Bangladesh:

Drifting into Islamic Fundamentalism?

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About the Author

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About SADF

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Since 9/11 the world has regarded Pakistan and Afghanistan as the epicentre of Islamic fundamentalism. Many of the early observations dealt with the tremendous challenge that terrorism and religious-militant extremism would pose for peace and stability from a geopolitical perspective. Realising the increasingly complex scenarios as well as the causalities and impacts, analyses on the phenomenon under discussion were slowly but persistently broadening. In order to be able to address not only the militant, but also the socio-economic and political dimensions of Islamic fundamentalism - the networks and ideological foundations of internationally acting fundamentalist groups have increasingly caught the attention of observers worldwide. Nevertheless, despite a general broadening of the research focus when it comes to Islamic fundamentalism, it also led to the phenomenon of only seeing part of the story: First, being pre-occupied with the security aspects of the Islamist challenge in the context of the foreign intervention in Afghanistan, many analysts, initially had a narrow focus on the 'AfPak' region. Consequently, fundamentalist developments in other parts of the Indian subcontinent were not adequately recognized until today. Second, today it

seems that this trend of ignoring or neglecting the rise of Islamic fanaticism in other South Asian countries with Muslim majorities, such as Bangladesh or the Maldives, seems to continue.

In order to understand the distortion in the scholarly engagement with Islamic fundamentalism, one has to look at the different reasoning and interests of research, which changed over time. In the earlier years, the clear focus of monitoring and analysing was to get a deeper understanding of the organizational structure of militant Islamist groups operating in the AfPak region in order to develop an adequate strategy for a military solution. Furthermore, research findings stressed the anti-democratic and anti-systemic potential of Taliban and other militant Islamist oppositional forces in order to provide foreign involved governments with the necessary arguments to justify missions and budgets for their missions in Afghanistan.

However, it seems that recent endeavours have been concentrating on identifying arguments aimed at sustaining that claim that Islamic militants merely pose a regionally limited threat: in other words it 'only' affects Pakistan and Afghanistan and if a negotiated settlement is achieved, the

Taliban-problem will be solved automatically. It is obvious that this strategy only serves the purpose of ensuring a safe and smooth withdrawal of foreign troops while creating the image of having provided a framework for a minimal level of stability.

It is noteworthy to mention that analysts who follow this line of argumentation try to introduce a separation between the Afghani Pakistani Taliban. Despite the fact that this distinction partly matches the reality of different organisational structures, tactics, strategies, and recruiting patterns of the Taliban operating in the region, it ignores the commonalities when it comes to ideological foundation, spiritual leadership and central command which justifies the description of the Taliban as a coherent whole movement. In this context, one also has to point out that the Taliban are only a facet, of a much larger, Islamic fundamentalist movement. This phenomenon of an interconnected Islamist movement sector, pushed by transnational religious extremist organisations, like the Muslim Brotherhood or al-Qaida, is dramatically rising in South Asia. For example, al-Qaida through Bin Laden's 1998 declaration calling for an internationally coordinated Jihad, which was signed by terrorist organisations with links to Pakistan and Bangladesh, gave a remarkable impetus to cooperation between the different militant groups.

Obviously, this apparition -the emergence of an increasing interlinked international Islamist movement- undermines the rationale of legitimizing the process of negotiation with the Taliban. It is important to understand, that the Taliban and other Islamist groups as anti-systemic and anti-democratic forces are bounded by as well as trapped in a common fundamentalist ideology and, in order to keep the whole movement going, it has to reject any democratic system of governance. Because the Islamist's major goal is to establish Islamic fundamentalist state – not only in Afghanistan but also in the Maldives, Pakistan and Bangladesh too. However, in order for the US to ensure a safe withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington will remain ignorant towards this threat.

Additionally, by properly recognizing the rise of Islamic fundamentalism that is transforming Bangladesh into a hub of international militancy, would consequentially call for measures by the international community (presuming that there is a coherent logic of the 'war against terror'). However, the US and its allies are 'exhausted' and not keen on any

new assignment. Therefore, western observers prefer to pick up other flashpoints, like the disastrous working environment in Bangladesh's textile industry. This is without any doubt a very crucial issue and deserves much attention. However, focusing on other themes is conveniently helping western government in two ways:

First, it draws the international community's attention away from growing Islamic fundamentalism, which arguably poses the most dangerous challenge to Bangladesh at this moment. However, by using the strategy of general ignorance, the international community does not have to justify their reluctance to tackle this problem. But decision makers should be aware that the chosen tactic not only leads to the neglect of everything Bangladesh stands for, especially the idea of secular democracy in a Muslim majority country, but it also threatens to put the country back to square one, i.e. the return to an atmosphere comparable to the days of West Pakistan's dictate. The difference would be that instead of being under the choke of West-Pakistani military rulers, Bangladeshis would be controlled by Jihadist organisations which emerged in or are supported by Pakistan.

Second, the strategy of focusing on 'less-critical issues' offers politicians and academics an alternative field of activities to get active in Bangladesh without having to position themselves in the context of another existential threat towards the Bangladeshi state and society: the tremendous polarisation between the two antagonistic political parties in Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and their respective leadership leading the country from crisis to crisis.

To summarize, it seems that history is repeating itself. As in 1971, during the war of independence the international community, especially the US, was watching the genocide of three million people as well as the large-scale destruction of the economy and infrastructure in Bangladesh by West-Pakistan apathetically. Today, there is an imminent threat that the very same countries once again remain idle while the collaborators of the then aggressors - who, slowly but persistently, built the backbone of Bangladesh's fundamentalist movement over the past decades - penetrate the state and its institutions and oppress Bangladeshi society.

The international community must realise the urgency of the situation. Both regionally and globally acting Islamic

fundamentalist movements are tightening their grip on Bangladesh. Since the early 1990s, a silent process of Islamisation has started in the country. The breeding ground for this process was prepared by the country's military rulers, General Ziaur Rahman (1975-1981) and General H.M. Ershad (1982-1990). During both autocratic governments, far reaching constitutional amendments were introduced which undermined the institutional bulwark, i.e. secularism and democracy, against a potential Islamist takeover. More concretely, Ziaur and Ershad diluted the secular principles in the constitution in order to gain legitimacy by playing the religious card. By anchoring Islam in the constitution and putting religion at the centre of the political discourse, Bangladesh was effectively transformed into an Islamic state. As a result, Islamist parties have been able to incrementally appropriate room in the political arena, despite the fact that they did not enjoy much general public support. It is interesting to mention that in this direction Pakistan serves as an interesting point of reference: the fact that Islamist parties do not get many votes does not mean that they are automatically marginalised when it comes to exercising political influence and access to state resources. Here, aggressive political behaviour combined with extra-judicial measures (e.g. black mailing, target killings, major terrorist activities) are used to compensate the lack in electoral support. Needless to say, as long as Islamist militant groups are seen as an instrument in certain policy fields, the imbalance between support by the people and influence on the political decision making process will continue.

Having said that, after the reintroduction of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh in 1990/91, the Islamist parties (foremost Jammat-e-Islami and Islamic Okye Jyote) were already so deeply rooted into the political landscape that they continued to be part of elected governments. In result, they were not only using state resources to promote their 'anti-secular revolution' but also to push the entrenchment of Islamic fundamentalist elements deeply into the political-administrative structure of the country. Today, 'Islamisation' is not a silent process anymore: it is loud, aggressive and it has reached the centre of power politics in Dhaka.

Furthermore, one has to stress that Islamic fundamentalism is not anymore an urban phenomenon. Islamist ideologies and radical views of how social order should be organised can be found with an

increasing extent in the daily lives of the people in remote rural areas. The high level of Islamist penetration of state and society in Bangladesh can not only be seen in the formulation of policies, including the blackmailing of whole governments and inconvenient political parties, but also in the context using coercive force as an instrument to transform the country into an Islamic fundamentalist state. It is alarming that the Islamists are not even attempting to cover up the fact that they identify themselves with the Taliban and their former terror-state the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which, according to some Islamists, should serve as a blueprint for restructuring Bangladesh's political and social systems.

However, it seems that the recent increase in reports of human rights abuses, violations of civil rights and constraints on political participation in the country have given the international community food for thought. The likelihood of a military intervention in civil-political affairs in order to avoid a clash between the AL and BNP (especially in the context of the upcoming general elections) will add to the tendency of foreign observers reassessing their view of the political situation. Indeed, it is of utmost importance that both foreign diplomats and the government of

Bangladesh realise that the only way forward is to stop downplaying the Islamist threat. It is time to develop a coherent and stringent strategy against religious fundamentalism. Bangladesh's secular and democratic principles are under tremendous pressure through radical political and militant extremism. The few measures carried out by the current government to contain the Islamist threats remain ineffective. For example, despite the fact that some Islamists groups are banned, their mobilising capacities and on-going operations are still relatively strong. A reason for the fruitlessness of efforts to protect secularism and democracy is because they are negated in qualitative and quantitative terms by examples of how state institutions, major political actors, and Islamists are still cooperating with each other. The root thereof is the unrestricted political struggle between AL and BNP, which gave the Islamists additional room to manoeuvre in order to capture political space and power. Of course, there are many other factors too that contribute to the growth of Islamic radicalism in its political and militant forms in Bangladesh. First of all, there are domestic ones, e.g. corruption, bad governance, instability and a violent political culture, troubled civil-military relations, unfortunate socio-economic

conditions. Furthermore, there is also unquestionably a 'foreign hand' involved, which helps to facilitate and orchestrate the growth of the Islamic movement.

Nevertheless, for the moment one can conclude that an Islamic state like the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan is still far from being established. But there are clear indications that the Islamists are aiming at achieving the implementation of such a form of governance and have already set patterns to prepare the ground for it. In order to stop this process, a collective national involvement of the major political actors is necessary to protect democracy, secularism and human rights, supported by a more determined and active international community. As long as this is not achieved, Bangladesh risks falling in the clutches of Islamic fundamentalism!