Bangladesh - Between Terrorism, Identity and Illiberal Democracy: The Unfolding of a Tragic Saga

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Abstract

In the case of Bangladesh, this paper argues, the nature of the prevailing political culture is playing an important role in the growth of extremist politics and the resulting violence. Most of the political parties are democratic, but only in name. Leaders of the parties are selected rather than elected, dissent within the parties is next to non-existent and grassroots members are not allowed to offer input, which is vital for maintaining a vibrant democratic system. The danger for Bangladesh, where democracy is nearly absent in all but in name, is that such a situation might create a space for both right and left wing terrorism to flourish. The objective of this paper is, therefore, to trace the evolution of Bangladesh's politics and highlight the impact of vitriolic politics as a catalyst in the spread of political extremism in Bangladesh.

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Key Words

Bangladesh, illiberal politics, left and right-wing violence, identity politics, malgovernance.

Introduction

Bangladesh has been viewed as a moderate, democratic Muslim-majority state that has made significant strides in economic and human development. Though the political history of Bangladesh in the first 20 years of its existence has been punctuated by periods of military and quasi-military rule, the country has experienced relative stability since the restoration of democracy in 1990. Since then the country has had four largely free and fair general elections: in 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2008.

While Bangladesh has in the past been synonymous with a myriad of problems such as chronic poverty, natural disasters and a huge population, it was not seen as a country suffering from the scourge of terrorism. Indeed, in spite of the 'liberalist' interpretation of terrorism, which holds that terrorism needs to be

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understood as a response to economic, social and political misery,[1] Bangladesh has not experienced any bout of terrorism since the birth of the country in 1971. However, this situation started changing in the late 1990s. At times, it is feared that Bangladesh is on its way to becoming a major outpost of militant Islam linked to some of the key centers of Islamic militancy in South, Southeast, and West Asia.[2] A series of bomb attacks all over the country in August 2005, followed by deadly attacks on judges by suicide bombers in the latter part of the same year, put Bangladesh on the radar of the international security community. Faced with tremendous pressures both from within and outside the country, the then ruling party ordered security services to stamp out the terrorists. Violent engagements followed, and after a series of dramatic encounters, top leaders of the group responsible for the August bombings were apprehended, brought to trial and subsequently executed. Other terrorist organizations were also identified and efforts were made successfully to neutralize them. However, signs are that the offensive against the terrorists did not crush them. Rather, the drive of the security forces may have encouraged the emergence of a new leadership as adamant as its predecessors in pursuing its radical goals.[3] The recent arrests of members of banned religious outfits only point to the

fact that Bangladesh has to travel a long road in its struggle with terrorism.[4]

Why is Bangladesh suffering from this malaise? One must remember that terrorism is not a mono-causal issue. One writer has identified four factors which explain the growth of terrorism: (i) increasing population; (ii) growing disparities in wealth and benefits; (iii) the expansion of religious terrorism; and (iv) advanced technology and access to it.[5] Paul Wilkinson, on the other hand, has listed a wider range of causes. For Wilkinson, terrorism may be brought about by: (i) states themselves; (ii) ethnic conflicts; (iii) groups believing in extreme left ideology; (iv) groups espousing extreme right ideology; and (v) religious fanatics. He does warn against treating these categories as mutually exclusive and emphasizes that many groups are motivated by a combination of religious, ethnic and political aims and motivations.[6]

> Bangladesh has not experienced any bout of terrorism since the birth of the country in 1971.

In the case of Bangladesh, this paper argues, it is the nature of the prevailing political culture, exacerbated by a crisis of identity, which is playing the important role in the growth of extremist politics and the resulting violence.

True, Bangladesh has been a practicing democratic polity for more than half of its existence. Observers, however, have questioned the way democracy is perceived by Bangladesh's ruling elites and masses. Most of the political parties are democratic, but only in name. Leaders of the parties are selected rather than elected, dissent within the parties is next to non-existent and grassroots members are not allowed to offer input, which is vital for maintaining a vibrant democratic system.

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The political scene is further complicated by a crisis of identity which affects the majority Muslim population of Bangladesh. Since the advent of British rule in India, Bengali Muslims have gradually experienced a steady growth of collective self-consciousness as a distinct group of people, and this has had profound political implications. However, it should also be pointed out that this growth has not been a smooth or unidirectional one. Indeed, as Asim Roy points out, "The Bengal Muslim search for a collective identity was clearly caught between the two opposite pulls of an extra-territorial 'Islamic' ideology and of a local geographical 'Bengali'

culture."[7] The political road which was taken by the Muslims of this region saw them opting for Pakistan in 1947, but within a space of twenty-four years the 'Islamic identity' was discarded in favour of a 'Bengali culture', which manifested itself through the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. The emergence of Bangladesh, however, did not lead to an end to the quest. Rather, the saga continues and the events in the country since its inception have only served to strengthen "the persistent image of a people still groping for a commonly acceptable identity."[8] This in turn has led to a rupture of the Bangladeshi population strictly along partisan lines, with the Bangladesh Awami League (henceforth known as the AL) promoting itself as a proponent of 'Bengali culture' and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (henceforth known as the BNP) highlighting the importance of the country's 'Islamic identity'.

The rot does not stop here, for the political system is characterized by excessive rivalry between the leaders of the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the two main political parties of the country. As a result of this confrontational situation, Bangladesh has been afflicted with a political culture where everything centres on the desire to win power. Moreover, all this has led to the politicization of the country along party lines, with public offices being increasingly viewed as a source of self-aggrandisement. Such a situation has made observers wonder if spoil politics

will ultimately bring about terminal politics, i.e., an intensification and acceleration of violent conflict, leading to state collapse[9]

> Bangladesh has been afflicted with a political culture where everything centres on the desire to win power.

Under such circumstances, the danger for Bangladesh, where democracy is nearly absent in all but in name, is that such a situation might create a space for both right and left wing terrorism to flourish. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to trace the evolution of Bangladesh's politics, the tussle over the identity of its majority population, and to highlight the impact of vitriolic politics as a catalyst in the spread of political extremism in Bangladesh. Such an approach has been adopted because we believe political violence should be understood as a series "of practices and cultural forms whose meanings" can only be unlocked by focusing on "the historical memory and the social relations of the society within which it arises, takes form, and achieves effects."[10] The paper also emphasizes the need for a more pro-people governance system that can help Bangladesh climb out of this downward spiral.

The paper is divided into the following sections: the first section looks at the birth of Bangladesh and the faltering journey the state took until the overthrow of the military dictatorship of General H. M. Ershad in late 1990. The vexing issue of identity is seldom absent as the British and Pakistani eras recede into the background and a new country emerges from the debris of a united Pakistan. Therefore, an attempt will be made to trace the role identity politics played during this timeframe. The track record of the four democratic governments which have governed the country from 1991 to 2010 will be scrutinized in section two. The third section highlights the present situation prevailing in the country and identifies the pitfalls awaiting Bangladesh. The paper concludes by explaining how the prevailing political culture is pushing the country to the brink of an abyss and discusses what can be done to arrest this dangerous trend.

Terrorism, Identity and Religion in Colonial Bengal

Bangladesh declared its independence from Pakistan on March 26, 1971. While the bloodshed and travails of the nine months long war of independence have become etched in the national memory of the country, violence was not a stranger in the land which subsequently came to constitute the country called Bangladesh. Indeed, during the British rule in India (1757-1947), the area

comprising today's Bangladesh was a part of the British Indian Empire and was known as East Bengal. The propensity of Bengal to erupt into spasms of political violence and social disorder was recognized by numerous conquerors as they tried to impose their suzerainty over the region. Historians have reviewed the history of 77 separate peasant uprisings in India during British rule,[11] with Bengal emerging as a centre of peasant unrest. This finding is reinforced by Stephen Fuches, who argues that in the latter part of the eighteenth century large parts of Bengal were in a state of virtual insurrection.[12] While most of these uprisings cannot be considered politically conscious attempts to overthrow foreign domination. but were triggered by local grievances, at times these uprisings transmuted into religious movements. One such movement was the *Fara'idi* movement.[13]

Originally a peasant movement, the *Fara'idis* combined Islamic proselytizing with attacks on landlords, usually Hindus in the case of Bengal. The *Fara'idis* were suppressed by the British, but this could not prevent the emergence of another movement led by one Nasir Ali (alias Titu Mir), who between 1827 and 1831 rallied Muslim cultivators and weavers in the districts of Nadia, Faridpur and Twenty-Four Parganas of Bengal against Hindu landlords, money lenders and British owners of indigo

plantations. Titu Mir's activities were not only confined to bringing about changes in the socio-economic condition of the Muslim masses. A disciple of Sayyid Ahmed of Rai Bareilly, who between 1826 and 1831 attempted to organize a jihad (holy war) against the rule of non-believers in India,[14] Titu Mir concentrated on establishing the outer boundaries of Bengali Muslim identity. He brought about changes in the way Bengali Muslims donned the dhoti, the three-yard length loin cloth worn by Bengali peasants, and instructed his followers to grow beards.[15] Titu Mir was subsequently killed in a skirmish with the British while protesting a local Hindu landlord's imposition of a beard tax. The setbacks experienced by these movements, however, should not negate the fact that these movements had considerable impact on the minds of the Muslim population of Bengal. One observer of the movements observed that, while the material condition of the Muslims of region underwent little or no change, the era of conflict and confrontation led to the formation "of separate Islamic identity- an overzealous respect for the faith."[16]

While 19th century Bengal witnessed violence motivated by economic issues, it was the 20th century that saw the advent of modern political violence. Between 1900 and 1910 Bengal was racked by terrorist activities. The purpose was

to force the British rulers of India to concede political power to Indians. The partition of Bengal in 1905 gave impetus to the movement and by 1907 there was a sharp increase in terrorist attacks directed towards British officials in the province.[17] Indians working in the law-enforcement agencies of British India were also targeted. This period also saw the emergence of secret societies whose purpose was to carry out terrorist acts and accelerate the move towards India's freedom from colonial rule.[18]

> Political activists, students, peasants and professionals formed what could be considered autonomous armed gangs, which were seldom accountable to any authority.

The nationalist character of the terrorist movement taking place in Bengal during this time was strongly influenced by Hindu religious symbolism and had a deleterious impact on Bengali Muslims. The terrorists in their desire to attain greater sympathy from the overwhelming Hindu masses of India adopted '*Bande Mataram*' (Hail, Motherland) and similar slogans which appealed to their sentiments in a cultural idiom rooted in religion. Kali, the Hindu goddess of power and destruction, was put on a

pedestal as the patron of the movement. Such gestures were deeply offensive to the majority of Bengali Muslims who were already aware of their identity as a separate community. The result was wide-spread bitterness among the Muslim population.[19] A similar conclusion is reached by Richard Hula, who observes that the terror campaign, particularly in its more violent aspects, had an impact far beyond that of producing the British response. Instead, it led to antagonism between Muslims and Hindus.[20]

This brief foray into the history of Bengal reveals the interaction of violence and identity politics in the region during the British rule, which lasted for nearly two hundred years. Commenting on this phenomenon in Bengal, Asim Roy notes that the conflicts generated by the revivalist movements transformed from a struggle to ensure socio-economic and civil rights to a concern with religious rights, and in the process sharpened the ethnic and communal differences present in the region. With the passage of time the conflicts merged under a common Islamic fold. leading to a strict division of Hindu and Muslim communities in the region.[21] The terrorist movement in the first two decades of the twentieth century only served to reinforce this divide, thereby ensuring the support of the Bengali Muslims when the call for a separate homeland for the Muslims of India was raised in the following decades.

Bangladesh from 1971 to 1990 – Lurching Between Hope and Despair

The British rule of India ended in 1947 with the partition of the Indian subcontinent and the emergence of two countries, namely India and Pakistan. East Bengal became a part of Pakistan, but the religious ideology which led to the birth of Pakistan proved inadequate to hold the country together, and Bangladesh emerged as an independent and sovereign state in December 1971 after undergoing a nine months long war. The Awami League, led by its charismatic leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, spearheaded the struggle, and it was an Awami League government, headed by Sheikh Mujib, which took over the reins of power in the newly independent country.

The dominant position of the Awami League in the liberation struggle should not make one underestimate the complex nature of the war itself. While East Pakistani members of the Pakistan Army and East Pakistan Rifles (a paramilitary organization) fought in the war, the fact remains that the bulk of the Bengali fighters were civilian militias. Political activists, students, peasants and professionals formed what could be considered autonomous armed gangs, which were seldom accountable to any authority. The war also saw the growth of a radical left-wing ideology, which already existed in East Pakistan.[22] While the majority of the civilian militias went back home after the end of the war, keen observers noted "the exploits of the liberation forces have been a kind of traumatic experience for many a young Bengali. If experience has brutalized his sensibilities, it has also affected his values and his attitude to life."[23] Indeed, the 1971 war and the post-war retribution-based violence that targeted the opponents of the liberation struggle transformed the conflict and its aftermath into a collective trauma. Large-scale civilian participation in the war strongly politicized large segments of society.[24]

> The Awami League itself seemed unable to provide any guidance to lead the new state out of the labyrinth.

It was this war-torn, violence-racked and politically conscious country which Sheikh Mujib inherited upon his return to Bangladesh from a Pakistani jail on January 10, 1972. The task facing the Mujib's AL government was immense, but it was still able to present the country with a fairly acceptable democratic constitution- the 1972 constitution (adopted in November 1972), which provided for a Westminster-

type parliamentary democracy. The constitution adopted nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism as its four pillars. While various explanations were used to justify the inclusion of these goals, it was secularism which created confusion and resentment among the majority of the population. Indeed, it soon became clear that secularism as perceived in the West and as promoted in Bangladesh differed significantly. Aggravating the situation was the fact that the hurried introduction of the vaguely defined concept of secularism was really a superimposition on a mainly agrarian, backward and pre-modern society where old values, with Islam as an important component of daily life, still played a crucial role.[25]

The Awami League itself seemed unable to provide any guidance to lead the new state out of the labyrinth. Rather, it fumbled and sought to provide a definition of secularism which was at odds with the prevailing notion of secularism as practiced in the West. In the Western discourse secularism meant a new world-view as opposed to the spirituality and otherworldliness espoused by the major religions of the world. Influenced by rationalism, the Enlightenment and the twin forces of the industrial revolution and capitalism, secularism questioned the place of the supernatural and sacred in the affairs of human beings.[26]

Needless to say, such an atmosphere was not present in the newly independent country. Moreover, the AL government did not define secularism clearly, but spoke of it being used as a sort of barrier against the abuse of religion for political gains. Time and again, Mujib was at pains to point that he was not disavowing the need for Islam to be protected and patronized by the state. However, he was also concerned about the needs of other religious minorities residing within Bangladesh. The result of such a policy was not the consolidation of secularism in Bangladesh but the emergence of a situation where all religions flourished and vied with each other for state patronage. This did not go down well with the majority Muslim population of the country.[27]

> The presence of the Indian Army in Bangladesh after the end of the war and allegations of widespread looting by Indian troops had a negative impact on the Bangladeshis.

The Awami League's pursuit of secularism also ran up against the anti-Indian attitude which was rapidly building up inside the country. The honeymoon of 1971, when India actively supported the Liberation War of Bangladesh, did not last long.

The presence of the Indian Army in Bangladesh after the end of the war and allegations of widespread looting by Indian troops had a negative impact on the Bangladeshis. The display of hegemonic aspirations by India, which received a boost with her comprehensive victory over Pakistan, turned a grateful Bangladeshi population into a sullen one. It was not long after 1971 that the terms anti-Indian and anti-Awami League turned synonymous. The secularist policy of Sheikh Mujib was seen as an appeasement of India and suffered a Muslim backlash as the Indian high-handedness with Bangladesh became apparent.

By 1975 the AL government had sunk into a quagmire of corruption, economic mismanagement and administrative inefficiency. Like the tragic hero of Robert Browning's"The Patriot", Mujib, the charismatic leader, lost touch with the very people who had propelled him to power. In early 1975 he discarded the parliamentary system and moved closer to a trend of authoritarianism of personal rule.[28] The situation prevailing within the country deteriorated further, and in August 15, 1975 a group of mid-ranking army officers killed Mujib and several members of his family. The era of military rule had started in Bangladesh.

The chaos which followed the assassination of Sheikh Mujib saw a series of coups and counter-coups being mounted, and it was only in late 1975 that a semblance of order was restored in the country with the assumption of power by Major General Ziaur Rahman.

Bangladesh negated the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam as promoted by the Pakistani state, but it did not in any way deny its Muslim identity.

The Zia era lasted from 1975 to 1981 and gave Bangladesh a mixed legacy. Zia reintroduced a multiparty political system in the country. He created his own political party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (the BNP), which over time has emerged as the alternative to the philosophy and politics of The Awami League. The popularity of the BNP in no way diminishes the fact that it was imposed from the top down by Zia's government and still reflects the authoritarian style of its general-turned-politician. Another of Zia's achievements was saving the Bangladesh Army from disintegrating into numerous factions. He did not hesitate to use force, and over time the Bangladesh Army was able to purge itself of factionalism. However, this happened too late for Zia, and it was the holdover of factionalism in the military which cost him his life.[29]

Ziaur Rahman also reversed the secularization policy initiated by Sheikh

Mujib. In 1973 Abidullah Ghazi penned an insightful essay where he pointed out the strong Islamic nature of Bengal and observed that the rejection of Pakistan was only a rejection of an inconvenient political bond. Bangladesh negated the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam as promoted by the Pakistani state, but it did not in any way deny its Muslim identity.[30] Zia seemed to have reached a similar conclusion. He realized how important Islam was for consolidating his rule and sought to achieve this by giving a legal and constitutional face to Bangladesh's Islamic orientation. Zia amended the Bangladesh Constitution, did away with secularism and inserted a clause professing 'faith in the Almighty Allah'.

> The new nationalism purportedly brought the ethnically non-Bengalis, including the tribal groups, within the fold of the Bangladeshi state.

Changes were brought about in the school syllabi whereby courses on Islam were made compulsory for the students. However, the dangers posed by extremist Islam were not disregarded, and right-wing religious parties and interest groups were kept in check. Thus, observes Kathryn Jacques, the tenor of Zia's Islamic message was one which catered to the majority population's religious beliefs, albeit mixed with Bangladeshi territorial and cultural pride.[31]

Zia also withdrew the ban on Islamic political parties which the Awami League government had imposed in the aftermath of the 1971 war. Initiating a move which was destined to have a profound impact upon the course of Bangladeshi politics, Zia popularized the concept of Bangladeshi nationalism as opposed to the Bengali nationalism of the Awami League. The new nationalism purportedly brought the ethnically non-Bengalis, including the tribal groups, within the fold of the Bangladeshi state. More importantly, it also drew a distinction between the Bengali-speaking people of Bangladesh and those of West Bengal in India who are predominantly Hindu. One observer points out that such an action meant a "reassertion of the distinct and separate identity of Bengali Muslims vis-à-vis the Bengali Hindus" and thus revived the question of identity which had vexed the Muslims of this region during the colonial period.[32] Zia's party, the BNP, has faithfully adhered to his policies, and later on in the article we will see how this has affected politics in Bangladesh.

After a brief democratic interlude, General H. M. Ershad took power in 1982 and ruled the country until 1990. Interestingly, General Ershad informed the nation that the he had stepped in and assumed the reins of government because

the successor regime to Zia had drifted away from the Islamic-nationalistic objectives previously set by the assassinated general.[33] Ershad continued Zia's policy and went further. To accord legitimacy to his rule Ershad resorted to what at times seemed a blatant policy of promoting Islam. However, in spite of his public displays of piety, Ershad was unable to acquire the public support he so desperately sought. Moreover, he neither had Zia's charisma nor was he free from the stigma of corruption. In fact, it was during his rule that corruption became endemic in the country. More importantly, Ershad's attempts to hold on to power saw him use state agencies to radicalize a generation of students and politicize the already highly volatile universities. The effect of his policy has outlived his regime and is worth quoting at length:

> Finally, when the situation became too critical, Ershad also emulated the opposition parties' clashing tactics by arming and criminalizing his party's student branch and syndicates. This led to the 1987 and 1990 pitched battles on the campus of Dhaka University, the epicenter of protest. This tactic eventually proved how out of steam Ershad's government had run. The Bangladeshi state had slipped so far from Weber's ideal type of legitimate violence monopoly that the government was compelled to activate groups which would have normally threatened its survival simply in order to maintain itself. These armed gangs, some of whose leaders were given positions in Ershad's party, were used to confront opposition parties in the street, and were 'rewarded' by controlling commercial areas and running protection rackets on them. As had already happened during and after the war of independence, though on a wider scale, this privatization of legitimate violence started a process of criminalization of politics which continues up to the present day.[34]

Bangladesh from 1991 to 2011 - The Emergence of Illiberal Democracy

The Ershad era came to an end in early December 1990. The military dictator resigned in the face of a massive uprising spearheaded by the two main political parties: the Awami League headed by Sheikh Hasina, the eldest daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party led by Khaleda Zia, the widow of Ziaur Rahman. In the years that followed the country fulfilled the criteria of a "minimalist democracy" – regular free and contested elections, peaceful handover of power, growth of fundamental freedom and a return of civilian control over policy and institutions.[35] However, the fact remains that this focus on the minimalist criteria of democracy has only served to hide the real malaise, which is pushing the country to the brink of becoming what Fareed Zakaria has labeled "Illiberal Democracy".[36] In order to understand the factors which are propelling Bangladesh to this sad state of affairs, one needs to trace the trajectory which the country has taken in the last two decades.

The principal characteristic of Bangladesh's democratic political system is a stable two-party system. The two main political parties, the Awami League and the BNP, command the allegiance of the majority of the voters and have strong grass roots support. Between the years 1991 and 2010, the two parties have competed in four elections and have been voted in and out of office. It should also be pointed out here that despite the overwhelming domination of Bangladesh's political scene by the aforementioned two parties, a third political party adhering to Islamist politics has also made its presence felt over the years. This is the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, and critics of Jamaat-e-Islami point out that it plays a central role in what they perceive as a gradual Islamisation of Bangladeshi politics. Jamaat's political leverage underwent a noticeable change in 2001 when the BNP joined hands with Jamaat and formed the government. The Awami League's landslide victory in the 2008 elections and the abysmal performance of both the BNP and Jamaat has adversely affected the fortunes of Jamaat, but it cannot be denied that Islamist parties have carved out a space for themselves in the political milieu of Bangladesh.

While the bipolar political system has brought a semblance of stability into the political system, it has created an atmosphere which has largely negated whatever little advantages have accrued from such a situation. Successive ruling parties have resorted to similar policies: the opposition is seldom given the opportunity to air its views either in the parliament or in the official electronic media; few or no attempts were made to incorporate the opposition in matters of policy and governance. In fact, the ruling parties seem determined to ride roughshod over their opponents and have systematically subjected opposition workers to harassment and detention through a partisan use of the law enforcement agencies.[37] The opposition is unwilling to forgo what it deems to be its rightful share in perpetuating this state of affairs. The pretence of following democratic norms is abandoned as soon as the election is over and a sole objective overrides all other consideration: unseat the government, force another election and return to power as quickly as possible. Milam sums up the prevailing political culture of both the AL and the BNP aptly when he writes that the natural state of Bangladesh politics is to "abjure other viewpoints; identify national interest with your party; and consider being out of power almost worse than death itself."[38]

This bipolar system also suffers from the legacy of the contending national identities which were introduced in Bangladesh in the early years of the country's existence, and this has been discussed in the previous pages. The struggle between the linguistic-based

Bengali nationalism and territorial-based Bangladeshi nationalism, tinged as it was with an Islamic flavor, meant a contest for the collective identity of the Bangladeshi state.[39] Both the Awami League and the BNP are determined not to yield any ground on this issue with the result that the country has been bifurcated along partisan lines, with supporters of both parties, and, in turn, contending ideologies of nationalism, unwilling to grant any semblance of legitimacy, whichever party is in power.

> To ensure the smooth functioning of these grab-and-hold policies, political parties in Bangladesh have resorted to blatant politicization of the administration and law-enforcement agencies.

Such a confrontational approach to politics is further exacerbated by the fact that the top leaders of both the political parties are barely on speaking terms with each other.[40] In such a vitriolic atmosphere, it is natural that the democratic process has not only stalled but also deteriorated over the years. Parliament has not been able to serve as an effective forum for debate, and the inability of the political parties to tolerate dissent has effectively turned it into a dysfunctional body. Under

such circumstances, a "winner-takes-all" approach termed by Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) as "partyarchy" has become the principal feature of Bangladeshi politics.[41] The attainment of political office is therefore seen as a means of access to and control over resources.

The situation is further compounded by the increasing reliance of political parties on hoodlums to further their confrontational politics. In fact, both the major political parties have now systematized the phenomenon, which accelerated during the Ershad era. Thus Bangladesh has witnessed a "progressive criminalisation of politics and the disconnection of a growing number of party workers from any political goals beyond using politics as a source of livelihood."[42] Under such circumstances, anything and everything is up for grabs, for "the act of physical possession constitutes and reinforces other forms of power and hierarchy."[43] And to ensure the smooth functioning of these grab-and-hold policies, political parties in Bangladesh have resorted to blatant politicization of the administration and law-enforcement agencies. The purpose is to facilitate their access to resources, either in collusion with the executive or by making the administration a silent spectator to these acts. More importantly, political parties have systematically used law enforcement agencies to protect their own workers while harassing members of

the opposition. Such partisan use of the state's machinery has left the ordinary citizens with a system of institutionalized anarchy where little or no protection is available against the depredations of the political criminals.[44]

> Political divisions, problems of nation building, economic causes and external linkages are all identified by analysts as probable causes of the emergence of religious extremism in the country.

A more ominous fallout of such policies is the increasing politicization and subsequent deterioration of the civil service. Bangladesh today epitomizes the Manichaean divide of "Us versus them, good versus evil" and the polarization has been institutionalized and naturalized to such an extent that nearly all public and professional associations openly declare their political affiliation.[45] Government employees are no exception to this trend. Indeed, what the economists identify as "selection by intrinsic motivation" has now become the norm as far as recruitment in to the civil service is concerned. As service conditions became more and more subject to political consideration, bright students are increasingly turning away from the civil service. Political appointees who seldom have the necessary educational qualification or skill to run the administration effectively are filling the lacuna. Paul Collier's observation about the dumb class bully turned general in Africa who oversees the destruction of his country's civil administration applies to Bangladeshi politicians who have "gradually replaced the clever boys with people more like themselves. And as they promoted the dumb and corrupt over the bright and the honest, the good chose to leave."[46]

The Bangladesh Army also has been unable to shield itself from the prevailing state of affairs in the country. The impact of the 1971 war and the anarchic conditions which followed the war had an adverse impact on the army, and it was only after much effort and bloodshed that factionalism within the army was neutralized in the early 1980s. However, with the return to multi-party rule in 1991, the army has also been affected by the strict polarization which pervades the country. In his in-depth study of Bangladesh's armed forces, Nurul Islam notes that both the BNP and the AL while in power sought to appoint "sympathetic" officers to the top leadership of the army. Such policies have promoted "groupings" and factionalism within the army, which, in the long run, have affected its professionalism. The result of such actions has been the continued politicization of the army.[47]

In short, Bangladesh's experience with democracy has not been a happy one. Rather, democracy has come to be synonymous with wanton greed, disregard for the rule of law and widespread politicization of all segments of Bangladeshi society. Afsan Chowdhury succinctly summed up the present state of the country when he wrote that Bangladeshis have become post-modern citizens living in a fake modern state ruled by people with pre-modern instincts.[48]

Indeed, today's Bangladesh strongly displays symptoms of what Chris Allen described as "Spoil Politics". In such a condition, public office or power is seen is a means of self-aggrandizement. The natural consequences of such a policy are the spread of corruption on a massive and endemic scale, the withering away of the state from a large range of functions and services, the monopolization of power in the hands of a few individuals and the loss of the ability of the state to control the means of coercion. This state of affairs has every possibility of leading to a situation of terminal decline of the Bangladeshi state, where state authority gradually disappears while the powers that be engage in a sort of corruption "feeding frenzy". Ultimately, a state fades away not necessarily through a process of violent disruption but rather through a steady erosion of its authority.[49]

In the case of Bangladesh, the dangers of a failing state of 150 million people are obvious. Located in the arc of Muslim countries stretching from Afghanistan to Indonesia, any sign of political upheaval, socio-economic instability and resulting chaos in Bangladesh can make it susceptible to the spread of extremist ideology.[50]

It was in the 1990s that signs began to emerge of the growth and spread of religious extremism in Bangladesh. While successive governments adopted policies of either denial or selective engagement as far as religious extremism was concerned, the reality of the threat was rammed home on August 17, 2005, when a series of bombs blasts rocked the country. Since then, a spate of suicide bomb attacks have killed scores of government officials, lawyers, policemen and members of the public. The attacks, orchestrated by groups like Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) highlighted the danger facing Bangladesh. Analysts also pointed to the existence of groups like Harakatul Jihad-i-Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B) and Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB), which were engaged in activities detrimental to the security of the country. Mention should also be made about the presence of smaller and shadowy bodies such as Allahr Dal (Allah's party), Hizb-ul Tahrir and Hizb-ul Touhid, which may be parts of proscribed organizations which have regrouped and emerged as new entities under different names.[51]

Widespread national and international pressure forced the then BNP-led government finally to acknowledge and deal with the threat. Since August 2005, law enforcement agencies have arrested hundreds of members of these extremist organizations and every member of the original leadership of the JMB has been arrested, tried and executed. While no major terrorism-related incident has been reported in the country since January 2006, analysts caution that the danger posed by religious extremists should not be underestimated. The Brussels-based International Crisis Group observed in a report that while the JMB has been decimated, its demise should not be taken for granted, and the possibility of attacks planned and carried out by a revived JMB remains a possibility.[52] The threat of Bangladesh-based groups interacting with foreign extremist organizations and carrying out acts of terrorism both within and outside the country should also not be underplayed.[53]

The end of the Cold War and the increasing pace of globalization has also raised the vexing issue of Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) and their perceived ties with terrorist organizations. Fears were expressed that terrorists would find it attractive to join transnational criminal organizations to fund the terror activities and avail themselves of services provided by TCOs. Such services may include purchasing weapons from illicit arms traffickers or false identity documents from counterfeiters. Such a 'strategic alliance' could not but have an adverse impact upon international security.[54] Bangladesh also seems vulnerable to this danger, as it shares a porous boundary with Myanmar and an ill-guarded maritime boundary, and its security agencies are hampered by a lack of technology and well-trained manpower to deal effectively with such challenges. However, it should be noted that until now no trace of linkages between Bangladeshi terrorist groups and TCOs have been clearly established, and perhaps this lends credence to the argument put forward by analysts that TCOs, in spite of the possibility that collaboration may bring monetary benefits, may avoid interacting with terrorists so as not to attract unwanted attention from law enforcement agencies.[55]

The reasons behind the growth and spread of religious extremism in Bangladesh are manifold. As pointed out at the beginning of this paper, terrorism is a multi-faceted phenomenon, and what is being experienced in Bangladesh is no exception. Thus, political divisions, problems of nation building, economic causes and external linkages are all identified by analysts as probable causes of the emergence of religious extremism in the country.[56] The multi-pronged nature of extremism is taken into cognizance by this paper. However, it contends that it is

the spread of illiberal democracy which has worsened the situation and, in many a case, acted as a sort of catalyst leading to the spread of the problem. The rise of the JMB, the much-feared extremist organization which carried out the most fearful attacks experienced in Bangladesh up till now, serves to illustrate the veracity of this contention.

> While religious terrorism is now the bugbear of the international community, the dangers of left-wing terrorism in South Asia is a security concern which is to be disregarded at one's peril.

The JMB emerged as an extremist organization in 1998 with the objective of establishing Islamic rule in the country. Between 1998 and 2003, the group recruited, trained and mobilized members, raised funds and undertook operations across the country. The areas where the JMB emerged in strength were located in the northern and southwestern regions of the country. Interestingly, these regions were (and still are) racked by a plethora of leftist groups who mouth Marxist-Leninist slogans but in reality have degenerated into armed groups engaged in extortion, kidnappings and killings. Among these groups, the most prominent are the Purba Banglar Communist Party

(Marxist-Leninist Janajuddho), the Purba Banglar Maoist Communist Party, the New Biplobi Communist Party, the Biplobi Communist Party, the Dakkhin Banglar Chinnomul Communist Party and the Sarbahara Party.

All these groups have been engaged in killing and extortion for decades now, and it was against the activities of these groups that the JMB and its offshoot the JMJB launched their operations in April/May 2004.[57] In this drive against the leftist extremist groups, the JMB and JMJB were able to garner the support of the local police administration. Siddiqul Islam alias Bangla Bhai, the JMB operative who led this drive, spoke about the assistance provided to him by the police chiefs of the districts where he operated and the rapport which developed between his organization and the local law-enforcement agencies.[58] Such a nexus of extremist groups and law enforcement agencies is not uncommon and can be cited as yet another example of vigilante justice perpetrated in many a part of the world. Yet such acts only serve to underline the deeper malaise affecting Bangladesh. The events surrounding the activities of the JMB and JMJB against leftist militants in reality provides a classic proof of the Bangladeshi state's inability to impose its writ upon certain geographical areas of the country. As the ability of the state to control means of coercion faded away, non-state actors, in this case donning the garb of religious

groups, stepped in to fill the void. It is difficult to ignore the striking similarities between the scenario described above and the pattern of "spoil politics leading to terminal decline" as described by Allen. Indeed, such a situation has prompted one political commentator to write that such conditions imply an absence of the state. This absence, either in certain geographical areas or in areas of social services, highlights the crisis of governance and helps "create a void, which in turn leads to the establishment of a parallel structure of authority."[59]

While religious terrorism is now the bugbear of the international community, the dangers of left-wing terrorism in South Asia is a security concern which is to be disregarded at one's peril. Extremists espousing a radical Maoist ideology are now a reality in Nepal and have carved out a space for themselves in India. While the immediate causes of the spread of Maoist groups varies from one area to another, it is a fact that this outburst is a response to the appalling structural violence that has been perpetrated by elites, supported by the state, against landless and poor peasants.[60] In a hard-hitting piece Jason Miklian and Scott Carney point out why India is having such a difficult time in neutralizing the Maoist problem. They observe that Indian authorities have misunderstood the very nature of the problem. India's ruling elites have mistaken industrialization for

development and blindly believe in their ability to have a 21st century economic system without fixing India's corrupt political and judicial system. India, Miklian and Carney believe, is spending billions and using its coercive means to deal with the Maoists without addressing the basic issues of malgovernance, which have pushed the people into the embrace of the Maoists.[61]

Maoists have not yet emerged as a political force in Bangladesh. However, given the fact that the present nature of illiberal democracy in the country has made it difficult for ordinary people to be heard in any other way than through spontaneous and violent protests, in spite of the fact that historically the Bangladeshi state has strongly repressed such protests, [62] will it be too far-fetched to predict the emergence of such an extreme form of politics in Bangladesh? Siddiqui describes two recent incidents where the long suffering population finally decided to take matters into their own hands and confront the rapacious state.[63] Interestingly, in a pattern eerily similar to the mineral-rich regions of India now plagued by Maoist extremists, the Bangladeshi people have also resorted to violent opposition against state policies with regard to the nature of mining and use of minerals.[64] Such policies have been identified as anti-people and driven more by venal motive than safeguarding the interest of the common man and the state. Will it be safe to assume that such

desperate people will never be influenced by radical ideologies which have such powerful appeal across the border? Also, will it be too far-fetched to assume that groups espousing violent Islamic ideologies will appear on the scene to deal with the Maoists, should the problem spread across the border? After all, the rise of the JMB and JMJB were linked to the persistent law and order problem thrown up by the presence of leftist splinter groups in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's present state should make its elites remember the haunting words of a reporter's epitaph of a dying regime:

> In a society so crushed by misery, by privation and worry, nothing will speak more eloquently to the imagination, nothing causes greater unrest, anger, and hatred than the picture of corruption and privilege among the elite. Even an incompetent and sterile government, if it lived a Spartan life, could exist for years basking in the esteem of the people. The attitude of the people to the Palace is normally kindhearted and understanding. But all tolerance has its limits, which in its swaggering arrogance the Palace often and easily violates. And the mood of the street changes violently from submission to defiance, from patience to rebelliousness.[65]

Conclusion

The present state of politics in Bangladesh has done little to endear the concept of democracy to the average Bangladeshi. Rather, the sustained involvements of the members of political parties in criminal activities have highlighted the malicious transformations such organizations have undergone over the years. Bangladesh's political culture reflects a profound ideological void and political bankruptcy of the leadership. Under such circumstances, rent-seeking policies dominate the parties – from the centre to the periphery. Violence that seems to pervade all sectors of the Bangladeshi society serves to highlight the poor quality of the country's political culture.[66] Moreover, the ubiquitous presence of violence puts a question mark on the survivability of the country, for such violence inevitably tends to escalate, give birth to coups and counter-coups and spawn extremist organizations. Such scenarios eventually lead "to the point where a culture of political violence can come into being and with it the very possibility of democratic breakdown."[67] Milam reinforces this observation and writes that Bangladesh suffers from an image of imminent failure, an image resulting from a concoction of instability and ungovernability which have been brought about by a failed political class adhering to a failed political culture.[68]

Despite such a pessimistic mood pervading the country, it must be pointed out that Bangladesh has made steady progress over the past forty years. The country has been able to maintain a steady rate of economic growth in spite of weak governance. Such a performance has led the World Bank to identify this phenomenon as a

"Bangladesh Paradox", a situation where the country has slowly inched its way forward and attained growth in spite of a "truly dreadful configuration of policies and governance".[69] It should also be mentioned that Bangladesh has made significant progress in terms of slowing down population growth, cutting down child mortality rates, improving access to education and health care and ensuring women's empowerment.[70] Such achievements do point to the success of political parties in governing the country and may raise doubts about the efficacy of the gloomy predictions. However, the Bangladesh conundrum persists and analysts are still at a loss as to how one can reconcile the country's stable economic growth rate with the confrontational politics prevailing in the country.[71]

> The vexing issue of identity which seems to have divided the Bangladeshi political milieu can only be dealt with by a healthy all-inclusive democratic system.

The state of democracy in Bangladesh has also experienced some positive development. Over the years, vertical accountability, mainly through the workings of an active civil society and vigilant media, has increased, but horizontal accountability has not undergone a similar transformation.[72]

Rather, the same malaise of illiberalism has prevented the various branches of the government, including the judiciary, from playing the desired role, leading one commentator to bemoan the presence of a "Democracy of un-public opinion" in the country.[73]

However, such a situation should not make one question the validity of democracy itself. Indeed, history tells us that the road to representative and accountable government has been torturous for many a political unit. Bangladesh needs to move ahead with its democratic experiment in spite of the malaise affecting it. In other words, the response of the Bangladeshi people to flawed democracy should not be less but more democracy – a democracy of constitutional liberalism, i.e., the tradition which protects people's dignity and autonomy from all sorts of coercion. Bangladeshis need to be empowered so that they do not remain abstract legal citizens, but act as active agents who can formulate and pursue their interests on their own vis-à-vis the existing structures of dominance and privilege.[74] Such a democracy will also assist the Bangladesh state in dealing with threats of violence from religious extremism, for "democracy diminishes the threat of violence and terrorism by sub-state actors, including religious extremists affiliated with religious political parties."[75] Of course, this democracy also needs to ensure the participation of the

total population of Bangladesh in the democratic process. The vexing issue of identity which seems to have divided the Bangladeshi political milieu can only be dealt with by a healthy all-inclusive democratic system. The spate of terror attacks and the recent litany of arrests of terror suspects made by law enforcement agencies should not draw attention away from the fact that a well-governed Bangladeshi state can effectively deal with the scourge of terrorism should it earnestly desire to do so.[76] Only such a democracy can prevent Bangladesh from hurtling down the precipice on which it stands precariously. The alternative to this might be a fate which will not be a happy one for millions of Bangladeshis and South Asians.

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