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Ansarullah Bangla Team: A Major Threat for Bangladesh's Democracy

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Since 9/11, the world has considered Pakistan and Afghanistan as the epicentre of Islamic fundamentalism in South Asia, incarnated in the Taliban movement and its affiliates. Many of the early observations dealt with the tremendous challenge which terrorism and religious-militant extremism would pose to peace and stability (from a geopolitical perspective). Realising the increasingly complex scenarios as well as the causalities and impacts, analyses on the phenomenon under discussion were slowly but persistently broadening. In order to be able to address not only the militant, but also the socio-economic and political dimensions of Islamic fundamentalism, the networks and ideological foundations of internationally acting fundamentalist groups have increasingly caught the attention of observers (worldwide). Despite a general widening of the research focus (for example taking gender aspects into account, like suicide bombing by female terrorists), it has also led to the phenomenon of only seeing certain aspects and/or dimensions of Islamic fundamentalism. By being pre-occupied with the security aspects of the Islamist challenge in the context of the foreign intervention in Afghanistan, many analysts initially had a narrow focus on the 'AfPak' region. Consequently, fundamentalist developments in other parts of the Indian subcontinent, especially in Bangladesh, were not adequately recognized for a long time. This is becoming increasingly significant, since it seems that the international community still does not recognize the growing leverage of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh with its international linkages. This arguably poses the most dangerous challenge to everything the country stands for, especially the idea of a tolerant, secular democracy in a Muslim majority country. At the moment, this threat finds its expression in the appearance and increasing activity of a hardline Islamist group, called Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT).

Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) – Origin, Social Base, and Structure

Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) reflects a new and young generation of jihadists in Bangladesh. The main target group for recruitment are highly motivated and educated university students, especially those familiar with the English language and extraordinarily active in social media. In other words, ABT is searching for those who are media and technology savy. Nevertheless, ABT members and sympathisers can be found throughout society.

ABT appears to be a more recent phenomenon. However, one can trace its roots back to an organisation called Jama'atul Muslemin founded in 2007. After it ceased to operate, it appeared again in 2013. According to Bangladeshi officials, ABT must be recognized as a 'large terrorist organisation', outstripping established groups like Harakat ul-Jihad al-Islami-Bangladesh (HUJI-B) and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Today, ABT is one of the most active terrorist groups in Bangladesh. But it is difficult to specify its concrete strength in numbers since it has rather fluid organisational structures, using tremendously all types of new social media for their activities. Usually they work in small cells comprising 4 to 7 people in one unit. As a result, it is difficult to identify persons who belong to ABT or sympathisers.

A New Face of Terrorism in Bangladesh? Ideology, Aims, and Targets of ABT

ABT is heavily influenced by renowned extremist ideologues, such as Anwar Al-Awlaki who was killed by a US drone strike in 2011. Subsequently, this group supports the armed jihadi ideology of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and

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Islamic State (IS) to wage holy war in Bangladesh and abroad. Furthermore, they are against any democratic form of governance since they perceive democracy as anti-Islamic. Basically, the aim of ABT is the radicalisation of the youths in Bangladesh and to win them for promoting and participating actively in a local jihad. Furthermore, ABT is seeking control of areas in Bangladesh.

In this context, it is most important to understand that ABT significantly differs from older major militant Islamic fundamentalist groups like HUJI-B or JMB. In contrast to HUJI-B and JMB, the ABT's main goal is not fighting or influencing the political-administrative structures in order to implement their Islamic fundamentalist ideology or to carry out spectacular terrorist attack to discredit the state to gain publicity. At the moment, it seems that the focus is on silencing or eradicating any critics of extremist religious doctrines, organized Islam, or the intolerance of Islamist radicals. To succeed, they use the opportunities afforded by cyberspace not only to promote jihadi ideology but also to identify prominent opponents and murder them. This mostly happens in extraordinarily brutal ways in crowded public spaces to create attention. The main targets are liberal, independent and secular academic and independent intellectuals, bloggers and cultural personalities. In other words, anyone who poses a threat to their fundamentalist Islamic teachings and lifestyle is a potential target of ABT.

ABT – Following Unfortunate Historical Patterns

It is important to note that the elimination of secular minds by Islamic militants is not new in Bangladesh and numerous analysts see the current murders as part of a continuum going back to the country's 1971 war of independence. It is not surprising that ABT members were also supporters of war criminals, like imprisoned Delwar Hossain Sayedee, leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI). As such, the recent murders of secular thinkers in Bangladesh are only the gloomy peak of growing jihadi influence in the country.

Since the early 1990s, a silent but steady process of Islamisation is gaining ground in the country. The breeding ground for this process was prepared by the country's military rulers, General Ziaur Rahman (1975-1981) and General H.M. Ershad (1982-1990). During both autocratic governments, far reaching constitutional amendments were introduced which undermined the institutional bulwark against a potential Islamist takeover, i.e. the principles of secularism and democracy. More concretely, Ziaur and Ershad diluted the secular principles in the constitution in order to gain legitimacy by playing the religious card.

They were undoubtedly inspired by their Pakistani peer, General Zia-ul Haq (1977-1988), under whose dictatorial regime Pakistan descended into a marsh of Islamic fundamentalism. By anchoring Islam in the constitution and putting religion at the centre of the political discourse, Bangladesh was effectively transformed into an Islamic state. As a result, Islamist parties have been able to incrementally appropriate room in the political arena, despite the fact that they did not enjoy much general public support. It is interesting to mention that in this direction Pakistan serves as a crucial point of reference: the fact that Islamist parties do not get many votes percentage-wise does not automatically imply that they are marginalised when it comes to exercising political influence and access to state resources. Here, aggressive political behaviour combined with extra-judicial measures (e.g. blackmail, targeted killings, major terrorist activities) are used as compensation for a lack of electoral support. The high level of Islamist penetration of state and society was further enhanced during the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) governments (1991–1996, 2001–2006). They were not only using state resources to promote their 'anti-secular revolution' but also pushed the entrenchment of Islamic fundamentalist elements deeply into the political-administrative structure of the country. Today, Islamisation is not a silent process anymore: it is loud, aggressive, and it has reached the centre of power politics in Dhaka, and the ABT function as the most effective transmitter.

ABT's Support Base

According to official statements, ABT is not linked with international terror groups. But this is hard to believe. One should expect that they receive substantial funding from Middle Eastern sources (for example NGOs, religious charity organizations, or Bangladeshi workers) who are interested in promoting radical and militant groups at the expense of more moderate streams in Islam. However, in Bangladesh one must make a clear distinction between state and society when it comes to support for radical Islamic fundamentalism (including respective militant outfits).

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Radical Islamist groups have a very limited leverage among the common people due to a very strong, active, secular and pro-democratic civil society. However, it looks quite different on the side of the state and the political parties. Islamist groups have enjoyed massive support by the state, especially under the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) coalition government which included the radical religious parties Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI) and the Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ).

What sort of Actions or Crimes have been connected to the Group?

As already mentioned, ABT's major goal and activity is targeted killing. Therefore, the group members are either directly kill dissenters, or aid and abet it. They have already killed and threatened a number of secular bloggers, activists and writers as well as published a 'global hit list' of prominent figures claiming that they will be murdered if they do not follow the demands of ABT. Furthermore, ABT is promoting domestic and global jihad by distributing material and ideology either by using social media and the internet or mosques to meet and radicalise young people. In order to suppress freedom of expression and to silence opposition, they try to put pressure on media outlets to silence any opposition against the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism in state and society. It is noteworthy that they combine this with the strategy to oppress women and deny their rights by forcing media companies to dismiss female employees. Besides this, ABT is involved in many (petty) criminal activities like bank robbery.

Bangladesh's Counter-Terrorism and its Effectiveness

Generally one can state that the country's political establishment still seems to be deaf when it comes to the realization of the full threat of Islamic fundamentalism. The way authorities and analysts are downplaying or ignoring the growing influence of ABT and its embeddedness in the international jihadist networks of Islamic State and al-Qaeda is perturbing. This will open further space for the promotion and entrenchment of a fundamentalist ethos in Bangladesh. Simply banning militant religious organisation like ABT is not enough. The country needs a comprehensive concept against religious fundamentalism accompanied by a coherent and stringent counter-terrorism strategy. The so called 'zero-tolerance policy towards militancy' is a step in the right direction but the country's security agencies are tremendously lacking counter-terrorism capabilities and resources. Until now, the few measures carried out by the current government to contain the Islamist threats remain ineffective, especially if one looks at the mobilising potential of the Islamists and the on-going operations of 'officially' banned organisations. Furthermore, the jihadi groups have developed extraordinary skills in adopting to changes in the security environment and carrying out respective modifications in their organisational structure and operational strategy.

Actually the half-hearted, mainly ad-hoc and unorganized actions against radical Islamist organisations have not had the desired effects. Instead of eradicating the threat, radical Islamists were able to portray themselves as being unjustly persecuted. The ban of the JI is such an example. Dhaka's decision-makers did not understand that the costs of ignoring jihadism are much higher than narrow political ends and electoral benefits from radicalized sections of the country's electorate. Bangladesh should not make the same mistake as Pakistan, allowing or even encouraging domestic militancy and international terrorist groups to use Bangladeshi territory as a launch pad for jihadist activities.

ATB and its International Aspirations and Presence

Against the persistently recurrent official statements that Bangladesh's domestic terror groups have no links with internationally acting jihadi organisations, there are more and more indications of how deeply the Islamic fundamentalists of the South Asian country are involved in the 'World of the Global Jihad'. One of the latest examples is the detention of 14 Bangladeshi nationals at the end of 2015. These men were part of a larger group of 26 Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore. The authorities of the city-state found clear evidence that these Bangladeshi nationals were supporting the armed jihadist ideology of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS), planning to take part in extremist activities elsewhere, and shared jihadist material. Already in 2013, the 14 formed a growing terrorist group but not in order to carry out attacks on the island but to 'wage holy war' overseas, especially in their home country. The arrest of these radical Islamists under the Internal Security Act (ISA) is a decisive moment since it was the first time that a jihadist terror cell comprising of foreigners has been uncovered in Singapore. Furthermore,

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there is the threat that the South East Asian state could also move into the focus of terrorists as a target. The presence of ABT members in Singapore can be seen as an indication for several implications. Firstly, they look beyond Bangladesh's borders to promote and participate in jihadi activities, not only in South- but also in South East Asia. Secondly, they try to build an international network in order to carry out jihadi activities. Thirdly, they have created or are in the process of creating an international network or structure in order to operate independently from the financial and logistic support of worldwide acting terror groups like IS or al-Qaeda.

Final thoughts – ABT and the Challenge for Bangladesh's Democracy

There are no doubts that ABT, like most of radical Islamic fundamentalist organisation, categorically rejects democracy, negotiations, and especially consensus-based political decision-making. In other words, deliberative political processes which require finding of compromises and making exceptions are outside of a fundamentalist ABT mind-set. Thinking and acting based on extremist ideologies does not allow any room for dissent because disagreements and disputes, which are inherent to the democratic process, are seen as a threat that can weaken the power and efficiency of the ideology that holds the ABT together. Therefore, democratic contestation deteriorates the movement's coherence and gives room for fragmentation. Hence, it is in the nature and a matter of survival for the ABT to fight democracy by all means.

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