

The Terrorism that Stalks Bangladesh By Hiranmay Karlekar

Despite a tradition of secularism in government, Bangladesh has not escaped the creeping influence of Islamist extremism, including involvement in acts of international terrorism. Hiranmay Karlekar chronicles the growing threat posed by this extremism to domestic politics and the international community.

WITH THE WORLD'S ATTENTION focused on Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, Bangladesh has been steadily emerging as an incubator and exporter of Islamist terrorism, despite denials within the country. That fact first received international attention in January 1999 after Delhi Police arrested Syed Abu Nasir, a 27-year-old Bangladeshi national and an employee of the Saudi-based International Islamic Relief Organization. He had come to India as the leader of a 10-member team planning to set off car bombs in front of the United States Embassy in New Delhi and consulates-general in Chennai and Kolkata.

Yossef Bodansky, who gives details of the entire episode in his 1999 book on Osama Bin Laden and his terrorist network,¹ says the plans were drawn up at a meeting in Dhaka in 1998 at the office of the Al Haramain Islamic Foundation, a charity linked to Bin Laden. Nasir attended that meeting. Among others present were Sheikh Ahmed Al-Gamdi, IIRO's president; Professor Hafiz Mohammad Sayeed, head of Markaz-al-Dawa-wal-Irshad, the fountainhead of Lashkar-e-Toiba, a Pakistani terrorist group active in Kashmir; and Azam Cheema, one of its leading commanders.

The incident did not set off more than large ripples perhaps because the strikes were prevented. The early morning shooting in front of Kolkata's American Center on January 22, 2002, which killed five and injured more than 20 policemen, however, sent alarm bells ringing. The Asif Reza Commando Force (ARCF), a criminal group that claimed responsibility for that attack, is associated with the Harkat-

1 Yossef Bodansky, *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (Rocklin, California: Prima Publishing, 1999), 377-80.

2 Bertil Lintner, "Bangladesh: Extremist Islamist Consolidation" in K.P.S. Gill and Ajai Sahni eds, *Faultlines*, Vol. 14

(New Delhi: Institute of Conflict Management, July 2003), 3.

3 *Ibid*, 27.

ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HUJIB), which apparently called the shots in this attack. Asif Reza's leader and the principal accused in the shooting case, Aftab Ansari, who has since been sentenced to death, had earlier played a key role in the kidnapping of a Kolkata businessman, Partha Pratim Roy Burman. Out of the ransom of \$37.5 million reportedly paid for Burman's release, Omar Sheikh, who was subsequently convicted of the murder of the American journalist Daniel Pearl in Karachi, had sent \$100,000 to Mohammad Atta to help pay for attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Like many such groups in the region, the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh was formed by a group of jihadis returning from Afghanistan. Founded in 1992, its main goal was to recruit volunteers to fight in Afghanistan and Kashmir. It grew rapidly. Bertil Lintner, a respected authority on South and Southeast Asia, writing in 2003, said the group had about 15,000 members, of whom 2,000 were hardcore.² It also had 19 training centers, which he listed by location.³ Its growth was part of the surge in Islamist militancy in the 1990s.

While Lintner's groundbreaking work was among the first to reveal the depth of the Islamist penetration of Bangladesh, a fact successive governments sought to deny, its roots go back much farther, to the founding of the country and the war with Pakistan. In effect, Islamists have been battling for decades to supplant modern intellectuals who had a firmly secular vision for Bangladesh. Their victories and ability to use the country's deep political divisions to their advantage have been alarming.

FUNDAMENTALIST ROOTS

Islamist fundamentalists, who had collaborated with the Pakistanis during the 1971 libera-

tion struggle and had escaped into the woodwork after independence, reemerged thanks to loopholes in the law to punish collaborators which Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh, had enacted. His announcement in 1973 of a general amnesty covering even those convicted of such crimes, enabled them to return to public life.

Sheikh Mujib, an avowed secular socialist, was assassinated in the military coup of August 15, 1975, an act that removed a crucial factor holding back Islamic militancy. Even the toothless act on collaborators was revoked in December 1975, and the constitutional ban on the formation of communal parties and associations was revoked in May 1976. Major-General Ziaur Rahman, a hero of the independence war, began marching toward the presidency when he became the Chief Martial Law Administrator. Cultivating Islamists for political support, he assumed office as president on April 21, 1977, and almost immediately issued a proclamation Islamizing the Constitution and removing all mention of secularism. The changes were ratified in April 1979.

THE MOVEMENT'S REVIVAL

Meanwhile, the revival of fundamentalist politics had already started, with President Rahman giving it a major boost by permitting Golam Azam, a principal collaborator with the Pakistanis who had been accused of being instrumental in mass rape, torture and slaughter during the 1971 war, to return from Pakistan, to which he had fled before Bangladesh's liberation. Azam became the driving force behind the Jama'at-e-Islami Bangladesh (JeIB), which had been virtually defunct in the immediate aftermath of liberation on December 16, 1971 when secular forces held power. The JeIB re-emerged as a political party at a convention in Dhaka in May 1979, and Azam

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was secretly made its Ameer (head) with Abbas Ali Khan acting as the titular head.

President Rahman, who had formed the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on September 1, 1978, was assassinated on May 30, 1981. Lt-Gen H.M. Ershad seized power in March 1982 by ousting Abdus Sattar, a former Supreme Court judge who had succeeded Rahman; Ershad proved to be very good news for Islamic militants.

The steps he took included the encouragement of grants for mosques and the receipt of foreign assistance for their development. More important, he changed the Constitution to make Islam Bangladesh's state religion while guaranteeing that other religions could also be practiced in peace and harmony.

Ershad's corrupt and autocratic regime was finally overthrown in December 1990 by a popular upheaval. But by the time Ershad was gone, official patronage and a huge influx of funds from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia had enabled the Jama'at-e-Islami Bangladesh and its auxiliaries like the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) to build an extensive network of mosques, madrasas and sharia courts. In many parts of the country they unleashed a campaign of violence and intimidation against non-governmental organizations educating women and helping them to become economically independent. They started harassing secular intellectuals by issuing death threats;

women were sometimes the target of *fatwas* issued through the sharia courts and many are said to have committed suicide as a result.

Resistance invariably followed. The end of Ershad's dictatorship, and the formation of a democratically elected government led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party under Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, the late President Ziaur Rahman's widow, opened up some political space. The secular and modernist forces identified with the liberation struggle, which had been on the defensive so long, became active again. The JeIB's election of Golam Azam, notorious for his pro-Pakistan background, as its Ameer on in late December 1991 was a provocation the secularists could not ignore. On January 19, 1992, 101 widely respected citizens formed a committee to force Azam to be tried as a war criminal. The group sought the support of political parties, and 13 of them endorsed the demand for Azam's trial. The group, popularly called the Nirmul Committee, included representatives of political parties, professional groups and mass organizations. Jahanara Imam, a respected public figure who had a son killed by Pakistanis during the liberation war, became its convener.

MORE COLLABORATION

The BNP government did not wish to see Azam in the dock and worked to sabotage his trial by a so-

4 Bodansky, *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America*, 226.

5 Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2002), 219.

called people's court in a large park in Dhaka in March 1992. The government could not stop the proceedings and nearly half-a-million attended. The government responded by filing sedition cases against 24 key members of the Nirmul Committee, but had to retreat in the face of a snowballing movement. Begum Zia finally agreed to try Azam formally and to withdraw the sedition charges, but reneged on both counts.

The Nirmul Committee's movement lost much of its steam in 1994. One reason was that its rallying icon, Jahanara Imam, died. The other was that the opposition Awami League was itself warming up to the JeIB, which became an ally in its campaign for new elections and the appointment of a caretaker government. The Islamists were again on the offensive. They held several demonstrations in Dhaka and elsewhere and targeted liberal intellectuals and journalists, whom they charged with offending religious sentiment; many were threatened with death. They hounded the feminist writer, Taslima Nasreen, out of the country. Flush with funds, working under the umbrella of the JeIB and heavily armed, they were now in a position to take on secular and liberal elements steeped in the ethos of the liberation struggle.

Begum Zia's government supported the resurgent activist religious movement. The extent to which she was prepared to do their bidding became clear when she abandoned her plan to attend the World Population Conference in Cairo in September 1994, following claims from the JeIB that birth control was against Islam and the conference was aimed at "exterminating Muslims."

All this seems to confirm that Bangladesh, regardless of its operational ability to cope with terrorism, lacks the political will to confront Islamist forces. Even the ascent of the Awami League to power in 1996, with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's daughter, Sheikh Hasina as Prime Minister, did not make much difference. Instances of violence by fundamentalist Islamist groups allied with the JeIB and its student wing rose alarmingly.

This was partly the result of a global trend, of course. The jihad by Mujahedeen militia armed and aided by the CIA through Pakistan's Inter-

Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate against Soviet forces in Afghanistan gave a major impetus to fundamentalist Islam besides lending a romantic aura to jihadis. The Soviet exit in February 1989 further boosted the process as well as the public image of both Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, besides releasing a large number of battle-hardened jihadis for deployment elsewhere.

The boost given to the Taliban by the CIA and the ISI in mid-1994 kept the jihadi flag flying. The madrasas that had been proliferating in Pakistan from 1980 under President Zia ul Haq's Islamisation drive kept up a regular flow of recruits to terrorist training camps. By 1997, the Taliban controlled almost the whole of Afghanistan. By then, relations between the US and fundamentalist Islamist groups led by Bin Laden had deteriorated sharply. For one thing, while initially accepting aid from the US, they remained intensely hostile to the way of life it stood for and its support for Israel. For another, they hated on religious grounds the presence of US forces in Saudi Arabia, which bolstered the regime of the ruling dynasty with which they were beginning to have problems. From the West, there was growing criticism of the harsh social order imposed by the Taliban, especially the regime's restrictions on Afghan women.

Bin Laden's hand was suspected behind the blast that left six dead at the World Trade Center in New York on February 26, 1993, and the car bomb explosion outside Khubar Tower, a US military residential complex in Saudi Arabia which left 19 dead in June 1996. In February 1998, Bin Laden played a critical role in setting up the World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders, which issued a *fatwa* calling for jihad against the US. According to Bodansky, one of the six signatories of it was Abdul Salam Muhammad, "Emir of the Jihad movement in Bangladesh."⁴ Rohan Gunaratna has said that Muhammad was from Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HUJIB) and his alias was Fazlur Rahman.⁵

In 1998, the stakes rose. First, there was Al Qaeda's bomb attack on US embassies in

⁶ News report, "Cops, Militants Trade fire at Joypurhat," *Daily Star*, Internet edition, August 16, 2003. Also, Julfikar Ali Manik, "JMJB Mentor Rahman Evades Probing Eyes," *Daily Star*, Internet Edition, February 25, 2005.

⁷ www.jamaat-e-islami.org as updated on September 22, 2002, accessed on December 21, 2004. Section under the heading, "Characteristics of the Jamaat-e-Islami".

⁸ Ibid, "State policies" under the sub-sectional heading "Framework for Politics" in the section titled "Vision and Commitment."

Nairobi, Kenya and Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, which left over 300 dead and 5,100 injured, and the retaliatory US missile strikes on Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and a facility in Sudan that the US claimed was making chemical weapons.

DEEPENING CRISIS

In Bangladesh, the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) was formed in 1998 to pursue armed struggle. In 2003, following a clash with police, its spiritual leader or Shaikh was Maulana Abdur Rahman. The group began publicly calling itself Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (Awakened Muslim Masses of Bangladesh) after a clash with the police in 2003.⁶ The two organizations overlapped almost wholly in structure and personnel. They had close links with Ahle Hadith Andolan Bangladesh (AHAB), established in 1994 by Dr Muhammad Asadullah al-Galib, a teacher of Arabic at Rajshahi University. All three, as well as the HUIB, belonged to a terror network coordinated by the JeIB.

With a creed almost identical to the Taliban, the JeIB is the ideological fountainhead for all four groups. It declares its ultimate objective as "the establishment of the Islamic system in all spheres of life."⁷ It also says, "The Quranic code is the supreme law of the Muslim community and must be enforced in its entirety in all aspects of life. Islamic law is to be made the criterion by which to judge the private and public conduct of rulers and the ruled alike, and the chief source of all legislation."⁸

The kind of social order the JeIB and its allies had in mind became clear when the JMJB presided over an offensive led by its Operations Commander, Siddiqui Islam, better known by his *nom de guerre* of Bangla Bhai, in northwestern and northern Bangladesh from April 2004

to February 2005. It compelled men to wear beards and skullcaps, and women to wear the *burqa* or the *hijab*. It came out strongly against all kinds of entertainment and was responsible for bomb attacks on horse races and entertainment events during village fairs between November 2004 and January 2005. It particularly targeted activists of the extreme left-wing organization known as *Sarbahara* (Proletariat), who were sometimes tortured to death. Indeed, anyone who crossed their path courted the same fate. According to the well-known NGO, Ain O Salish Kendra (Law and Arbitration), 22 persons were brutally murdered by the Islamists between April 1 and July 31, 2004.

Meanwhile, HUIB had its own violent trajectory. It was behind an attempt to kill Bangladesh's most famous poet, Shamsur Rahman, on January 18, 1999, which was part of a plan to kill 28 intellectuals known for their secular outlook and opposition to fundamentalist Islam. It was also behind the killing of a journalist, Shamsur Rahman, on July 16, 2000, an attempt to kill then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina six days later and an explosion during the Bengali New Year's Day celebrations in Dhaka, on April 14, 2001, which killed ten and injured scores.

After the US State Department declared it a terrorist organization on May 21, 2002, HUIB kept a lower profile, but its campaign of violence continued. It was believed responsible by many for an assassination attempt on the well-known Bangladeshi writer, Humayun Azad, in Dhaka, on February 27, 2004; an attempt on the life of the British High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Anwar Choudhury, at a shrine in Sylhet on May 21, 2004; and a grenade attack on an Awami League meeting in Sylhet town on August 7, 2004. Azad and Choudhury were wounded - the former critically⁹—while one person was killed

⁹ Azad recovered but died in Germany in August 7 of the same year following a heart attack.

and 30 wounded in the bomb attack. It is also believed that it was behind a grenade attack on an Awami League rally in Dhaka on August 21, 2004 that killed 22 and wounded nearly 200, and whose target was Sheikh Hasina.

In a series of articles in August 2004, the Bengali-language daily *Prothom Alo* (First Light) gave a detailed account of the terrorist training camps that the HUIJIB ran in the Chittagong Hills. Meanwhile, the Islami Chhatra Shibir, the JeIB's youth arm, was on its own extermination drive, allegedly murdering Gopal Krishna Muhuri, a college principal, in Chittagong on November 16, 2001, and Mohammad Yunus, a professor of economics at Rajshahi University on December 24, 2004.

The attacks appeared to be part of an attempt to intimidate and silence intellectuals and political leaders opposed to fundamentalist Islam. The question is: What was the government doing? Under Begum Khaleda Zia's government, in office from 1991 to 1996, little was done. When the Awami League of Sheikh Hassina wielded power from 1996 to 2001, it acted in individual cases but was handicapped by the entrenched presence of fundamentalist elements in the intelligence agencies and police. Besides, it lacked a comprehensive plan to counter terrorism.

The situation deteriorated further with the ascent of the BNP-led four-party coalition, with Begum Zia again as Prime Minister, following the general elections of October 2001. This government, which now included two ministers from the JeIB, Matiur Rahman Nizami, its Ameer, and Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahed, its general secretary, both of whom had collaborated with Pakistan in 1971, had no appetite for taking on extremists and it has even been accused clandestinely helping them, as in the case of the notorious terrorist Bangla Bhai, who had the support of local authorities and protection in the higher reaches of government. Nizami told a press conference in Dhaka on July 22, 2004, that Bangla Bhai was merely a creation of the newspapers and that "the government found no existence of him." Previously, the government released on bail 41 HUIJIB terrorists arrested at a training

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camp in Cox's Bazaar in 1996. Understandably violence continued and investigations into terrorist outrages were subverted.

Finally, under intense pressure from donor countries who were increasingly troubled by the spread of Islamist fundamentalism, the government banned the JMB, JMJB and AHAB on February 23, 2005 and arrested many leaders. The HUIJIB was banned on October 17, 2005, two years after an intelligence report recommended the action. Another indication of the government's collaboration with and use of these groups, was provided by Begum meeting with several HUIJIB leaders in 2005 who visited her in the guise of "Islamic scholars," earlier in the same month.

¹⁰ Rejaul Karim Byron, "New terror law soon for quick trial," *Daily Star*, February 27, 2007.

¹¹ Ibid, "Government discusses anti-terrorism ordinance," December 31, 2007.

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Not surprisingly, all these organizations remained active, albeit at a lower level. When the coalition government handed over power to a caretaker government in October 2006 as a prelude to holding elections scheduled for January 2007, the impression was that the Islamists lived on to fight another day, particularly since a pliant Election Commission had been installed by the coalition.

THE CARETAKER ERA

The BNP's and JeIB's plan seemed to come unstuck when the present caretaker dispensation came to power, with Fakhruddin Ahmed as the administrator, following a thinly-veiled military coup on January 11 last year. Hopes soared that its crackdown on corruption would be accompanied by a parallel one against jihadis. Disappointment followed, notwithstanding the much-publicized hanging of Bangla Bhai, Maulana Abdur Rahman and four of their associates on March 29, 2007. Their death sentences had been confirmed by the Bangladesh High Court, and their appeal was rejected by the Supreme Court on January 21, 2007. The Government had no option but to execute them.

While the present caretaker government has been arresting and prosecuting activists of the JMB, JMJB, AHAB and even HUJIB (which the US described on March 5, 2008, as a foreign terrorist organisation, which enables it to take legal action against the outfit), it has done virtually nothing against the JeIB, the principal source of fundamentalist ideology. Maulana Abdur Rahman was an active member of the

JeIB's ICS as a student and Bangla Bhai was also a member of the ICS. Indeed, almost all key figures in Bangladeshi terrorist organizations have had a JeIB link some time or the other.

Sadly, despite the clear threat these groups have long constituted, combating terrorism is not even a priority of the present dispensation. The *Daily Star* of February 27, 2007, reported, the government had already drafted the Anti-Terrorism Ordinance that defined "terrorists, terrorist acts, terrorist organizations" and provided punishment including the death sentence and life imprisonment.¹⁰ But the newspaper reported on December 31, 2007 that the advisers had discussed the Ordinance the previous day and instructed the law ministry to come up with a draft incorporating a "more specific and clearer definition of terrorism," a clear backing away from the challenge.¹¹

The present prospects are grim. The regime's crackdown on corruption has disabled the Awami League and the BNP and dispatched their principal leaders, Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia, to prison. But the JeIB and its auxiliaries remain by and large untouched, as does the business empire that sustains the organization's activities. The JeIB and BNP supporters who had been planted in the electoral machinery remain in place. This means that JeIB may have a huge advantage in the next elections, which are supposed to be held before December 2008. If there is hope in Bangladesh, it lies in the fact that the majority remains tolerant and eclectic and a remarkably brave civil society and intelligentsia have been battling fundamentalism with rare courage. But how long can both survive mounting odds?

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