

Deradicalisation in Bangladesh: Challenges Ahead

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The Sheikh Hasina government has been able to crack down on militant outfits by initiating a process of de-radicalisation ever since it came to power in 2009. This has been evident from the fact that since 2009 the violent activities of the Islamic extremists have been curtailed with relatively little bloodshed. And the same has been the case with the left wing extremists in the country. The Sheikh Hasina regime is more determined, than any government since the formation of Bangladesh to de-radicalise the political as well as the social structure of Bangladesh. This paper will describe and analyse deradicalisation process underway in Bangladesh and the emerging challenges.

Trial of War Criminals (WCs)

Of all the measures taken to crack down on the Islamic extremists, the process of bringing the war criminals (WCs) to justice is the most important. The prime ministerial candidate Sheikh Hasina made it crystal clear in her election manifesto that those that collaborated with the Pakistan army and government in the rape and genocide of an estimated three million people during the Liberation War, would finally be held to account.¹ On January 29, 2009, Bangladesh's Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament) passed a unanimous resolution calling upon the government to ensure immediate trial of war criminals. Participating in the discussion on the

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motion, Sheikh Hasina said: "The war criminals must be brought to justice, no matter what." On January 30, 2009, the Bangladesh home minister, Sahara Khatun, announced that her ministry had asked the authorities concerned to guard all exit points so that no war criminal could flee the country, and added that "all relevant information about war criminals has been sent to the respective places."²

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League (AL) government led by Sheikh Hasina, formed a tribunal, which was mandated to try and prosecute the WCs, on March 25, 2010. The government also created, the War Criminals Fact Finding Committee (WCFFC), which handed over a list of WCs and documented evidence in support of charges against them, on April 4, 2010. According to the convener of the WCFFC, M. A. Hassan, the documentation comprised of 18 books, the names and addresses of 1,775 alleged WCs, with detailed accounts of crimes, including mass killings. On March 23, moreover, reports indicated that the government had approved a list of war criminals prepared by the National Security Intelligence (NSI) and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID).

These measures against the WCs are giant steps after collusion by successive governments (mainly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its allies like Jammat-e-Islami (JeI) to protect the WCs. The Islamist extremists, who hatched the plan against the general population during the Liberation War in 1971, were politically rehabilitated. Islamic fundamentalist political formations like JeI were accused of playing a major role in the massacre along with the Pakistani army. Hence a backlash against the government's initiative for the trial of the WCs was inevitable. The JeI along with its student wing, the Islamic Chhatra Shibir (ICS) organised a number of street demonstrations against AL government with sole motive of disrupting the trial of the WCs. Despite all the odds the AL government went ahead. As a result some of the king pins of the JeI like the *Ameer* (chief), Motiur Rahman Nizami, the secretary general Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojahid and the *Nayeb-e-Ameer* (Deputy Chief) Delwar Hossain Sayedee were arrested on June 29, 2010.³ Apart from these more than a thousand others have also been arrested.

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BDR Mutiny and Reconstitution of the Security Forces

One of the major challenges faced by the democratically elected AL government was the mutiny in Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), (currently known as the Border Guards Bangladesh-BGB), a paramilitary force in February 2009, just after two months after the restoration of democracy. The mutiny began on the second day of the BDR annual week celebration on February 24, 2009 at the Pikhana cantonment in the national capital Dhaka. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had given an address

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As rightly stated by Hironmaya Karlekar, the threat to the prime minister's life became evident when some of the mutineers told reporters inside the BDR headquarters that they would agree to a ceasefire only after talks with Sheikh Hasina and the home minister, Sahara Khatun. Saying that they would not talk to anybody else, they said: "We will allow the PM and cabinet members in. We will tell them our demands. You ask them to come right now. We will call ceasefire once they are in."⁵ This was a trap laid in the hope that Sheikh Hasina, who has inherited

both her father *Bangabandhu* Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's courage and emotional surges, would fall for it. Fortunately she did not.⁶

What ever the reason for the outbreak of the BDR mutiny, the sole aim of the mutiny was to create countrywide chaos by provoking the army to retaliate by killing as many as 57 army officers. According to Hironmaya Karlekar, they hoped that this would result in the imposition of martial law - thus facilitating the ouster of the AL government which has massive popular support. The argument would be that a democratic government which could not prevent Bangladesh from being plunged into such a crisis could not be trusted with the responsibility of being at the helm at such a critical time.⁷ And this would have been accepted by a country in the midst of a terrible civil war.

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Despite many conspiracy theories and activities the AL led government took measures to bring the mutineers to justice. In this process the very first step was to clean up the BDR. And the reason for such a move was very simple. It was very clear that the mutiny was in no way spontaneous, but one that was planned. And, moreover, the involvement of the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) in the planning was strongly suspected. The commerce minister Faruk Khan said on March 12, 2009 that: "We've so far identified some persons in the BDR who are associated with the JMB," and this was based on feedback from the investigators".⁸

The outbreak of a mutiny with such intensity could not have been possible without the support of the forces who do not believe in democracy and ultimately want to create a situation that would lead the country into a crisis. Hence, the penetration of extremist elements into BDR, at that point in time, can not be ruled out. Hence a drastic change in composition of BDR and bringing the mutineers to book was a major step to de-radicalise one of the security structures of Bangladesh.

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The first step to reconstitute the BDR was the proposal to change the name from BDR to BGB which was passed on December 21, 2010 following President Zillur Rahman's formal approval. Following this a separate bill was passed in parliament on December 8, 2010, which provided for capital punishment for mutiny instead of seven-years imprisonment and the change of name to BGB with new logo and uniform. As per the BDR Director General Rafiqul Islam, major changes have been brought into the new act. "From now on activities of border guards will be decentralised. The entire force will be divided into and operated under four zones."⁹

Apart from the reforms in the BDR, the government went ahead to try the mutineers in the court of law. As reports suggest, a special court of the BDR read out charges against 275 out of 735 accused of the Sadar Rifle Battalion at Darbar Hall of Pikhana on March 6, 2011.¹⁰ And a Dhaka court on March 3, 2011 fixed March 28 for hearing on charge framing in a case filed in connection with the carnage at BDR headquarters in February 2009.¹¹

Secular Ethos Reincorporated

In another blow to the Islamic fundamentalists the AL government filed a petition against the fifth amendment of the constitution of April 1979 which removed the word "secularism" from the constitution and inserted words that are Islamic in character. In the amendment process the preamble of the constitution had been changed to include a pledge that, "the high ideals of absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah" shall be the fundamental principle of the constitution. On January 3, 2010, the government filed a case against the fifth amendment, and on October 4, 2010, the High Court ruled that, "Bangladesh is now a secular state since the original constitution of 1972 has been automatically restored following the Supreme Court judgment." Earlier, on July 27, 2010, the Supreme Court had restored the original constitution of 1972. The Supreme Court also reinstated a ban on Islamic political parties on July 28, 2010. In a detailed, 184-page verdict,

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secular ethos in the constitution, the Islamic extremists have been subjected to direct attacks. According to the database of South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), 2010, by December 26, the government had arrested some 958 cadres and leaders of the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), the student front of the JeI and the JeI in 2010. Along with these cadres the Security Forces also arrested 43 JMB and nine Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B) militants.¹³ It is important to mention that the government's drive against JeI and ICS intensified after the killing of a Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), activist, identified as Faruk Hossain, in the Rajshahi University (RU) campus on February 9, 2010, and the subsequent confirmation of the link between JeI and ICS. Some of important militants and the extremist leaders arrested during the drive against the militants are Maulana Saidur Rahman *aka* Zafar, chief of the JMB, JeI's *Ameer* Matiur Rahman Nizami, Secretary General Ali Ahsan Muhammad Mujaheed, *Nayeb-e-Ameer* Delwar Hossain Sayedee, senior leaders Mohammad Qamaruzzaman and Abdul Qader Mollah.

The arrests of these leaders of extremist outfits, exposed the links between the JeI and JMB like never before. During a face to face interrogation the arrested chief of the JMB Saidur Rahman revealed the links between JeI and JMB on July 13, 2010. Similarly, the arrested leader of the Huzib-ut-Tahirr, Syed Golam Maola, on July 12,

the Supreme Court scrapped the bulk of the 1979 fifth amendment, including provisions that had allowed religious political parties to flourish and that legalised military rule. Bangladesh was re-declared a secular state after a gap of 31 years.¹² Along with the reestablishment of the secular ethos into the constitution the AL government has taken a long leap in banning the political parties which are responsible of spreading religious fundamentalism, that ultimately goes against the secular ethos of the constitution.

Direct Crackdown on Extremist Forces

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2010, exposed the links between JeI and JMB.¹⁴ Once the JeI's nexus with various militant outfits was exposed and many of its main leaders put behind bars on charges of war Crimes and various other charges of illegal possession of arms; the JeI is now on the back foot. Reports indicate that JeI is planning to operate under a different name if banned by the Sheikh Hasina government.

Benefits for India

The deradicalisation process that the Sheikh Hasina government has initiated has been helpful to India, in terms of its internal security. One year after she became prime minister, Sheikh Hasina visited India on January 10-13, 2010 to improve bilateral relation. As the outcome of the visit both countries signed agreements on Mutual Legal Assistance on Criminal Matters, Transfer of Sentenced Persons, and Combating International Terrorism, Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking. On January 13, 2010, replying on the issue of handing over top ULFA and NDFB leaders, Sheikh Hasina disclosed that India and Bangladesh were working on an extradition treaty.¹⁵ Complimenting the commitment of Sheikh Hasina, the Bangladesh high commissioner in India, Tariq Ahmed Karim, declared in Guwahati on April 2010 that: "The world has seen our resolve to fight terrorism and India has acknowledged it at the highest level. We shall not allow any terrorist act against India to be carried out from our territory."¹⁶

A striking result of Sheikh Hasina's commitment was the crackdown on the insurgent outfits of the Northeast India, who were using Bangladesh as a safe haven. As a major development for India's internal security, on May 1, 2010, Bangladesh handed over, Ranjan Daimary, the 'president' of the anti-talks faction of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB-ATF) to India. In similar fashion a number of United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) leaders were arrested and subsequently handed over to the Indian authorities. Some of the top ULFA leaders who were handed over to the Indian authorities were 'general secretary, Arbinda Rajkhowa, 'deputy commander-in-chief' Raju Baruah, 'foreign secretary' Sasadhar Choudhury, and 'finance secretary' Chitraban Hazarika.

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Such measures against anti India insurgent groups of hiding in Bangladesh bode well for the internal security of India. One can arguably say that, this was perhaps one of the most important factors that forced the ULFA into peace talks with

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the Indian establishment. At the same time India would prefer some more action from Bangladesh government in terms of freezing the bank accounts of various insurgent groups in Bangladesh. There is still a great deal of confusion whether those accounts have been frozen or not.¹⁷

While the process of de-radicalisation has proved positive for India, the strategic agreement between China and Bangladesh to construct a direct road-link to Yunnan province of China via Myanmar to Chittagong as well as China's help in constructing

the Sonadia deep sea port at Cox's Bazaar has serious security implications for India.¹⁸ At a time when both India and Bangladesh are moving closer in terms of bilateral relations, more than Bangladesh it is India who should take steps to take Bangladesh into confidence in its fight against Islamic forces like JeI, JMB and ICS. Because, in a scenario where India is surrounded by the neighbours like Pakistan, Nepal, where anti-India sentiment dominates, perhaps the Sheikh Hasina regime may be the best in complimenting India's commitment for democracy and fight against terrorism.

Challenges Ahead

Ever since the AL has come to power the de-radicalisation measures have constantly been threatened by two groups,; the JeI with its student wing ICS is the fountainhead of the Islamic extremist forces in Bangladesh and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on the political front. The regular street protests by the JeI and the ICS ostensibly against price rise, power and water shortages have been serving two purposes. On the one hand they serve to stall any initiative against extremists thereby delaying the trial of the WCs in which JeI is a major party. On the other hand it is politically helping its ally BNP in delegitimise the AL government. It has been more successful in political terms as the, the BNP and its allies won in 114 municipalities whereas AL won 88 municipalities in the January 2011 elections. Such a result is certainly alarming for Sheikh Hasina because it gives the JeI and the BNP an edge.

Secondly, so far the Sheikh Hasina's policy of reforming the security forces is concerned; this needs to be undertaken in a more comprehensive manner. According to reports, the government has still not been able to bring the BDR mutineers to justice. It is, however, important to mention that,

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given the nexus among the Islamic extremists and the pro-Islamic political parties, the Sheikh Hasina government cannot afford to delay the trial process.

Thirdly, though the Islamist extremists have not carried out any major strikes in last few years, it will be not be right to say that they have been completely wiped out. One should keep in mind that the militant outfits like JMB and HuJI-B have the capacity to undertake major attacks since reports suggest that the JMB has gone for a major recruitment drive in the year 2010. Moreover foreign funding for militant outfits has not been drastically checked which continues to be a matter for worry. While dealing with the JMB militants, the Sheikh Hasina government should not forget the serial bomb blasts by the JMB and JMJB in August 2005. Similarly, HuJI-B continues to maintain close links with a number of a Pakistani militant outfit determined to expand their base in the country.

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The Sheikh Hasina government has achieved dramatic success in containing extremist forces in Bangladesh. However, the corrosive nature of violent and disruptive street mobilisation by political parties like BNP and its allies supported by JeI has the potential to destroy the tenuous stability that has been secured after decades of disorder. Bangladesh has made very steady gains, but is still at risk of sliding back if the government wavers even slightly.



Notes:

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- 2 For details see "JS Passes Proposal to Try War Criminals", *The Daily Star*, available at <http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=73557>, January 30, 2009, accessed on January 30 2009.
- 3 "Jamaat Trio Held on Court Order", *The Daily Star*, available at www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=144739, June 30, 2010, accessed on June 30, 2010.
- 4 Sayeed, Ahmed, "Chronicles of Tragedy and the Pendulum of Sentiment," Forum, *The Daily Star*, Vol. 4, Issue 4, April 2009 available at www.thedailystar.net/forum/2009/april/chronicle.htm, as cited in Anand Kumar, "The BDR Mutiny: Mystery Remains but Democracy Emerge Stronger", *Journal of Defence Studies*, VI. 3, No. 4., October 2009, p. 106.
- 5 "BDR Representatives a Jamuna for Talks with PM", *The Daily Star*, available at http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/latest_news.php?nid=15233, accessed on February 25, 2009
- 6 See Karlekar Hiranmoya, "After the Revolt", *SAIR*, Weekly Assessment and Briefings, Volume 7, No. 37, March 23, 2009, available at, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/7_37.htm#assessment1, accessed on March 15, 2011,
- 7 Ibid.

- 8 See "JMB linked to BDR massacre: Faruk", *The Daily Star*, available at http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/latest_news.php?nid=15561, accessed on March 15, 2011.
- 9 See "BDR set to turn BGB", *The Daily Star*, available at <http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=166940>, accessed on December 22, 2010.
- 10 See "BDR Mutiny Trial: Charges against 275 Jawans Read out", *The Daily Star*, available at <http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=176700>, accessed on March 7, 2011.
- 11 See "BDR Carnage Case: Charge framing hearing Mar 28", *The Daily Star*, available at http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/latest_news.php?nid=28706, accessed on March 3, 2011.
- 12 Behera, Anshuman, "Dhaka Crushes Islamist," *The Pioneer*, January 7, 2011, New Delhi and also see "SC verdict an impetus to establish secular democratic Bangladesh", *The Daily Star*, available at <http://www.thedailystar.net/story.php?nid=148837>, accessed on March 15, 2011.
- 13 "Bangladesh Assessment" in *South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP)*, available at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/bangladesh/index.htm>, accessed on March 15, 2011.
- 14 ----- "Jel: Desperate Manoeuvres", SAIR, Volume 9, No. 16, October 25, 2010, available at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/sair9/9_16.htm#assessment2, accessed on March 15, 2011
- 15 "India-Bangladesh Relations", Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, New Delhi, available at www.meaindia.nic.in/meaxpsite/foreignrelation/bangladesh.pdf
- 16 Hussain, Wasbir, "Dhaka arrests Terror" available at http://cdpsindia.org/assam_landmarks.asp, accessed on March 15, 2011.
- 17 See "Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 4202", MEA, Government of India, New Delhi, available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=220216192>, accessed on April 24, 2010.
- 18 See "Rajya Sabha: Unstarred Questions No. 2513", (MEA), Government of India, New Delhi, available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=220116934>, accessed on December 2, 2010.