

Commentary

Attack on Sheikh Hasina

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On August 21, 2004, a little before 5.30 in the evening, there was a grenade attack on the Awami League leader, Sheikh Hasina Wajed. This occurred soon after she concluded her speech in a public rally close to the Awami League headquarters in Dhaka, which ironically was held to protest the recent grenade attacks in Sylhet. 11 of the 13 grenades hurled at the rally exploded instantly followed by indiscriminate firing fortunately missing the target, Sheikh Hasina, as she was hurriedly escorted into her bullet-proof car. The impact left 18 dead and hundreds wounded. Committed in broad daylight, the terror attack - the work of 'experts' - was meticulously planned and executed.

Beginning with the Udichi blast in March 1999, such attacks have become commonplace in Bangladesh - possibly the 20th in as many as 5 years. All the recent attacks have, according to senior investigation officers, used such similar grenades¹ as the ARGES 48, which incidentally the Bangladeshi army also uses. The ARGES 48 were originally of Austrian make, but are now widely made in China and other parts of the world. These grenades have been used in the Afghanistan war as well as on the Indian Parliament attack in December 2001. Alarmingly, the stickers found on the unexploded grenades led experts to believe that they could have been locally made. Besides the type of explosives, a distinctive pattern can be discerned in all the recent terror attacks in Bangladesh. First, there is a commonality in the locations. The bomb attacks have always aimed at causing huge casualties by targeting crowded places like cinema halls, cultural gatherings, and especially political rallies (of Awami League). Second, a common thread unites these targets - the allegation that they are by their very nature, 'un-islamic.'² Moreover, people from different walks of life but with a common secular orientation have been targeted over the last few years. These attacks can thus be distinguished from criminal acts of violence because of the nature of targets selected. The targeted ones have ranged from common people, to high-profile personalities such as the British High Commissioner, the Mayor of Sylhet, Awami League leaders like Sheikh Hasina, Suranjit Sengupta and others.³ Given the category of people being targeted,

it has not gone amiss or unnoticed that neither any BNP leaders nor other alliance party leaders have ever been the targets of such attacks.

Furthermore, each time a blast has occurred, it has been a common practice for the BNP to suggest that it was orchestrated by the Awami League to deliberately sully the image of Bangladesh. The inability of the Bangladeshi leaders to rise above personal differences and evolve larger national policies has resulted in a failure to rein in terror. Vital national issues like the deterioration of law and order and the rise of religious extremism have invariably been hostage to the Hasina-Khaleda personal duel. Given the overarching role that personality clashes and personal enmity play in Bangladeshi domestic politics, the political parties of Bangladesh - especially the Awami League and the BNP - are not able to offer any objective opinion or reaction in times of such crises. Likewise, even when Sheikh Hasina was attacked as a Prime Minister, Opposition leader Begum Khaleda had accused the government of deliberately maligning the image of Bangladesh. Similarly, for the Awami League, every attack is interpreted as the inevitable fallout of 'Talibanisation' of Bangladesh that has been taking place over the years.

The spectre of Talibanisation in Bangladesh was first identified during the visit of the US President Bill Clinton in October 2000. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had insisted on canceling the President's visit to the National Memorial in Savar on the outskirts of Dhaka in view of the threats arising out of the presence of religious extremist elements. This issue soon gathered momentum especially during the October 2001 Jatiya Sangsad elections. Media reports in Bangladesh suggested that the Islamic parties, especially Jama'at-e-Islami, had taken advantage of Bangladeshi Taliban activists who came home from Afghanistan following the US military offensive. The formation of the new government with Jama'at-e-Islami as a key partner did not relegate the question of the Taliban-Al Qaida presence in Bangladesh to the background. The leader of Opposition, Sheikh Hasina, began using the bogey of Talibanisation for delegitimising the Begum Khaleda government and the international media also started highlighting Al Qaida presence in Bangladesh. Beginning with the first terror attack on March 6, 1999, Sheikh Hasina has accused the BNP as well as its right-wing political allies of condoning and encouraging external militant and terrorist groups inside the country. Given the escalation of terror and violence in the last four years, the Opposition parties, especially the Awami League, have reiterated their accusations against the BNP alliance government of turning a blind eye to the growing presence of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh.

Despite the professed secular commitments, Bangladesh has not been immune

to religious extremism. A number of recent developments and incidents suggest that mounting religious extremism could feed and intensify socio-political tensions. Taliban's growing influence in Bangladesh was reflected in the street demonstrations and protest rallies organised by religious activists disapproving of the government's pledge to be a partner of the US global war against terror. Since then, especially last year, there have been numerous such incidents indicative of the growing intolerance in Bangladesh. In fact, the last three similar bomb attacks, prior to the recent one, have been at Sylhet of which two have taken place at the Sufi shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal.

- The first such attack in the month of January 2004 was timed soon after the departure of the Jamaat leader Saidi who criticised the Sylhetis for revering the local Sufi shrine. The next attack at the same place occurred during a visit of the Bangladesh-born British High Commissioner, Anwar Choudhury.
- The religious intolerance is highly marked in the light of the recent escalations in attacks on minorities including churchgoers, Hindus as well as the Ahmadiyas. There is a growing belief that the government's indifferent attitude towards the demands by Islamic groups to declare Ahmadiya as non-Muslims has encouraged them to go ahead with an even more assertive militant agenda.
- Emergence of a militant group Jagrato Muslim Jatiya Bangladesh (JMJB) in the northwestern region is another example of the growing sway of Islamic militancy. The local police and administration are unable to prevent this group, which has been holding people to ransom and demanding implementation of *Sharia* law all over Bangladesh.
- Following a report in a national vernacular daily, *Prothom Alo* on the terrorist activity in Chittagong and its unregistered madrasas, the Kowmi madrasa teachers and students of Chittagong have demanded the arrest of the publisher of *Prothom Alo* and the closure of the magazine.
- Death threats are being issued against an increasingly large number of secular-minded political personalities and even journalists.

These developments indicate that under continuous pressure from the fundamentalists, the BNP-led government will gradually concede space on religious issues like the imposition of *Sharia* and the introduction of Islamic code of conduct in public life. Thus, the right-wing forces may assert enormous influence in Bangladeshi internal politics and plunge the state into domestic turmoil, especially

when the main political parties are clearly undecided about the strategies they would evolve to handle such a menace.

What is further distressing is the complete failure of the judicial system in Bangladesh, for it has chosen to act as a handmaiden of the party in power. Not surprisingly, despite the devastating blasts no investigation or probe has ever been complete or made public so far. In fact, beyond the rudimentary attempts to accuse and arrest the Opposition leaders, that too without evidence, very few have actually been held responsible for any of the acts of terror. Further, the present BNP-led government is adding to the confidence of the right-wing chauvinists by denying the existence of any Islamic militant groups and thus it might be unwittingly nurturing a Frankenstein's monster by refusing to acknowledge the malignancy of this malady.

As argued earlier, while Jamaat-e-Islami may not have been directly behind the attacks,⁴ its stand on the issue of Islamic assertion has given strength to the fringe groups. Even if these forces represent a small number at the moment, they are unmistakably expanding their area of influence and becoming increasingly vocal and daring in their attacks. This largely occurs because the two main political parties remain locked in a game of one-upmanship and vital national security issues are invariably overlooked. In fact, immediately after the August 21 attack a relatively unknown group Hikmatul Zihad⁵ claimed responsibility for it and vowed to achieve its goal within the next few days. However, there has been no comment from the media or official sources on this front. According to an Indian report, a meeting called by a group of Islamic militant was attended by members of the Harkat-ul Jihad Al Islam (HUJAI) as well as a senior BNP leader to plan the August 21 attack on Sheikh Hasina.⁶

The recent grenade attack on Sheikh Hasina has provided the Opposition ammunition to reiterate the demand for the present alliance to quit. Despite a month-long programme that ended recently, the Opposition forces were unable to muster adequate strength to bring about the dismissal of the BNP alliance government. A renewed attempt has been made once again by the Awami League, the 11-Left Party alliance and the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal led by Hasanul Haq Inu.⁷ Although the government agreed to use the services of the Interpol for investigation into the case, the Opposition further argued that an impartial and fair investigation was not possible without the ouster of the BNP ruling collation. Further, internal dissensions have emerged within the BNP-led alliance. Naziur Rahman Manzur of the Bangladesh Jatiya Party and Mufti Fazlul Huque Amini, Chairman of the Islami Oikya Jote - both alliance partners - have criticised the government for its failure to arrest any attacker. Given the serious charges that are being leveled

at Jamaat and its linkages with the Islamic militant groups, domestic pressure has been building up on Khaleda Zia to drop them from the cabinet.

Bangladesh largely comprises of a secular and culturally conscious people who would not allow Islamic radicals to hold the country to ransom. But keeping the extremist forces under control would also necessitate the cooperation of the BNP and the Awami League. Only a concerted effort from all quarters will help rein in terror and violence, which has been heightened by the free flow of small arms.

References/End Notes

- 1 Are Sylhet and Dhaka Bomb Attacks of Same Module? *Prothom Alo*. August 24, 2004. (Author's translation)
- 2 Bomb Carnage in Bangladesh: All Victims are Secular. *The Daily Star*. August 29, 2004.
- 3 It Was an Attempt to Kill Our Democracy . *The Daily Star*. August 24, 2004.
- 4 http://www.asiapacificms.com/articles/bangladesh_extremism downloaded on 8/30/2003.
- 5 Hikmatul Zihad Vows to Kill Hasina in a Week. *The Daily Star*. August 25, 2004.
- 6 Bangladesh Calls Hartal Again Today, *Ananda Bazaar Patrika* (Bengali) August 30, 2004. (Author's translation)
- 7 Quit Immediately. *The Daily Star*. August 30, 2004.

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