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Secularism, Extremism and Counter-Terrorism in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has always taken tremendous pride in its secular tradition. Over the recent years, there has been a surge in extremist elements that does not subscribe to the founding ideals of Bangladesh. Since taking over from the caretaker government in 2009, the Awami League Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has mounted a massive onslaught against extremism and terrorism on its sacred Bengali soil. This paper seeks to explain the Bangladesh's counter terrorism model under three broad categories of education, legislation and enforcement.

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The People's Republic of Bangladesh founded in 1971 after a gruesome war of liberation has prided itself as a strong secular Bengali-Muslim majority nation state. Secularism was enshrined as one of the 4 key principles of state policy in the 1972 constitution of Bangladesh the others being nationalism, democracy and socialism. Although the ideal of secularism was removed from the 1977 constitution by the then President Ziaur Rahman, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh passed a ruling in 2010, reinstating the secularism clause from the 1972 constitution. Even prior to the proclamation of independence the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur

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Rahman had announced to his supporters in his historic electrifying speech, on 7 March 1971, at the Race Course Ground in Dhaka that “Hindus, Muslims, Bengalis, non-Bengalis, all those who live in this Bangla are our brothers. The responsibility of protecting them is on you. Ensure that our reputation is not smeared in any way.”² This solemn sentiment from the founding father of Bangladesh has been unrelentingly carried out by none other than the daughter of the Bangabandhu, the current Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina.

Over the recent years Bangladesh has been scarred by an uprising of extremist elements that aims to not only destroy the solid foundation of secularism upon which Bangladesh has been built upon but also to overthrow the modern state and replace it with an Islamic caliphate.³ Since 2013, there has been a shift in terrorist trends from mass untargeted bombings to specific targeted killings of several dozens of bloggers, atheist, Hindus, Christians, Buddhist and even on Shia Muslims. The Islamist militants in Bangladesh can be viewed to have been betting on the idea that by engaging in targeted killing it would achieve the objective of striking terror in the hearts of the *kafirs* (unbelievers) thus causing the secular Awami league to lose its credibility in ensuring the protection of all minorities in Bangladesh. The boldness to commit such outrageous acts of terror is exemplified in the murder of the Bangladeshi-born American secular blogger Avijit Roy.⁴ On 26 February 2015, as he was returning from the famous Dhaka Ekushey Book fair with his wife, Avijit Roy was killed with a machete by militants from the Ansarullah Bangla Team.⁵ These types of vicious crimes are not only an attack on the individual but also on the Bengali culture of open intellectual discourse and freedom of expression.

On 1 July 2016, in the midst of the holy month of Ramadan five radical Islamist militants took siege of the Holey Artisan Bakery in the affluent Dhaka neighborhood of Gulshan⁶. After Bangladeshi Commandos had neutralised the militants, the dead bodies of 20 hacked hostages of various nationalities were found lying in the café. The Islamic State in Bangladesh (ISB) a franchise branch of the Islamic state in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed responsibility for the

² 7th March, 1971 Speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9vUulq4tZI>

³ "ISIS Attack On Bangladesh Warning| Its Scary| Exclusive Interview of ISIS Bangladeshi Member|." YouTube. " <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oc6-5gN1mE4>

⁴ "US-Bangladesh Blogger Avijit Roy Hacked to Death - BBC News" <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31656222>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ "Bangladesh Attack: Gunmen 'started Shooting Right Away'" - CNN. <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/02/asia/bangladesh-dhaka-shooting-witnesses/>

attack in a widely published video telecast.⁷ Thus this proves the presence of Bangladeshi Jihadist in ISIS. There has been a fruitless debate going on in Bangladesh over whether the terrorist operating on its soil is home grown or imported. The Awami League government consistently denies that the militants in Bangladesh are from overseas. Experts of counter-terrorism should call this debate to a close as the product of radical Islamic terrorism is indifferent be it from domestic or foreign sources. In fact the authorities of Bangladesh should be more weary if the terrorist are home grown as the enemy within is always more dangerous than the enemy outside. The stand that the terrorism in Bangladesh is home grown was reiterated during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's address to the United Nations General Assembly on 21 September 2016 whereby she said that "As a victim of terrorist attacks myself, I have a 'zero tolerance' approach to terrorism and violent extremism. Our Government did succeed in disintegrating the home grown terrorist groups, plugging their regular financing pipelines, and flushing out the regional operatives from our territory. With the vicious rise of certain international terrorist entities, it appears some of the local fringe elements have drawn inspiration and managed to regroup and rebrand themselves."⁸ On several other occasions as well Sheikh Hasina has also made this exact point. Regardless of the origin of terrorist the Awami League Government has been unforgiving in tackling terrorism & extremism.

Bangladesh's efforts in its fight against terror have been applauded internationally. During the 20th National Conference of the Awami League held on 22 October 2016, India's leader of the opposition in the Rajya Sabha Ghulam Nabi Azad had said in his address that "India and Bangladesh are close strategic partners in counter terrorism and India appreciates the steps taken by the Bangladesh government to counter terror activities on its soil in the aftermath of the July attack."⁹ Since taking over the reign of power from the non-partisan military backed caretaker government of 2007-2009 headed by Chief Advisor (Prime Minister) Fakhruddin Ahmed, Sheikh Hasina has fiercely been committed in eliminating terrorism & radical Islamic extremism. Bangladesh approach towards combating terrorism can be clustered into three categories education, legislation and enforcement.

⁷ "ISIS Attack On Bangladesh Warning| Its Scary| Exclusive Interview of ISIS Bangladeshi Member|." YouTube. " <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oc6-5gN1mE4>

⁸ "The 71st Session of the UN General Assembly General Debate Address by H. E. Sheikh Hasina." https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/71/71_BD_en.pdf

⁹ "Ghulam Nabi Azad Praises Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina's Role in Fighting Terrorism." *The Indian Express*, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/ghulam-nabi-azad-praises-bangladesh-pm-sheik-hasina-role-in-fighting-terrorism-3097475/>

Education

In 2010, the Bangladesh Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced its progressive anti-militancy national education policy.¹⁰ Under this policy it has become compulsory to include anti-extremism chapters in academic textbooks. Moreover, the MOE has also spearheaded awareness campaigns across schools & colleges in the country educating the Bengali youth against the evils of extremism. The Awami League Government has also mandated the reform of the Madrassa curriculum. This new education framework requires that all students are taught languages, Math, Science and a minimum standard of secular subjects until the eighth grade. Outside the classroom, the government has also collaborated with Imams and religious scholars all over Bangladesh to spread the message of the true values of Islam that promotes peace, tolerance, harmony and co-existence with members of other religions. This initiative of preaching the correct version of Islam has thus facilitated the reclamation of the reputation of the *deen-e-haq* (religion of truth) from the radical Islamist extremist. According to a publication by the Center of Research and Information, Bangladesh, “since 15 July 2016, Imams of Mosques across the country have been delivering “Khutba” (Sermon) before and after Friday prayers highlighting the directives of the Holy Quran and Hadith against militancy and terrorism.”¹¹ The reform in national education policy is an instrumental measure in shielding young minds from falling prey to extremist ideologies. This will also ensure that the Bengali youth are guided on the straight path and not deviate to the road of those that have gone astray or that have been misled.

Legislation

In order to strengthen its clutch against terrorism, the Awami League government has introduced some key legislative measures that have empowered Bangladesh to take swift action on extremist activities. One of the very first actions of the Sheikh Hasina’s government since taking over in 2009 was to endorse the Anti-Terrorism Ordinance, 2008 that was issued by the

¹⁰ "Bangladesh Combating Terrorism Ensuring Peace." Center for Research and Information, Bangladesh.<http://cri.org.bd/publication/2015/pdf/Bangladesh%20Combating%20Terrorism%20Ensuring%20Peace--CRI%20Publication.pdf>

¹¹ Bangladesh: Countering Terrorism & Preventing Violent Extremism, "Center for Research and Information, <http://cri.org.bd/publication/UNGA%20Publication%20-%20Terrorism/#/5/>

erstwhile caretaker government.¹² Thus the Jatiyo Sangsad (national parliament) had passed the Anti-Terrorism Act in February 2009. Under this law if any Bangladeshi citizen commits an act of terror against any foreign soil be it from within Bangladesh or abroad, he would be punished as if the crime was committed in Bangladesh. Also the law allows authorities to prosecute individuals be it Bangladeshi or non-Bangladeshi who plot terrorist activities against Bangladesh from overseas. This extra-territorial jurisdiction of the Anti-Terrorism Act is indeed reflective of the transnational nature of terrorism that has plagued today's world. This law also allows provides provisions for the courts to send militants involved in terrorist activities to the gallows. Subsequent amendments to the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009 were made to bring this landmark law in line with the United Nations plan on counter terrorism strategy and other resolutions.¹³ One such amendment was made in 2013 which allowed courts to accept material from social media as evidence hence, making the judicial process relevant to the 21st century.

A vital factor in eliminating terrorism at its roots involve cutting off sources of funding for terrorism activities. On 20 February 2012, Bangladesh also passed the Money Laundering Prevention Act (MLPA).¹⁴ Under a provision of the MLPA the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) of the Bangladesh Bank (Bangladesh's Central Bank) was established as the central agency tasked with tackling money laundering in Bangladesh¹⁵. The FIU works closely with commercial banks in Bangladesh in order to equip them with the capabilities required for handling cases of money laundering and curbing financing of terrorism. According to the Swiss Basel Anti-Money Laundering Index, Bangladesh was ranked the second lowest country in South Asia after India that is at risk to terrorist financing¹⁶. This Index focuses on "anti-money laundering and counter terrorist financing frameworks and other related factors such as financial/public transparency and judicial strength."¹⁷

In addition to formulating the necessary legislation to combat terrorism, the Awami League Government has never been hesitant in banning any extremist groups, individuals, preachers

¹² "Anti-Terrorism Ordinance (ATO), 2008 -Bangladesh." https://www.imolin.org/doc/amlid/Bangladesh/Bangladesh_Anti_Terrorism_Ordinance_2008.pdf

¹³ "Bangladesh Combating Terrorism Ensuring Peace." Center for Research and Information, Bangladesh. <http://cri.org.bd/publication/2015/pdf/Bangladesh%20Combating%20Terrorism%20Ensuring%20Peace--CRI%20Publication.pdf>

¹⁴ "Money Laundering Prevention Act, 2012"- Bangladesh Bank. <https://www.bb.org.bd/openpdf.php>

¹⁵ "Money Laundering & Terrorist Financing Risk Management Guidelines - Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit, Bangladesh Bank." https://www.bb.org.bd/aboutus/regulationguideline/aml/aml_cft2015.pdf

¹⁶ "Basel AntiMoneyLaundering Index-South Asia." Basel Institute <https://index.baselgovernance.org/ranking>

¹⁷ "Basel Governance Index." <https://index.baselgovernance.org/>

spreading hatred, intolerance, radicalisation and values against the founding ethos of Bangladesh. This is undoubtedly a manifestation of Sheikh Hasina's zero tolerance policy towards terrorism and extremism. In the aftermath of the 1 July 2016 Dhaka attack, a special meeting of the cabinet committee on Law and order was held. Following which, Bangladesh Industry Minister Amir Hossain Amu who chaired the meeting announced a total ban upon the controversial Islamist evangelist Zakir Naik¹⁸. The Information Ministry was also ordered to block access to Naik's "Peace TV Bangla."¹⁹ Such firm moves by the government shows that Bangladesh is willing to go to any lengths to purge extremist influences on its secular Bengali-Muslim nation state.

Enforcement

On 12 May 2009, the then newly elected Awami League Government formed the high-powered 17-member "National Committee on Militancy Resistance and Prevention"²⁰. This committee chaired by the Home Ministry comprises of member from other ministries & national agencies has been tasked with tackling extremism and defeating radicalisation in Bangladesh. In August 2009, the "National Committee for Intelligence coordination" was also formed with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as Chairperson.²¹ This committee was created to facilitate intelligence coordination amongst the various law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh. Its members include the chiefs of the National Security Intelligence, Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, Special Security Forces, Rapid Action Battalion and the Criminal Investigation Department. In the field of crime prevention there are two important deterrent factors. Firstly the risk of getting detected and secondly fear of the punishment. Bangladesh's anti-terrorism measures have strategically made use of both these factors to curb terrorist activities. The ability of Bangladesh's counter-terrorism forces to wipe out a banned terrorist group can be seen in the swift action taken against the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). On 27 August 2016, the Dhaka Metropolitan police launched "Operation Hit Strong 27."²² This successful anti-terrorism raid which involved a gunfight between Police Officers and terrorist from the JMB resulted in the killing of Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury who was the mastermind of the ISIS backed Gulshan café attack²³. Earlier on July 26, 9 militants from the JMB were also slaughtered in an encounter in the Dhaka neighbourhood of Kallyanpur. On 2 September, Tamim Chowdhury's second-in command Retired army

¹⁸ "Bangladesh Govt Bans Televangelist Zakir Naik's Peace TV" *The Indian Express* <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/world-news/bangladesh-bans-televangelist-zakir-naiks-peace-tv-2905038/>

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ "Bangladesh Govt. Forms High-powered Committee to Combat Militancy & Terrorism" *Asian Tribune* <http://www.asiantribune.com/node/17477>

²¹ "Bangladesh Forms National Committee to Coordinate Intelligence" *Zee News* http://zeenews.india.com/news/south-asia/bdesh-forms-national-committee-to-coordinate-intelligence-activities_552424.html

²² "The Operation 'Hit Strong 27' | The Daily Star." <http://www.thedailystar.net/narayanganj-raid/the-operation-hit-strong-27-1276399>

²³ Ibid

official Zahidul Islam alias Major Murad was also taken out by the Dhaka Police²⁴. Back in 2005 when the JMB had not yet been an ally of ISIS, it was responsible for the massive attack on 17 August 2005, whereby 500 bomb blasts took place in a single day in 63 out of 64 of Bangladesh's districts. The mastermind of this attack Siddiquir Rahman popularly known as "*Bangla Bhai*" (Bengali Brother) was hanged along with five other militants on 30 March 2007 under the administration of the caretaker government that was in place at that time. After a series of aggressive crackdown on the JMB the authorities in Bangladesh have now successfully eliminated the JMB. The strong efforts of the Bangladesh counter-terrorism forces have tremendously hindered terrorist operation in the country. Over the recent months since the 1 July Gulshan café attack reports of terrorist incidents including the machete hacking of writers, bloggers & Hindus have been largely unheard of. This has not been because the terrorist have been disinclined to commit further strikes but it's due to the hard work of the Bangladeshi security forces in the enforcement of the stringent anti-terrorism laws. Hence, it has now become very difficult for terrorist groups to operate in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Bangladesh has come a long way since 1971. From what was brushed off as a "Basket Case" by former United States Secretary of State Dr Henry Kissinger, Bangladesh has now emerged as a South Asian tiger growing consistently at 6 percent per year over the last decade. The India-locked secular Bengali-Muslim nation state despite a long history coloured with bloodshed is now steadily threading the path towards realising the vision of its founder Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Bangladesh's secularism and prosperity have attracted the evil eyes of Radical Islamist extremist forces that intend to hijack this *Shonar Bangla* (Golden Bengal) of the Bangabandhu and turn it into an Islamic Caliphate. The elected Awami League Government since assuming office has been absolutely uncompromising in its battle against terrorism and extremism in every form. The firm resolve displayed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in defeating extremism and terrorism has been unseen in the Muslim world. Bangladesh's experience in counter-terrorism has provided it with a model for other countries to emulate. Today, against all odds Bangladesh has developed into a stable, functioning state that is in tandem with its *raison d'être*. As the only country in South Asia whose independence was attained by fighting an actual war with the oppressor, Bangladeshis have shown determination to preserve the values that it has fought for. It has proved that there is no room for extremism on its soil. Bangladesh's fight against the menace of terrorism has sent the

²⁴ "31 Islamic State Supporters Killed in 10 Months." Dhaka Tribune <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2016/09/11/31-supporters-killed-10-months/>

message to the world that it has no fear taking on any force that threatens its sovereignty or principles of state policy. As the Nobel Laureate Bengali Poet Rabindranath Tagore said, “Let us not pray to be sheltered from dangers but to be fearless when facing them.”

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