

Bangladesh's Counter-Terror Act : Need for a Political Solution

By Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf, Jul 09, 2016

Increasing concerns about the rise of terrorist attacks

The terrorist attack in Dhaka's international and diplomatic enclave Gulshan at the beginning of this month, which left at least 21 victims of different nationalities dead, was followed within less than a week by a bomb attack during the largest Eid congregation (Eid-ul-Fitr the greatest festival of the Muslims) at Sholakia ground at Kishoreganj, killing at least four people and leaving several people injured. Once again, the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility, at least directly for the attack in Gulshan. Regarding the Kishoreganj bombing, there are severe indications that it got inspired by IS since it seems to be in close relation with an IS propaganda video just released two days before. Nevertheless, the government officials are following the old rhetoric of continuing to deny the presence of foreign militant groups on the country's soil.

Subsequently, after witnessing these two dramatic terrorist attacks within one week, many people in Bangladesh are asking what happens next? Is the situation getting worse? Or will the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) be able to contain or even eradicate the threat of terrorism? Is the GoB able to protect the fundamental rights -and even the lives- of its citizen? Is terrorism homegrown or imported from outside by international Jihadist organizations? What must be done to ensure that Bangladesh stays secular and democratic as envisaged at the country's foundation? Taking questions and related concerns into account, many observers starting to demand more concrete, even a completely new approach to fighting terrorism and to protect the life of the people as well as the basic principles of Bangladesh's state and society.

What happened: A major ‘crackdown’ on Islamist Extremists and the Jihadi response

Last month, Bangladesh’s security forces carried out a **nationwide crackdown** on radical Islamists in the country. The main part of the campaign was running over several days including thousands of police and paramilitary personnel and led to the arrest of more than 11,300 people. This security operation has to be seen as the response of rising international and domestic critic regarding the apparent inaction of the GoB during **a wave of brutal assassinations** in the country happening before the Gulshan and Kishoreganj attacks. The **victims were** secular and liberal writers and thinkers (especially bloggers), university professors, foreign aid workers, gay rights activists and religious minorities including Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and members of the Shiite community. After quite some time, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s administration reacted and facilitated a massive **clampdown** to tackle the challenge of the Islamist threat. Nevertheless, critic remained and the accusation was made that Ms. Sheikh Hasina used the counter-terrorism activity to keep the opposition in check. Furthermore, some analysts were questioning the performance of the crackdown, which produced large numbers of arrests, but only a few (approximately 150) of them were concrete radical Islamist subjects. Most of the latter groups were lower rank members of Islamist organizations and **petty criminals**, but top Jihadists got largely spared by the raids. Against this backdrop, the **police stated** that “none of those arrested is believed to be a high-level operator who might have organized or ordered attacks”.

However, it would be naïve to think the Islamist threat was all-clear by then. In contrast, one should rather expect a harsh reaction by the militant Islamists who want to show their still available capacities. Subsequently, despite the crackdown many people, especially **independent intellectuals**, in Bangladesh are still anxious that the religious fanatics will continue to terrorize Bangladesh’s state and society, turning the country into a Jihadist hub.

As such one can state that after the Gulshan attack on July 1 and 2 and the Kishoreganj bombing on July 7, doubts regarding the efficacy of the counter-terrorist campaign of the GoB seemed to be confirmed. Following two arguments will be brought forward here: Firstly, that both events are clear indications not only for the existence but also of the rise of international Jihadism in the South Asian country. Secondly, that there is a correlation between the emergence of Islamist extremism and the predominant political culture in Bangladesh. This rationale leads to the core puzzle: How this could happen?

How this could happen: the puzzle

Basically, there are two fundamental social and political trajectories creating the above-mentioned correlation: The process of political polarization and the process of Islamisation.

The process of political polarization

To begin with, Bangladesh's development in all spheres of state and society suffers from a deeply entrenched process of political polarization. Later one finds its expression is an unfortunate political culture which is determined by extraordinary polarization, hostility, and politics of revenge between the two major political parties, Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). By experiencing this, political actors see democracy as a **zero-sum game** marked by a destructive **'tit-for-tat'** strategy in order to achieve partisan objectives which are prioritized over national concerns. In this context, not only political institutions and society are highly politicized but also the whole governmental machinery. Appointments in politics and administration are based more on loyalty, obedience, obeisance, charisma, and kinship, rather than on performance, merits, and skills. As a result, many of the state agencies remain ineffective or absent in rural/remote areas which are yet just another nail in the coffin of already poor and stagnating governance. This has also enabled endemic corruption to spread like a wildfire. In addition to that, the undemocratic nature, unprofessional practice, and behavior of political parties contribute to the semblance of instability as well. **Political parties** possess a weak organizational structure, lack internal democracy and a code of ethics. They suffer from a high degree of intra-party factional feuds leading to numerous fissions (and fusions) in the past. Excessive personal leadership cult, dynastic rule, **patron-client relations (clientelism)** as well as politics of patronage constitute other negative traits of the country's polity. At the same time, criminalization of politics, coercion as an acceptable mode of governance and widespread use of violence are punctuating the political landscape negatively. Subsequently, politicians, rely on musclemen (**mastaans/goondas**) to achieve goals in an unrestricted struggle for power. Therefore, one can state that in Bangladesh, increasing political radicalization and the rise of Jihadism are closely connected with Bangladesh's institutional dysfunctionality and destructive political culture.

The process of Islamisation

Basically one must state that the killings of secular thinkers in Bangladesh and the latest terror attacks are only the gloomy peak of growing Jihadi influence in the country. Since the early 1990s, a silent but steady process of Islamisation 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. the principles of 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. They were undoubtedly inspired by their Pakistani peer, General Zia-ul Haq (1977-1988), under whose dictatorial regime Pakistan descended into a marsh of Islamic fundamentalism. By anchoring Islam in the constitution and putting religion at the center 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 a crucial point of reference: the fact that Islamist parties do not get many votes percentage-wise does not automatically imply that they are marginalized when it comes to exercising political influence and access to state resources. Here, aggressive political behavior combined with extra-judicial measures (e.g. black mailing, target killings, major terrorist activities) are used as a compensation for the lack of electoral support.

The high level of Islamist penetration of state and society was further enhanced during the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) governments (1991–1996, 2001–2006). Not only were 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 center of power politics in Dhaka. In the given context, in 2013 Jihadists violently demanded the public execution of **atheist bloggers** and called for new (blasphemy) laws to combat writing critical of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. This process of Islamisation poses an existential threat to everything that Bangladesh stands for, especially its freedom struggle of 1971: democracy, freedom of mind and secularism understood as religious tolerance.

In sum, the rise of Islamist extremism was possible, besides the political culture and other factors, because of a lack of a coherent and stringent strategy against religious fundamentalism. The few measures carried out by the current government to contain the Islamist threats remain ineffective, especially if one looks at the mobilizing capacities of the Islamists and the on-going operations of ‘officially’ banned organizations.

Where to go: Conceptualizing a political solution

In consequence of above mention political trajectories and taking the rise of Jihadi attacks as well as the latest major crackdown into account, one can make following statements:

Firstly, we have no specific ‘Bangladesh way’ regarding strategies and methods of terrorist attacks. After a series of killings from secular writers and thinkers in the country, some analyst identified a certain level of ‘exceptionalism’ in terrorist attacks in Bangladesh: instead of large scale assaults in order to create maximum fear and threat perception (especially by the use of suicide terrorists) one can find a strategic selection and termination of people which are identified as ‘anti-Islamic’. The latter way of ‘silencing of any opposition’ towards Islamic extremist way of organizing state and society got portrayed as the ‘new face of terrorism’ in Bangladesh. Obviously, such a rationale helps also to support the rhetoric of the GoB that the current ways of Jihadist attacks are carried out by domestic groups and are not conducted by international terror organization like IS or Al Qaeda. Having this rationale in mind, the latest two attacks must be seen in the same line of attacks world-wide which are either directly organized or inspired by international terror groups. Consequently, the GoB should finally recognize that the international Jihadi movement arrived in Bangladesh.

Secondly, Bangladesh needs more than sporadic, large-scale police actions, especially if later one appears rather as imprudent than strategically well planned like the crackdown on militant Islamists last month. Another example that the GoB is still not prepared to react adequately and/or to in time is Operation Thunderbolt, a counter-terrorist action which led finally to an end of the Gulshan carnage which was initiated only 10 hours later after the begin of the attack. The reasons for this late reaction are not only complex and manifold but symptomatic for the GoB’s difficulties in dealing with terrorism: long decision-making processes by the responsible authorities, lack of civil-military coordination, insufficient logistics, and military

equipment are definitely some of them. In order to solve some of these major problems, the GoB needs a complex and coherent counter-terrorism strategy which includes tough military options like the latest crackdown on Islamists or operation thunderbolt. But latter ones must be embedded in an ‘overall political solution’ to eradicate all kinds of Islamist radicalization and influence in the country.

Thirdly, there is obviously no certain measure, or strategy with a specific set of actions that could represent the ‘best solution’ in tackling the terrorist threat in any country. As such, Bangladesh needs a coherent and comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy which includes especially a political solution. Such a ‘political solution’ must consist of several components:

a) The ‘fundamental aim’ to eradicate the conditions creating a favoring environment for religious fanatics.

b) A ‘sustainable rapprochement’ between the two **hostile political leaders** Sheikh Hasina (AL) and Begum Khaleda Zia (BNP) to create a ‘conducive political environment’, and a ‘constructive working relationship’ between government and opposition, and to end the disastrous extra-parliamentary activities to undermine the work of the GoB. The military formally proposed the idea of the minus-two formula, understood that both leaders have to leave the country, but such an option would rather enforce the political conflict than to calm it down.

c) A ‘clear conviction (political will)’ and the subsequent formulation and implementation of a program to bounce-back Islamist leverage in the country’s constitutional and institutional-administrative structure. In this context, the debate of the removal of a constitutional provision recognizing **Islam as the official religion** earlier this year was without an eminent step into the right direction. The fact that Bangladesh's High Court on Monday, March 28, rejected a respective petition, was unfortunate for Bangladesh’s transition towards liberal democracy, for several reasons:

(I) it’s against the initial spirit of the constitution which is favoring secularism;

(II) to declare a certain believe as state religion undermines the freedom of religion and expression, and contradicts the notion of liberal democracy;

(III) the way how the petition got rejected is against any rules and procedures in democratic governance. Within minutes, the petition got rejected without given the petitioner a chance to defend their case. Fourthly, the judgment gave ideological and judicial cover for further Islamisation of state and society, at the expense of the political leverage of secular forces. In sum, this decision of the highest court of Bangladesh will help to **boost Islamism** and Jihadi ideology in the country. Another essential part of a political solution is that the BNP must be forced to cut its ties with religious extremist political parties. **Democracy cannot prevail if political parties**, whose agenda it is to erode democracy, are at the forefront of formal and informal decision-making processes.

Fourthly, a ‘clear conviction (political will)’ and the subsequent formulation and implementation of a program to strengthen the country’s Civil Society, especially to protect and promote Civil Society Organisations in order to strengthen secular and tolerant forces. In this context, any Civil Society agenda must include initiatives to protect the country’s ethnic and religious minorities and other vulnerable groups (like LGBTI).

Fifthly, substantial social and economic reforms and subsequent concrete measures to uplift the living condition and future prospects of the people, especially for the youth. These includes also reforms in the educational sector, especially to reduce the leverage of the madrasas (Islamic religious schools). However, it is important to note, that many of the terrorists who carried out the latest attacks are from financially well-off families and are highly educated. This means that the Jihadi groups today are able to recruit people from all social classes, not only those feeling socially, economically or politically marginalized. Furthermore, it seems that the Jihadi groups invested much in new recruiting strategies and are able to reach not only poor students in madrasas but also rich ones in the leading private universities. It should be also noted that this is not a Bangladesh but rather a worldwide phenomenon. In sum, a political solution should not only focus on the reasons – which are extraordinary manifold – why “rich kids” are turning into terrorists, it must consist specific educational measures able to undermine the increasing successful propaganda strategies of the terror groups.

Last but not least, Bangladesh's complete political elite (irrespective of which political camp) needs a substantial reassessment of its approach towards the international community in general and foreign relations in particular. Being two-times under foreign yoke -first under British colonial rule and then under West-Pakistani military administration (including martial law) which treated former East Pakistan as an 'internal colony'- a certain cautiousness regarding any kind of foreign influence in domestic affairs is comprehensible. However, to find a political solution, the international community could play an important role, especially the European Union (EU). The EU should help to foster a dialogue between AL and BNP to work out a national consensus and create an avenue for a more **inclusive politics** to end violent radicalization. The dialogue should revolve around the issues of putting an end to the disruptive and stifling violence, to guarantee general human rights and the protection of all citizens, and to end the deadlock and generate trust and room for cooperation in order to re-establish democratic norms and principles. In these context, regarding **SADF in Brussels**, the international community could "urge external donors (NGOs and/or non-EU countries) to re-evaluate and monitor their flow of financial aid, development and assistance to Bangladesh so that it is not misused by the JeI [Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami] and its auxiliaries to augment their hazardous extremist impact on political life and secularism in Bangladesh".

Final thoughts

In order to contain and to eradicate the Jihadi threat, Bangladesh's elites must overcome domestic political rivalries to achieve a national consensus to formulate an overall concept for a political solution. Furthermore, the country needs a stringent engagement to promote the Civil Society to strengthen all democratic and secular forces is necessary. Later processes are demanding that the political decision-makers must overcome their 'state of denial' and finally enforce expeditious prosecution and punishment of militant religious extremism; as long as this is not achieved, Bangladesh risks falling even deeper into the clutches of Islamic fundamentalism. As such, it's time that the GoB accept that its country has to face not only the threat of domestic but international Jihadism too. Last but not least, the GoB has to join hands with the international community on the basis of commonly accepted standards human rights, transparency, and accountability, to combat international terrorism on the basics.

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Originally published on:

<http://www.indrastra.com/2016/07/EXCLUSIVE-After-Gulshan-and-Kishoreganj-002-07-2016-0016.html>