

Bangladesh Heads Toward Lawlessness

by Ramtanu Maitra

A barrage of grenade attacks on a political rally of the opposition Awami League Party at Dhaka on Aug. 21, intended to assassinate the former prime minister and party chief, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, is one more indication that Bangladesh is heading pell-mell toward lawlessness, and could very well turn out soon to be a shelter for terrorists and religious zealots. The grenade attack, which killed at least 20 people, was as well orchestrated as it could be. Grenades were thrown from different directions on the rally addressed by Sheikh Hasina, considered by the Islamic zealots as secular and pro-India. When she was hurriedly moved to a waiting car, the car was sprayed with seven bullets. She came out unscathed, but it is evident that Bangladesh has not erased the scar of being a nation where political differences are decided through assassinations. A series of assassinations had highlighted Bangladesh's first ten years of post-independence politics. It seems that nothing much has changed.

Killer Vigilantes

Bangladesh, home to 147 million people, has become an even more dangerous place than it was in the 1970s, particularly for those who oppose lawlessness and vigilantism. What has made things worse is that the vigilantes now wear an orthodox Islamic garb, and work loosely with the "law and order" personnel. One Islamic vigilante group, called Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), has come to the fore since April 2004, and is now active in the northwestern Bangladesh districts of Rajshahi, Naogaon, Natore, Joypurhat, Rangpur, and Bogra.

This group is led by one Siddiquil Islam, widely known as Bangla Bhai. He earned his kudos as a vigilante friend of the local police by killing Maoist extremists, known collectively as Sarbahara. The Sarbahara had become active during the past year in western Bangladesh, eliminating local leaders of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Bangla Bhai is an admirer of Osama bin Laden, and according to press interviews given by the JMJB, the group is a votary of extremist Islamic leaders and scholars. JMJB leaders follow the militant ideals of the Taliban and spearhead a movement based on an Islamic fundamentalist conception of *jihad*.

But, behind the rag-tag JMJB, lies a wound that the post-independence Bangladeshis could not heal. The formation of an independent Bangladesh, separated by violent war from Pakistan in 1972 with more than adequate help from India,



was not approved by a large number of Bangladeshis. This group includes the non-Bengali Muslim citizens of the erstwhile East Pakistan; a section of the Army which found strength and pride in being part of the powerful and professional Pakistani Army; the orthodox religious groups who considered the separation from Pakistan in 1972 by a “Hindu India” as a weakening of Islam in the subcontinent; and also those who felt a strong resentment in becoming a second-fiddle to the much-larger India.

Roots of Orthodoxy

In the political arena, the differences were clear. The pro-independence Bangladeshis were represented by the “secular” party, the Awami League, founded by Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the first President of Bangladesh. The party, following Sheikh Mujib’s assassination in 1975, is now headed by Sheikh Mujib’s daughter—the target of the Aug. 21 assassination attempt—Sheikh Hasina Wajed. At the same time, the failure of the Awami League to provide a reasonably good administration in the 1970s and again in the 1990s, helped to weaken its political base.

The weakening of the Awami League, particularly since the early 1980s, strengthened in turn the pro-Islamic groups. The military, on the other hand, remained close to Pakistan and re-built its linkages with Islamabad, through Beijing. In the later years, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was given a firm base inside Bangladesh to help incite rebellion in India’s turbulent northeast. The Islamization of the Pakistani Army and ISI further helped the Islamic groups in Bangladesh. In addition, Bangladeshi orthodox Islamic groups benefited financially from the spread of Wahhabism in the post-oil-price-hike era in the 1970s. From the distant

lands of Arabia, money poured into Jamaat-e-Islam and other Bangladeshi pro-Islamic groups, to build mosques, as well as to “Islamize” the nation. The military also helped these groups generously. The ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was formed in the 1980s, following the assassination of the second Bangladeshi President, Maj. Gen. Ziaur Rehman. The party was then nominally headed by Begum Khaleda Zia, wife of the slain President and a former beauty queen, but the real power remained in the hands of pro-Pakistan and pro-Islam military personnel. Presently, the ruling BNP has a political arrangement with the Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamic groups masquerading as political entities. Begum Zia, now Prime Minister, and a veteran of Bangladeshi politics, continues to enjoy the support of the pro-Pakistan Army faction.

Following the grenade attack, Sheikh Hasina on Aug. 24 blamed Prime Minister Begu Khaleda Zia and Jamaat Chief Matiur Rahman Nizami for cooking up the plan to kill her, and observed that an “international inquiry” into the grenade attack would unveil the plot.

Drug-Gun Nexus

The anti-India and pro-Islam groups in Bangladesh were also helped by drugs and weapons. The shorelines of Bangladesh’s only port, Chittagong, are wide open to smuggling. Last April, a huge cache of arms, which included 10,000 weapons, 5,000 grenades, and 300,000 rounds of ammunition, all packed in boxes labelled “Made in China,” were seized. It is likely that most of the weapons were destined for delivery to the various rebel groups functioning in India’s northeast, seeking secession or autonomy.

Dr. Robert Bradnock, a senior lecturer at King’s College in London and an expert on South Asian affairs, pointed, in a recent paper, to India’s concerns about the ongoing insurrection in Assam, the largest state in northeast India. He is also of the view that during the last 5-6 years, the Indian government has made great efforts to persuade Bangladesh to give up sheltering these militants. New Delhi had made clear its peaceful intentions and its long-term strategic interest in a secure economic relationship with Bangladesh.

Bradnock further said that there is rising concern that Islamic fundamentalism is beginning to influence government policies in Bangladesh. Others have noticed the growing “Talibanization” of Bangladesh. Hundreds of Islamic *madrassahs* (religious schools) have cropped up along the entire stretch of the 2,400-kilometer India-Bangladesh border. These *madrassahs*, New Delhi claims, provide a nucleus for an Islamic *jihadi* and ISI proxy war against India.

Talibanization

On April 4, 2002, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER), a weekly published from Hong Kong, pointed out that while the Jamaat-e-Islami is moving cautiously toward its goal of establishing an Islamic state, its elevation to gov-

ernment has encouraged other more extreme Islamic fundamentalist groups and individuals. They range from rabble-rousing cleric Maulana Ubaidul Haq to around a dozen radical groups often referred to as the Bangladeshi Taliban.

"They include the shadowy Harkat-ul Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI)," the *FEER* wrote, "which is believed to have been founded as an offshoot of a Pakistani group in 1992 with money and support from suspected global terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden. Western intelligence officials believe a certain Fazlur Rahman, who signed bin Laden's February 23, 1998, declaration of holy war on the U.S. on behalf of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh, is an associate of the now independent group."

The Indian police and analysts also claim that the Harkat group has links with banned Islamic militant groups in Pakistan, such as Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Toiba, and in the Middle East. There is also evidence that Harkat members and Muslim refugees from Myanmar, known as the Rohingya, were sent to fight the Indian security forces in Jammu and Kashmir, the anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan, and the Russians in Chechnya, since the late 1990s. Recently Pakistan arrested, in Dubai, Qari Saifullah Akhtar, a close contact between the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. Pakistani intelligence reported that he was in charge of directing the Rohingya. "Moreover, the radicals' ranks are being swelled by graduates from the estimated 64,000 *madrassahs*, or religious schools, which have mushroomed in the past decade and are described by a retired high-ranking civil servant as a 'potential political time bomb,' " *FEER* added.

Weak Response

But despite the clear evidence of creeping fundamentalism over the past decade, the current government is wholly unwilling to deal with it. The situation has been complicated by a section of the Army, which has opened the door to the fundamentalists in order to broaden the overall support-base to counter the "secular" and left-leaning policies of the Awami League. Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina Wajed, whose government was ousted in the October 2001 election, has said on many occasions that the BNP-led coalition government has created "a reign of terror across the country." Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, in turn, has accused the Awami League of being engaged in a "conspiracy to disrupt peace," and pledged that her government is determined to "control terrorism with an iron hand." In other words, notwithstanding what Begum Khaleda Zia proclaims, what happened on Aug. 21 was a disaster waiting to occur. But the BNP, wittingly or unwittingly, did not want to move against the forces of violent change. Among many signs of growing Islamic militancy in Bangladesh, none perhaps was clearer than the event on May 21, 2004, when a powerful homemade bomb rocked the Sufi shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal in the northeast of the country, resulting in the death of two men.

The bomb was either planted or hurled at devotees attending the Jumma prayer. An estimated 50-60 people received injuries from the blast. Among them was British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury, the newly appointed United Kingdom envoy to Bangladesh, who is originally from Bangladesh. His visit to the shrine was widely publicized. Therefore, there was no doubt that the bomb was directed at him.

But the Aug. 21 assassination attempt on Sheikh Hasina Wajed is another milestone on Bangladesh's way to Islamic fundamentalism and lawlessness. The issue is now before Begum Khaleda Zia to decide whether she, like a number of leaders in Pakistan in the 1980s and 1990s, will allow this violent force to get bigger and more powerful, in order to benefit politically from its support through elimination of her democratic opposition. Or, will she finally realize the long-term threat that the growth of such lawlessness poses to the country?

Meanwhile, on Aug. 23, Britain, India, Pakistan, and the United States offered the Dhaka government help in its probe, at separate meetings of their envoys with Foreign Minister Morshed Khan. "We have offered to help in the investigation, we want to work with Bangladesh on the matter," Veena Sikri, Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka, told journalists after her meeting with Morshed Khan. The Bangladeshi Foreign Minister held talks with U.S. Ambassador Harry K. Thomas, British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury, and Pakistani High Commissioner Manzar Shafiq to share the government's concern with them. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was "appalled" at the news of the grenade attack, his spokesman said in a statement. Strongly condemning the use of violence against civilians, the Secretary-General called for the perpetrators to be brought to justice, and urged all concerned to show restraint in the days ahead.

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