

## 8. Countering violent extremism in Bangladesh

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Bangladesh's emergence in 1971 rose from a burning spirit for a progressive, secular and democratic society. The Independence of Bangladesh followed a decades-long struggle between secular democratic ideologies of an aspiring People's Republic of Bangladesh and Islamisation espoused by the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

Severe economic deprivation and social discrimination aside, the people of Bangladesh suffered from Pakistan's aggression to undermine the Bangla language and culture, shared by both Hindu and Muslim Bengali population living across the borders in West Bengal, India and erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Thus the Bangla language was deemed by the Pakistani rulers as not Islamic enough, and the aggression was their way of "Islamisation" of the Bangla language and culture, by replacing with it Arabic culture and Urdu language in Bangladesh, which was the eastern part of Pakistan between 1947 and 1971.

Attacks on the works of the legendary lights of Bangla literature and poetry Rabindranath Thakur [Tagore] and Kazi Nazrul Islam and instructions by the Pakistani rulers to replace Bangla letters with the Arabic alphabet, met with steep resistance in the 1940s and early 1950s from the Bengali, that culminated in the historic language movement in 1952.

Rabindranath Thakur [Tagore], who belonged to the Brahma faith, was mislabelled as a "Hindu" poet spreading Hindu culture and beliefs while Kazi Nazrul Islam, in spite of being born a Muslim, was

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denounced as an atheist. In essence, the fight served to undermine the secular spirits promoted by both the leading poets that inspired harmonious cohabitation across faiths, namely Muslims and Hindus, to chart a path of hatred and conflict.

### **Ideological divide**

Islamic extremists considered the secular nature of Bangla language, literature, cultural practices and expressions as a threat to Islamic values, culture and teaching, rooted in Arabic language and culture. To both Pakistani rulers and politicians, Bengali Muslims, in spite of their religious faith and practices, were somehow not “Islamic enough” since they shared language and culture with Hindus – and therefore easy targets for hatred.

Bangladesh gained independence in 1971 through a bloodstained War of Liberation against Pakistan. In the war, a section of Bengali Muslims not only politically sided with Pakistan’s occupational army, but also took active part in the genocide, mass killing, violence and abuse of women in the name of Islam. Clearly opposed to the birth of Bangladesh, these groups then and until now have remained loyal to Pakistan.

Aided by these local collaborators, the Pakistani forces systematically targeted eminent intellectuals, educators, writers, professors, doctors, artists, and journalists throughout the 1971 war. In a last ditch attempt to bereft the new nation of its best brains and invaluable intellectual resources critical for nation building, a large number of intellectuals were rounded up, massacred and buried together in a mass grave on December 14, 1971, barely two nights before the Pakistanis surrendered to the valiant Bengali freedom fighters and Bangladesh became independent on December 16, 1971.

The persistent ideological divide had cost our new nation the much-needed unity. Unfortunately, the divide has widened over the past 47 years – deeply impacting Bangladesh’s socio-political dynamics until now. A nation born to realise secular humanity, by breaking away from Pakistan and rejecting a religion-based two-nation theory, has lost its original ideology and identity through the incurable political divide.

## Post liberation Bangladesh

Learning from the strife between religions imposed by the Islamic extremists for their political gain and from the enormous loss and suffering in the war-torn nation, one of the first decisions of the first government of independent Bangladesh was to ban religious-based communal politics. Jamaat-e-Islami and other communal parties, which played an active role in assisting Pakistani occupational forces and in committing genocide and all kinds of war crimes, were banned.

The first Constitution of sovereign Bangladesh in 1972, enshrined secularism as one of the four fundamental principles and pillars on which to build the new country. The defeated communal political groups and their abettors in the different corners of society refused to accept the idea of an independent and secular Bangladesh. Aided by conspirators at home and abroad, they went on plotting, and in 1975 assassinated Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation and the architect of Independent Bangladesh, and his family. The gruesome killings and subsequent political turns derailed the secular and progressive path Bangladesh aspired for and instead paved the way for the resurgence of fundamentalism in a war that started ravaging Bangladesh barely within three and a half years into its journey.

Communal forces that were defeated in 1971, became active again to govern the country according to the communal ideology through the subsequent regimes that assumed the seat of power. Bangladesh's first military ruler, Major General Ziaur Rahman [ruled from 1977 to 1981], who founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in the name of introducing “multi-party democracy”, allowed religion-based communal politics and paved the way for the communal parties to return to the political arena. Secularism was removed from the four fundamental principles enshrined in the Constitution of Bangladesh. Moreover, “Bismillah-Ar-Rahman-Ar-Rahim” [In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful] has been inserted/written at the top of the preamble of the Constitution of Bangladesh.

These major political ideological shifts threw away secular democratic values. The trend continued throughout the 1980s during the regime of the second military ruler Lt. General H.M. Ershad. He also widely patronised Islamist radicalism, communal and fundamentalist politics and instigated these sections through the introduction of a

controversial provision of a “state religion” in the Constitution. Through these machinations, Ershad managed to declare Islam as a state religion by amending the Constitution, defeating the very secular spirit that was at the core of the inception of Bangladesh as a nation.

Military regimes that assumed the state power by undemocratic means and without popular support, instead exploited the innocent sentiments of a majority Muslim population by using the name of Islam. The idea of Islamisation became a deep-rooted, long-lasting political tactic and helped change not only the political but also the secular psyche of society.

### **Secularism up against hurdles**

In the 1980s, during the regime of the second military dictator H.M. Ershad, a large number of madrasa-educated Bangladeshi Muslims left for Afghanistan to fight with the Afghan Mujahedeen against the occupying Soviet forces. Later, other similar groups went to Myanmar to fight with armed Rohingya insurgent groups. On return, these groups started aligning within the country both openly and underground with the agenda to establish *Shariah* Law through *Jihad*, *Shariah* being the ultimate goal of other Islamic political parties.

Even the fall of General Ershad’s autocratic regime, through a mass uprising and return of democracy in Bangladesh in 1991, did not halt the rise of Islamic extremism. Rather, when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Begum Khaleda Zia was in state power from 1991 to 1996, Bangladesh’s first Islamist militant outfit Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (Huji-B) emerged through an open declaration of its jihadist agenda at a press conference at the National Press Club in April 1992, followed by a procession in the city. Many of those Huji-Bangladesh leaders are now at the helm of Hefazat-e-Islam, an organisation that made a list of secular bloggers writers and free thinkers labelling them atheist and demanding their execution. The Hefazat-e-Islam has taken a position against Bangladesh’s secular education policy as part of its long-term strategy to influence young minds from early on by impinging on their education. The Islamic extremist outfit issues threats against secular textbook curriculum for school students from level one to ten. Hefazat’s top organisers dream of implementing a Taliban like rule in Bangladesh (Manik, 2013).

Since 1992, Huji-Bangladesh flourished and continued propagating their militant, extreme and communal ideologies unchallenged for years until the Awami League Government, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina began chasing them in January 1998, as the militant organisation became increasingly aggressive and began to carry out terrorist attacks across the country. The situation posed difficult challenges that the government was struggling to contain. Pro-Islamic political groups exploited general people's religious sentiment against the Awami League government by accusing them of going after Islam, the Islamic faith, and scholars.

Islamic political parties never hesitated to spread rumours and speculations using religious sentiments to win over secular political parties, including the Awami League. In fact, misrepresenting and distorting facts, spreading rumours, speculations and propaganda are some key tactics they used to influence popular beliefs. The propaganda thrived on some baseless and unrealistic yet inflammatory claims such as "Bangladesh would be part of India..." (Dhaka, 2001), "Azan (call for Muslim prayer) would be replaced in Bangladesh by blowing of conch-shells..." (Qadir, 2018).

Similarly, claims occurred about mosques that would be turned into Hindu temples, Hindu *Ulu dhwani* would be heard from mosques instead of the Holy *Azan*<sup>1</sup>; that Bangladesh would be converted to a Hindu State; Bangladesh would become a province of India; Muslims of the country would not be able to practice their religion in the country. Such political rhetoric has been used in the past decades to motivate people's sentiments against the secular spirit even before Bangladesh's national election in 2008. Begum Khaleda Zia, chief of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and widow of the first military ruler, urged voters to vote for her party to save Islam and the country (bdnews, 2008).

Interestingly, these false claims and propaganda tactics were very similar to those used by Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamic parties, in 1971, against the liberation forces, to foil the birth of secular Bangladesh.

And this propaganda helped to confuse large sections of the new generations, who grew up in the post-liberation dark era when martial law dictators had allowed the systematic infiltration of religion-based communal ideology in the society, by distorting historical facts in text

books, allowing the mushrooming of Madrasas (Islamic schools) and controlling the mainstream media. All these helped create a safe haven for those who have been engaged in spreading the dangerous disease of Islamic extremism, hatred for other religious communities, communalism, radicalisation, Islamist militancy and terrorism in Bangladesh, in decades since the killing of Sheikh Mujib in 1975.

### **Rise of terrorism and extremism in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh witnessed the first phase of terror attacks from the 1990s, continuing up to 2004-5, while the terror outfits began getting organised from the late 1980s. Progressive, secular cultural organisations, political parties and the judiciary, including judges and lawyers, were targets of terrorist rather than secular individuals. What emerged were systematic efforts to silence organised secular political, cultural and social forces that supported the democratic structure of the state. In this phase, individuals did not appear so much as targets even though some intellectuals such as Professor Humayun Azad were attacked.<sup>2</sup>

But the second phase of terror attacks from 2013 was more focused on silencing voices of progressive, secular individuals as well as intimidating not only Hindu, Buddhist and Christian minority communities, but also Muslims belonging to sects other than the majority Sunnis. In 2015, Shia Muslims came under attack for the first time. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community, traditional targets of fundamentalists, encountered fresh attacks. Some other little known religious communities and a few university professors were also been targeted. And then, for the first time ever in Bangladesh, foreign nationals were killed. This came as a surprise as Bangladeshis; even impoverished rural communities are well known for their hospitable, friendly and accommodative attitude towards foreign nationals (Manik & Barry, 2015; Manik & Barstow, 2015).

The ideological scuffle between Islamic extremists and secular bloggers/writers that had been going on for years, escalated to physical attacks and killing from 2013 onwards.

It is now evident that Islamic extremists have systematically targeted, followed and enlisted young bloggers and writers in premeditated hit lists. They went to the extent of announcing on social media their hit lists and murder plans of certain individuals. These appeared on Facebook and blogs, way before the actual attacks took place.

The serial killing of bloggers and writers sent chilling messages to the community of secular writers and freethinkers. Panic-stricken, many of them stopped writing and expressing their thoughts. Some even abandoned their professional, social and family commitments and went into hiding. Publishers known for publishing creative, secular literature were not spared from threats that made them wary of publishing any book that could subject them to aggressive fanatic attacks.

A culture of fear and self-censorship pervaded the intellectual arena. Terribly frightened by the traumatising reality, secular youths, writers, bloggers, and freethinkers and even journalists began to leave Bangladesh to save their lives. The circle of targets has gradually expanded to include as many minorities as you can think of – religious, sectarian, social, by sexual preference and of course intellectuals – thinkers, writers, journalists, bloggers, activists, publishers, and most recently, foreign nationals have also become new targets.

The word “hacked” has taken on a new painful meaning in Bangladesh through the traumatic development of physical violence and murder. This is the result of a long scheme of curbing freedom of thoughts and diversity of opinion and existence.

The Islamic fanatic and extremist forces are tirelessly at work to uproot the pluralist, progressive, secular ideology that created Bangladesh. It is a political goal of Islamic extremists to ensure supremacy of their single voice by silencing the rest.

### **Political patronage and a culture of denial**

Extremism and terrorism have flourished in Bangladesh with unique opportunities and patronage from democratic parties and leaders, even the ruling government. Patronage from influential or powerful offices and individuals in civil and military administration, security forces and also in the private sector, business arena or educational sector have assumed alarming proportions resulting in an expanding network and circle of influence for the Islamic extremist politics making the forces all the more difficult to contain. Exposing the patrons of terrorism and extremism faced with denial is one of the biggest challenges. I myself have reported extensively on the subject and presented evidence regarding how the Bangladesh Nationalist (BNP) party led a government-patronised rise of Islamic extremism,

terrorism and violence during their rule between 2001 and 2006 (Manik, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d).

A common practice by the Bangladesh-based terrorist and extremist outfits usually is that they do not disclose their existence and do not claim responsibility for terror attacks carried out by them. Only two terrorist outfits Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh (Huji-B) and Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) officially announced their existence. Of the two outfits, Huji-B never claimed responsibility for any attack officially since it started out in the late 1990s. Rather, its top leader officially denied their role behind the attacks. JMB is the only terrorist outfit in Bangladesh that officially claimed responsibility for several hundred terror attacks in 2004 and 2005.

No credible claims were made for the approximately 100 terror attacks witnessed by Bangladesh during the last seven years. Some vague and anonymous claims of questionable credibility came through on social media that did not give any lead. There is also a lack of transparency in sharing unclassified information that can and should be made available to the public. Authorities tend to deny and hide many facts and realities regarding extremism and terrorism, which need to be revealed, based on documents, pictures, witnesses and other evidence.

### **Affiliations with foreign militant and terrorist outfits**

A new style of extremism and terrorism was introduced in Bangladesh when the Bangladeshi-Afghan war veterans started to return from Afghanistan and Pakistan in the late 1980s after years of fighting for the Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet forces. A section of Bangladeshi-Afghan war veterans stayed on after the war in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Some of them formed close links to the top leadership of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, including Osama bin Laden. Inspired and empowered by those ties, they continued to maintain the hidden connections. Similarly, some Bangladeshis left for Syria to fight for the IS. Many extremists living in Bangladesh are also inspired by the IS, glorifying them through writing books, producing and releasing on the web, video clips from Afghanistan or Syria, showing their participation and support to the IS or Al Qaeda's jihad.



## Dilemmas and compromises

The series of killings of bloggers and writers practically passed without notable protests by the general public, except for in the media, social media, and academic and civil society. The lack of protests and concern came as a surprise considering the gruesome nature of the killings. Or maybe not; given the years of propaganda that had already caused divides and biases against bloggers, as atheists and anti-Islam.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was attacked and criticised for a visit of sympathy to the grieving family of Rajib Haider, the first blogger hacked to death in public in February 2013. The prime minister and the ruling Awami League were accused of patronising atheists and anti-Islamic writers. Since then, there have not been any high level visits to families of bloggers/writers murdered subsequently. Afraid of losing the Islamic vote bank and ruffling the extremists, the prime minister and senior leaders instead resorted to statements placating the extremists and warning writers/bloggers to refrain from writing things that can be potentially hurtful to religious sentiments. These statements were seen as validation of the killers and making the victims' families, progressive writers and potential terrorists' targets even more vulnerable.

The killing of two LGBT rights activists at their home in 2016 sent shockwaves through the vulnerable community. After the killing, the victims' families, friends and sympathisers could not raise their voice and demand justice, faced with statements issued immediately from a minister that homosexuality is prohibited by the law of the country (Mamun, 2016).<sup>3</sup>

Such statements and remarks further weakened the vulnerable community, causing more trouble for them, and no one came forward to speak for them. Rather, the victim blaming stigmatised the families of victims.

Then there is the other side of the coin: stigma for the families of Islamic extremists and terrorists. Five terrorists were killed by an army operation after a terror attack at a bakery in Gulshan district, Dhaka city on July 1, 2016. When I met some of the families of those terrorists, I felt they were overwhelmed by fear and trauma as much as by grief. On one hand they lost their sons, on the other hand as those young men were involved in the terrorist attacks where unsuspecting diners were killed, they were faced with a legal and social backlash. The

families were stigmatised in spite of them not having any role in their sons joining terrorist groups. Some of them went into hiding fearing a backlash and attacks as parents and families of terrorists. They had no access to protection of psychosocial support (Manik, 2016).

In Bangladesh, Islamic extremists have used bigotry, religious intolerance, extremism and terrorism as tools to push back Sufism, against moderate and liberal Muslims and secular political, social and cultural entities. However, this is the first time in Bangladesh that the extremists' demands have impinged upon school curricula to dictate what should or should not be included. There is a clear attempt to eliminate the works of progressive, secular and Hindu writers from school textbooks. Some literary write-ups have already been removed from children's Bangla textbooks as Islamic extremists found those objectionable on the ground that they depicted Gods, characters and holy places from Hindu mythology.

In the cultural history of Bangladesh, these stories were not always judged according to religious values, but rather as part of the ancient culture of Bengal representing a pluralist Bengali nation that blended across religious sects, e.g., Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians. The Islamic extremists are increasingly belligerent against the so-called anti-Islamic literature in Bangla textbooks for school students, demanding they be replaced by pro-Islamic content (Barry & Manik, 2017).

The demands for changes in Bangla textbooks that began in 2013, coincided with the time Islamic extremists labelled secular bloggers and writers as "atheists" demanding their punishment, execution and elimination. About a hundred such killings have occurred between 2013 and 2016. Secular bloggers, writers, publishers, intelligentsia and foreign nationals were murdered across Bangladesh by the extremists' self-styled "hacking by machete" method (Anand & Manik, 2016).

The scheme of influencing young minds toward certain religious and ideological leanings was alarmingly manifested through the way in which middle-class educated youth were willing participants in the July 2016 Dhaka café terror attack and killings. Secular forces consider the secular government's move, to make changes in the textbooks faced with demands from Islamist extremists, a big compromise with the bigots to get the majority Muslim vote in the elections.

## **Countering extremism and terrorism: overcoming challenges**

Increasingly, terrorism and extremism pose major challenges not only for the government, it is also a huge political and social challenge to de-radicalise those who have already been radicalised. It will take a tremendous amount of strategic course of action to stop or prevent ways and mechanisms that have already taken root, of radicalising and recruiting young boys and girls for extremist outfits.

In combating religious extremism and terrorism, Bangladesh is largely dependent on security forces, law enforcing agencies and the judiciary. There are limitations in these sectors that are not helpful in successfully combating and containing the rise of terrorism. Arrests are not enough, prisons should have de-radicalisation programmes with proper training and monitoring for reform opportunities for those arrested and also see to it that they are not able to radicalise other prisoners.

Legal and security measures aside, the authorities and other actors must put in place effective socio-political and cultural programmes and movements, to create awareness among all sections of people against the allure of extremists. Let me share a recent personal experience; my 14-year old nephew trains for cricket in a local school. He also loves to draw. On learning about his aspiration to become an artist, one of his friends in the cricket school asked him to stop drawing, as this is prohibited in Islam. Scared and confused, he stopped drawing pictures. His mother told me about it. It took me a while to allay his fears and motivate him to start drawing again. Radicalisation of the youth has spread at an alarming extent, not only in an organised manner, but also informally behind the scenes, socially and at an intimate individual level. Social media has opened up new avenues for exclusive interactions on the Internet, which is an instrumental way of reaching out to, persuading and enrolling young people silently and invisibly. The modern day busy life and smaller families with fewer children have a lot less interaction and sharing between parents and adolescent children, compared to what my generation experienced growing up. In many families, parents and family members mostly remain in the dark about the activities and affiliations of a growing adolescent and youth.

With easy access to the internet, young adults explore the deep web and the dark web in their isolation looking for a spark, falling into the lure of the unknown “friends” they “meet” on the web. These “friends” talk and spend time in engaging conversations. They understand the frustrations and aspirations of a tender age; they open doors to a new and exciting underworld; they motivate and help the youth to have a dream, a compelling purpose to live for! A sense of purpose that our society has failed to offer the youth.

The adventure, the heroism they watch only in movies, becomes real when the youth are misled into believing that killing is holy, bombing is sacred, hacking to death is the way to liberate the world of enemies of Islam. What better way than using the religion they have always known to represent the good and the right?

With a deteriorating political culture marked by dishonesty and corruption, politics no longer attracts the educated, decent people. It is seen as the necessary evil, the monster that feeds itself and cares for none. Social, cultural and sports activities are not as vibrant as they used to be. There is, in fact, very little educational and healthy entertainment available for the youth to engage meaningfully.

Growing up in nuclear families in isolation, our youth remains hungry for a cause, a purpose, an inspiration that can capture their adventurous imagination. In the absence of positive stimuli, negative motivation stealthily takes its place and influences them.

We are still at a loss as to what kind of motivational and brainwashing tactics are being used to recruit the youth from educated, liberal families and make them believe and do things they had never been taught during their upbringing or had as a frame of reference. It is a wonder and needs to be thoroughly investigated and understood. Only then can we hope to address it properly.

Islamic extremists are not only using grenades, bombs, firearms or machetes in their acts of terrorism, to transform the secular democratic Bangladesh into a fundamentalist and extremist haven, they have also strategically and systematically initiated social and cultural change. They are actively trying to change education by implanting the seeds of fundamentalism in early learning. This eventually brings change to secular values and practices. Cleverly, they have targeted the youth as the most important group to effect those changes.

It seems a long cultural struggle is unavoidable and imminent for countering and preventing the present rise of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh. This has to start from the family, in every household. It has to start with the school, the curriculum, as well as books and lectures. Sadly, the Islamic extremists are ahead of the game. They strategised where to start and much earlier than those few who are now thinking of countering the damages that have already been done.

Extensive investment in research and policy level work is needed to understand the reasons behind the radicalisation of the Bangladeshi youth. We need to bring the best brains and resources together to find a solution. Law enforcement and security agencies as well as the judiciary, are all absolutely important, as they already have the most information about the radicals.

The government will need to focus on policies and resource allocations for building a positive programme for the youth. Finally, what we need is a massive and unifying social and cultural movement that brings together, all those who have a stake in countering terrorism and extremism in Bangladesh, and are willing to do the hard work.

We have lost too much time. We have allowed major damage to be done that will be extremely difficult to reverse. We cannot afford to lose any more time. The time to act is *now!*

## Notes

1. *Ulu dhvani* is a custom mostly practiced by Bengali Hindu women at special occasions such as Durga *puja* (worship) and weddings. It is a vocal sound made by a group of women, believed to bring auspiciousness and drive out evil spells.
2. A group of terrorists brutally hacked Azad, as he made his way out through the crowded streets of the celebrated annual book fair held in the Bangladesh capital in February 2004. The book fair draws the country's largest annual literary and cultural congregation in the vicinity of Dhaka University campus, the cultural heartland of Bangladesh. In spite of getting treatment at home and abroad, a critically wounded Professor Azad died of his fatal injuries a few months later. He was a powerful, progressive and popular writer of Bangla literature representing secular thinkers. The attack nonetheless was on the progressive ideology he upheld.
3. [http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/sections\\_detail.php?id=11&sections\\_id=3233](http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/sections_detail.php?id=11&sections_id=3233);

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