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Opinion – Counter-Terrorism and Intellectual Co-Optation in Bangladesh

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SAZZAD SIDDIQUI, MAR 19 2025

In fragile democracies like Bangladesh, populist regimes arguably manipulate public perception to consolidate power which exemplifies Noam Chomsky's "manufacturing consent" theory – meaning how public opinion is shaped to serve ruling elites. Among few others, Sheikh Hasina's 15-year rule epitomized this tactic that used counter-terrorism campaigns to justify and sustain her authoritarianism mainly through exploiting security crises to suppress opposition and dissent in Bangladesh. The co-optation of intellectuals and academics aligned with the ruling Bangladesh Awami League (AL) was central to this strategy. The government also absorbed individuals from outside its ideological base which reflected the regime's unique ability to manufacture passive compliance of the dissent intellectuals. This helped broadly to legitimize repressive state actions in the name of countering terrorism and religious extremism mainly exploiting the police and other security organizations. Despite her consolidated power she was ultimately ousted and fled to India on 5 August 2024 amid an unprecedented student-led mass uprising. Now, India is unwilling to extradite her.

Such co-optation can be described as an "intellectual honey trap," where academics are subtly enticed into endorsing state narratives under the pretext of national security. In Bangladesh, research on extremism was often steered toward validating government policies rather than critically examining their implications. Scholars were encouraged to focus on ideological factors behind radicalization while avoiding systemic critiques, such as the role of state repression or structural inequalities. In Bangladesh, the infamous August 21, 2004, grenade attack on Hasina's rally became a cornerstone of manufacturing counter-terrorism narrative. The AL flaunted the tragedy to frame the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) as a terrorist organization and religious traders to consolidate political advantage.

Judicial processes, widely criticized as politically influenced, further entrenched the narrative, enabling Hasina's government to erode democratic institutions and manipulate electoral processes. The specter of Islamic fundamentalism also served as a convenient tool to consolidate power. Hasina positioned herself as the sole guardian of secularism, branding opposition parties such as the BNP as existential threats to national stability as her followers are often heard chanting "As long as Sheikh Hasina leads the nation, Bangladesh will not lose its way."

Under the pretext of counter-terrorism, Hasina's government notably expanded the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) which was initially established to combat crime and extremism by BNP increasingly became tools of political repression often termed as Death Squad. These actions were framed within a national security narrative, further reinforced by intellectual discourse aligned with state policies. Substantial state investment in counter-terrorism research and training institutions provided a semblance of legitimacy but often served dual purposes: consolidating state control and incentivizing intellectual conformity. For example, the 2023 Ministry of Finance budget for counter-terrorism included projects to upgrade RAB's technological capacities. International collaborations facilitated training programs.

Her government consistently portrayed opposition protests as extremist acts and suppressed dissents especially to gain electoral benefit tagging those movements as reforms and accountability were dismissed to justify violent crackdowns on their movements. Though there were some visible Islamic festivals – e.g., Qawwali a genre of Muslim

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devotional songs sung mainly by Sufi devotees – and gatherings following Hasina’s fall, critics argue that these were largely symbolic which arose from the lack of previous opportunities to engage in religious activities. These events were primarily performative, mainly intended to counter the narrative of anti-Islamists. As a result, the country has yet to witness any significant rise in Islamist fundamentalism, which seemingly disproves the pro-regime intellectuals’ argument that Islamist terrorists would take over the nation if Sheikh Hasina were not in power.

In Bangladesh, anti-terrorism narratives have frequently been politicized, serving as tools to suppress opposition and legitimize authoritarian rule. Both state-aligned and independent researchers often interpret a landscape shaped by these politicized narratives. This dynamic reflects broader trends of intellectual co-optation, where counter-terrorism research is framed to validate government policies, sidelining systemic critiques such as state repression or structural inequalities. In this regard, Bangladeshi-born anti-terrorism and violent religious extremism intellectuals have made significant contributions to understanding these critical issues. The intellectual landscape in Bangladesh includes influential thinkers who are recognized for their independent work and critiques of the Hasina regime, as well as those perceived to be aligned with it. However, both groups seem to be influenced by an “anti-terrorism honey trap.” This dynamic is largely driven by research grants, aspirations for academic recognition, the pursuit of influential positions, and a tendency toward populism.

This dynamic mirrors trends in other populist regimes. In Turkey, for example, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used counter-terrorism narratives to suppress dissent, targeting academics under accusations of promoting “terrorist propaganda.” Similarly, in India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi leveraged national security concerns to stifle dissent, as highlighted by Arundhati Roy in *Azadi*. However, Bangladesh stands out for the scale of intellectual compliance, with the AL successfully framing its actions as a defense of secularism – an ideal deeply ingrained in the nation’s identity. Amid widespread accusations of Islamization, the current Dr Yunus’ government reaffirmed its firm stance against any form of extremism on March 7 in Dhaka. Law enforcement authorities deployed batons, teargas, and sound grenades to disperse members of the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir as they attempted to stage a march advocating March for Khilafat, underscoring the administration’s unwavering ‘zero tolerance’ policy toward extremist activities.

In conclusion, the intellectual “honey trap” shaped by counter-terrorism politics undermines democracy and human rights by co-opting academics into state narratives, compromising their independence, and normalizing authoritarian practices. Escaping this trap demands moral courage, integrity, and a commitment to truth and justice. Scholars must challenge state propaganda, advocate for transparency in research, and resist incentives tied to government agendas. The fall of Sheikh Hasina’s regime highlights the unsustainability of using counter-terrorism to justify repression and manipulate intellectual discourse. This serves as a stark reminder of the need to uphold academic and intellectual purism over opportunistic pursuits and resist state-driven co-optation to preserve democratic values.

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