system committed to secularism. So it cannot be said that Bangladesh is a nation in crisis. Given the short time frame, less than a year, during which the incidents have occurred, some observers contend, with a modicum of reason, that Bangladesh may be at cross-roads: one path leading towards stability and the other towards dissension. The reality may be more complex. The two paths are likely to criss-cross and even entwine at times. That would require constant guidance, at all times, not only by the government, but by the societal leadership at various stages.

Historically, Bangladeshi Islam has been of a tolerant strain. *Sufistic* influence that encourages hybrid spiritualism has been preponderant. The subcontinental *Deobandis* (as opposed to that of the more syncretic *Barehlyvi* School) have had little success to date. But of late the impact of the austere *Wahabi* beliefs appear to be burgeoning. Expanding linkages with the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabian clerics, and less so, the Qataris, are seen to be a major cause. Furthermore no man, or nation, is an island or oasis unconnected with the rest of the global community. Extremism appears to receive a fillip from the spectre of violence in Pakistan and the rise of jingoist *Hindutva* in parts of India. Furthermore the ideology of the ‘Islamist Caliphate’, that claims to harken back to the pristine past glories of the faith, the relentless propaganda of the ‘*Daesh*’ might hold appeal for some. All these have combined to shake to some extent the roots of the tradition of toleration. For starters, the authorities must recognize this. Burying one’s head in the sands like an ostrich is not the answer. The ostrich does not make itself secure from potential predators just because it cannot itself see them. The situation obviously calls for a calibrated response.

And what might that response be? *First of all*, the political system in Bangladesh must close ranks, and the dichotomy must disappear, at least in combating this issue. The Awami League, that heads the government, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party that constitutes the major component of the opposition must combine their strengths to confront the threat of extremism that is their common enemy. *Second*, the civil society - in Bangladesh they constitute a powerful force - must supplement the efforts of the political leadership. The intelligentsia and the media must provide them with unstinted support. While the murder of the sixth blogger Samad was a horrendous crime, the instant massive protest it provoked among young university students provides that ray of hope that must be a key element in the nation's destiny. *Third*, those who can and are able, like academics and responsible clerics, must tap the depth of Bangladesh's ethos to produce necessary counter-narratives. There are adequate material there to develop ideas that would deny the clarion call of the extremists of the glory in gore. *Finally*, there must be learning from examples of success elsewhere. Not so far away, Singapore provides one, which has catapulted itself from the third-world to the first within a single generation, largely because the different communities there have been able to devise a *modus vivendi* to live and labour together, in harmony for progress.

Bangladeshis consider Kazi Nazrul Islam as their national poet. Nazrul's poetry and songs have moved millions of them to action, and though long dead and gone, he continues to inspire them. In his essay *Mandir O Masjid* (Temples and Mosques), penned in the 1920s, he made a fervent appeal for communal unity. At the Annual Session of the Indian National Congress at Krishnanagar around that time, he sang a stirring song '*Kandari Hoshiar*' ('Helmsman Beware'!), where he urged the helmsmen to warn the passengers that if the boat should capsize, so will *all*, irrespective of whether they are Hindus or Muslims. Bangladeshis, who take immense pride in their intellectual tradition, should heed the words of their poet.

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