

Crisis of Islamist Extremism in Contemporary Bangladesh

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Islamist extremism in Bangladesh emerged as a response to authoritarian populism and in the absence of a credible anti-establishment left-wing political project to articulate an alternative agenda to the existing status quo. Islamist extremists represent a politics of revenge and hatred with no clear objective to uplift the socio-economic conditions and livelihood prospects of the people.

On the evening of 1 July 2016, seven gunmen, allegedly associated with the Islamist extremist group, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), had stormed into a Spanish cafe, Holey Artisan Bakery in the Gulshan area of Dhaka's high security diplomatic zone. These militants took over the cafe, eventually killing mostly foreigners who were first taken as hostages. Similarly, on 7 July, a terror attack was organised with crude bombs and gun shooting before the morning Eid prayers in the Sholakia Idgah of Kishoreganj district in Bangladesh. Sholakia has the biggest Eid congregation in the country with at least two lakh people attending the Eid prayers. Both the incidents in Gulshan and Sholakia are organised forms of terror in the wake of recent attacks by a section of Bangladeshi Islamists who have adopted extremist methods to target civil society members, religious minorities (Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Bahais), Ahmadiyas, atheist bloggers, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community and progressive political activists.

Before the twin terror attacks, militancy expert, Zayadul Ahsan (2016) reported that in the last 18 months, at least 47 persons have been killed by the Islamist extremists in Dhaka. Out of 47, eight persons were allegedly killed by the pro-Al-Qaeda group, Ansar al-Islam, previously known as Ansarullah Bangla Team, led by the dismissed Bangladesh army officer, Major Ziaul Haq. Haq triggered an attempted military coup within the Bangladesh army in 2012. Haq-led Ansar recruits are from various Islamist organisations like Ahl al-Hadith, Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Hefazat-e-Islam and are usually poor madrasa students. Ansar's operation areas are generally in the northern part of the country and have so far targeted free thinkers, bloggers and gay rights activists.

In contrast, the pro-ISIS group, which has taken the responsibility of killing 28 persons in the last one and half years is led by a Bangladeshi-Canadian, Tamim Chowdhury alias Shaykh Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif. This pro-ISIS group recruits relatively affluent and urban upper middle class professionals. It has close links with a section of Islami Chhatra-shibir, the student wing of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami. This group primarily targets religious minorities, foreigners and university teachers. It operates mainly in Dhaka and its surrounding suburbs, Savar, Tongi, Gazipur and Mirpur.

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If terrorism makes symbolic statements then it is important to note that these terror attacks have occurred in a context where the Bangladeshi government has on record, denied the existence of the ISIS in the country.

Moreover, these attacks seem to be a violent response to the recent crackdown on the Islamist extremists by the Bangladeshi government. These attacks were also organised in the wake of a public fatwa (Islamic decree) issued by Maulana Fariduddin Masud, the Chairman of Bangladesh Jamiat-ul-Ulama and the imam (prayer leader) of Sholakia Eid prayers.

The above fatwa was signed by more than one lakh Bangladeshi ulema, condemning terrorism as “un-Islamic” and “forbidden,” while unambiguously stating that “Islam is the religion of peace” that delegitimises terrorist activities. The fatwa was also clear to state that the suicide squad members of terrorist organisations “will certainly go to hell” and even attending the *janaza* (religious prayers before the last rites) of terrorists is *haram* (forbidden).

According to a news report, Maulana Fariduddin Masud clearly pointed out that

in the name of Islam, some quarters are spreading extremism and terror through misinterpretation of Quran and Hadith to gain their personal interests...Though many label the militants as jihadis, they are actually terrorists...Islam doesn't support terrorism. And those, who are carrying out suicide attacks with the belief to go to heaven as martyrs if they die and live as heroes if remain alive, will not go to heaven according to Quran and Hadith...And those who will die taking stand against these militants will be regarded as martyrs. (Khokon and Loiwal 2016)

However, the recent spate of attacks by the Islamists is not new. In fact, right from the 1990s, a section of Islamists took recourse to such violent actions. The attention of international media towards Islamist extremism in Bangladesh started with a death threat to controversial author Taslima Nasrin, who had to flee from Bangladesh in 1994. Later, noted Bengali author, Humayun Azad was attacked on 27 February 2004 on the Bangla Academy premises during the Ekushe Book Fair by machete carrying

JMB militants, as confessed by a JMB commander in court (*Daily Star* 2006).

In the last one and a half decades, the Hindu, Christian and Buddhist minorities in Bangladesh have been getting threats from several suspected Islamist extremist groups. According to a report by a senior South Asian security analyst, since 1999 Islamist militants in Bangladesh have unleashed a series of attacks on religious minorities and politicians in a context where “governance, rule of law, and provision of justice seem in short supply” (Ganguly 2006: 1).

In August 2004, the Islamist extremists tried to assassinate Sheikh Hasina Wazed, the then parliamentary opposition leader and the present Bangladesh Prime Minister in an Awami League political rally in Dhaka but the attempt was aborted. However, the grenade attack on the same venue took the life of prominent Awami League politician, Ivy Rehman.

The Islamist extremists are alleged to have assassinated S A M S Kibria, a former foreign secretary and foreign minister, in February 2005 followed by a countryside terrorist attack in August 2005. Some 459 time bomb blasts occurred in 63 districts in just 30 minutes that killed two persons and injured 100. The JMB claimed responsibility for the blasts through leaflets found with the bomb devices (*Daily Star* 2005). Such a ghastly act was followed by suicide

bombings in Chittagong and Gazipur on 29 November 2005, where 10 persons, including two police officers, were killed (Ganguly 2006: 2). According to news reports, last year, from October till Christmas, at least 37 Christian priests were allegedly threatened by Islamist extremists (*Daily Star* 2015). On 15 June, the principal of Dhaka's Ramakrishna Mission was allegedly given a death threat by supporters of Islamic State (PTI 2016).

Contextualising Islamist Violence

Today, Islamist violence is crossing transcontinental borders in a context when the Islamists are encountering an everyday challenge from the modern and postmodern lifestyles in an increasingly globalised and digitised world. At the same time, it is through this same process of globalisation of technology and media that Islamist groups not only form networks but also display their gruesome acts, creating a spectacle to tempt a section of the Muslim youth.

As evident, the Islamists have often attacked atheist bloggers, secular writers, gay rights activists or what they call “blasphemous persons.” A forceful assertion by the Islamists on the question of blasphemy in fact reflects the crisis of authority and insecurity of Islamists, since blasphemy fundamentally challenges the legitimacy and core beliefs of religion

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among members of the Muslim community. This insecurity of Islamists is rooted in the belief that if punitive action is not taken against the disobedient, disloyal and blasphemous person, then blasphemy can become a norm and precedence in the society, and in the long run, can challenge the very foundation of religious faith upon which authority of Islamist ideology is grounded.

Also, the very non-action against the blasphemous person might be seen as the weakness of the Islamic ummah (transnational community of Islamic believers). Since, blasphemy is regarded as a “revolt” by a member of an “authentic” community, it is generally repressed by the religious authority to maintain its hegemony over the “authentic” Muslim community. Thus, Islamists act assertively by ensuring the punishment or disciplining the violator of religious code of conduct (in this case the blasphemer), with violence without waiting for the last day of judgment according to Islamic belief.

This Islamist political assertion is a function of an orthodox faith that relies on a scriptural-dogmatic understanding of Islamic religion and cultural practices. In this respect, the Islamists would hardly pay any attention to the Quranic injunction that “there shall be no coercion in matters of faith.”²¹ Rather, the self-proclaiming jihadist strives to act on behalf of Allah and “punishes” the “sinners” (blasphemous persons and the non-believers).

Moreover, Islamists have an inbuilt narcissism, self-obsession and a sense of megalomania precisely because of the Quranic belief that Islam is the final apostle, the final holy book and is the rightful guidance for all of humanity. Such beliefs are core to the formation and construction of Islamism as a political ideology. In the Kantian sense, Islamism can be identified with dogmatism “without previous criticism of its own powers” (Kant 1933: 32). This dogmatic confidence of the Islamists as the bearer of an “absolute truth” and the right and complete way of life gets shaken when it encounters such challenges like atheism and blasphemy because these trends only ignore the path of Islam and instead

critique it for being “backward,” “oppressive,” “irrational” and “regressive.”

In the face of such stiff challenges of atheism, blasphemy and consumerist hedonism; Islamists sometimes take refuge to violence to eliminate its opponent’s claims and opinions—in this case, the political articulations of atheism, blasphemy and consumerist hedonism. The ability to ignore disrespect and insult, instead of giving a violent reaction, actually shows the strength and confidence rather than the weakness of a person. In the case of the alleged disrespectful and insulting comments made by noted controversial authors and bloggers on Islam and the Prophet, one can notice how the Islamists were unable to ignore such anti-Islamic opinions and hence displayed their immense weakness and unstable nervousness rather than their strength while killing the secular bloggers and writers.

Moreover, political violence often unleashed by the Islamists in Bangladesh is also a result of absence of normative concepts of individual liberty and freedom within the specific ideological morphology of Islamism (Browers 2005). According to a prominent Islamist ideologue, Maududi, individual liberty and freedom is supposed to be submitted by humans to the creator and as loyal subjects, the obligatory duty of humans is to obey the rules of the creator because the humans or the created/creatures are born slaves of the creator (Maududi 1960).

Bikhu Parekh argues that the “fundamentalist discourse” is essentially a “moral discourse” (1994: 113). I would further add that it is a regulatory discourse as well. In the case of the attacks on secular bloggers and gay rights activists, a regulatory morality is governed and legitimised by a section of the religious authority and then justified in the name of the holy text. This tradition of silencing and repressing the revolt against any Islamic theological and spiritual authority like God or the Prophet is nothing new in Bangladesh.

In fact, much before the protests against certain novels by Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin, the anti-Ahmadi mob violence was organised in the early 1950s in the then Pakistan for an “authentic”

Islamic system (Ahmad M 1991: 471; Ahmed R 1994: 680). In other words, there is a history of constructing antagonistic frontiers within the politico-ideological discourses of the Islamists in Bangladesh against what they identify as the non-Islamic politico-ideological discourse. In this respect, Islamism can be seen as a critique of ideas like nation state, nationalism and secularism, which according to the Islamists, carry the imprint of Western politico-ideological epistemology.

Islamists in Contemporary Bangladesh

As I have argued elsewhere, the emergence of Islamists as key players in Bangladeshi politics was due to several factors (Islam 2015: 171–80). First, Islamists gain ground as a response to the failure of secular–nationalist project of Sheikh Mujib that later resulted into a cult status of Mujibism (*Mujibbad*) to address socio-economic deprivation and corruption in a newly independent Bangladesh.

Moreover, Mujib’s policies took an authoritarian turn that first banned religious parties and then later, outlawed all other political parties except his newly formed Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL), while replacing the parliamentary system with presidential form of government, multiparty system with totalitarian control and one-party rule, curtailing the powers of the national assembly. The judiciary lost much of its independence and the Supreme Court was deprived of its jurisdiction over the protection and enforcement of fundamental rights (Jahan 2000: xxv). Such repressive measures with virtually “one man rule” was accompanied by the absolute control of the parliament and the party and the rule of small coterie of nouveau riche close to Mujib. It came with stifling of political opposition, gagging of the press, declaration of emergency as a tool to repress political opponents, abolition of parliamentary democracy and the creation of single-party system with “megalomaniac” acts, and turning family affairs to almost state events (Rahman and Hasan 1980: 134–72). Mujib’s paramilitary force, the Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini, almost acted as a

private militia (Rahman and Hasan 1980: 144) and became well known for its “intimidation tactics” (Uddin 2006: 122). In such a context, Islamists emerged in the Bangladeshi political scene as a reaction to such authoritarian approach of Mujibism.

Second, Islamists gain ground due to military patronage with calculated strategy of successive military regimes of Ziaur-Rahman and Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who often in their search for political legitimacy on the one hand, and in isolating the Awami League on the other, directly or indirectly prepared the conditions for the rise of Islamism in Bangladesh (Rahim 2001: 255). The successive military dictatorships under Zia and Ershad made religious education compulsory in schools and patronised madrasa education, besides encouraging religious leaders to play active role in politics of the country (Rahim 2001: 255).

Third, it rose to prominence in a context where an alternative political force like a strong and credible left was absent from the political scene.

Fourth, political economy factors were behind the rise of Islamism in contemporary Bangladesh. As one commentator argues, Islamism generally became popular in 1980s and 1990s among a section of middle peasants and a squeezed urban middle class and also among the disgruntled children of the state elite “who were looking for an ideological alternative to the discredited nationalism of their elders and who sought to establish new links with the people” (Schendel 2000: 69–70).

Fifth, the ideologically motivated, literate and dedicated cadre-based organisational strength of the Islamists, strong networks of Islamists among various sections of the population and attempts for mass dissemination and circulation of Islamist literature also contributed to the rebuilding procedures of Islamism in Bangladesh (Rahim 2001: 255–56).

Finally, international events like the Islamic revolt of Iran in 1979 and the success of Taliban regime in capturing political power in Afghanistan in mid-1990s, also rekindled Islamist politics in Bangladesh. These international events only reminded Islamist parties like Jamaat

about the revolutionary potential of Islam in the contemporary world (Rahim 2001: 256–57). Similarly, external pressures from oil-rich Islamic countries that have been funding Bangladesh over the years through various forms of aid and financial grants also significantly helped to revitalise Islamic symbols in Bangladeshi politics (Rahim 2001: 256–57).

None of the above conditions, which contributed to the rise of the Islamists in Bangladesh from the second half of 1970s till the 1990s are absolutely absent in present Bangladesh. With the boycott of national assembly elections that were held on 5 January 2014 by the major opposition parties, the country has no parliamentary opposition. At the same time, one finds an increasing authoritarian and paranoid tendency of the current government with a vindictive attitude towards the existing opposition. For example, there were 14,000 arrests in just five days, including more than 2,700 members of the main opposition party—the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—in the name of government crackdown on Islamist violence, which shows the vindictive attitude of the current government towards the opposition (Agarwal 2016).

Sections of the military have direct or indirect relation with the Islamists as evident by the role of dismissed Bangladesh army officer, Major Ziaul Haq in forming a pro-Al-Qaeda group, Ansar al-Islam, previously known as Ansarullah Bangla Team. The ideologically motivated and dedicated cadre-based organisational strength of the Islamist groups and the external funding from several oil-rich West Asian countries towards Islamic non-governmental organisations have certainly contributed to the proliferation of several Islamist groups in Bangladesh. Moreover, the establishment of the so-called “Islamic caliphate” by the ISIS in parts of Iraq and Syria as a major international event has also attracted a section of the Bangladeshi youth to identify with such a project of creating an Islamic state in Bangladesh through armed violence.

The democratic demands of the people linked to deprivation, discrimination and corruption have been largely ignored by the current Bangladeshi political establishment. The country, instead, has been locked up in polarised debates on nationalism and seems to have not moved beyond the 1971 war crimes. In fact, much of the recent Islamist militancy in

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Scopus has indexed research papers that have been published in *EPW* from 2008 onwards.

The Scopus database journal ranks country-wise and journal-wise. It provides three broad sets of rankings: (i) Number of Citations, (ii) H-Index and (iii) SCLMago Journal and Country Rank.

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- Highest among 36 Indian social science journals and highest among 159 social science journals ranked in Asia.
- Highest among 36 journals in the category, “Economics, Econometrics and Finance” in the Asia region, and 36th among 835 journals globally.
- Highest among 23 journals in the category, “Sociology and Political Science” in the Asia region, and 15th among 928 journals globally.
- Between 2008 and 2014, *EPW*'s citations in three categories (“Economics, Econometrics, and Finance”; “Political Science and International Relations”; and “Sociology and Political Science”) were always in the second quartile of all citations recorded globally in the Scopus database.

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Bangladesh is in response to the trials of 1971 war criminals by the International Crimes Tribunal. At the same time, the lack of a credible political opposition has also created conditions under which a section of even the elite Bangladeshi youth, while getting frustrated with the status quo, is attracted towards violent political ideologies like Islamist extremism. The absence of a credible left-wing anti-establishment politics due to the complete surrender of a depoliticised left solely dependent on the Awami League for its existence, has also created conditions where any alternative challenge to the two major political formations of Awami League and BNP is missing except in some form of an Islamist political articulation.

Contradiction of Islamists

However, the contradiction of the Islamists lies in their strife to unite Muslims globally with the call for the unity of the umaah (Islamic community of believers cutting across class, gender and national citizenship) under their banner, while they target Islamic holy shrines and organise terror attacks during the Eid gathering in Dhaka, killing scores of innocent people, in the holy month of Ramadan.

While Islamic theology considers the month of Ramadan as a puritan month where the Muslims are expected to remain calm and stay away from any violence or war, the Islamist extremists seem to disregard such theological injunctions. In this respect, the Sunni Islamist extremists are Wahabism's own Frankenstein. They follow a distorted theology that has contributed to the formation of a destructive ideology where the enemy is omnipresent, harming both Muslims and non-Muslims. Islamist extremism is similar to an anarchist terrorist movement without any coherent set of demands but with an imagined goal of creating an Islamic caliphate.

This being said, one must acknowledge that Islamist extremists in Bangladesh are still marginal players, who although could certainly create momentary sensationalism in the country, do not have the support of the Bangladeshi people at large. In fact, all forms of Islamists whether it is moderate parliamentary, militant or

extremists have failed to get significant support from the Bangladeshi people. This is evident from two facts. First, the Islamist extremists hardly take recourse in democratic mobilisations to place concrete demands or seek the support of the people through electoral processes. Second, even those parliamentary Islamists, who have consistently fought local and national elections like the Jamaat-e-Islami, have never got more than 13% of the votes and 18 seats in a 300-member national assembly in the entire history of independent Bangladesh.

In this respect, contrary to the sensationalised news reports of increasing Islamist militancy, the political, electoral and ideological crisis of Islamism in Bangladesh has actually deepened in the last two decades (Islam 2015: 219–34). The violent response of the Islamist militants, thus, must be seen in such a context of crisis of Islamist political mobilisation through democratic means. The Bangladesh government, currently run by the Awami League, has efficiently tackled the Islamist extremists after the Gulshan and Sholakia attacks with a series of police raids and encounters of suspected militants. This being said, the struggle against Islamist militancy is not over although the current situation in Bangladesh suggests that the Islamists are facing a crisis of political mobilisation.

Moreover, the struggle for secularism against Islamist majoritarianism is not going to be decided in one day, as building a substantive secular state is a long-term hegemonic project. It cannot be fought with an authoritarian populist agenda, which is susceptible to compromises and complicity with majoritarianism. A secularist project can only be facilitated on the basis of a firm commitment to democracy and formation of a hegemonic project with secular egalitarian political articulation from below with massive people's participation in constructing such a project.

NOTE

- 1 2:256 of *The Holy Quran*; quoted from *The Message of the Qur'an: The Full Account of the Revealed Arabic Text Accompanied by Parallel Transliteration* translated and explained by Muhammad Asad, complete edition (Bristol: The Book Foundation, 2003: 69).

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