

A Divided Bangladesh Is Fertile Ground for Extremism To Grow

by Ramtanu Maitra

Despite a temporary lull in terrorist activities, due to pressure exerted on various Islamic militant groups in South Asia after the Sept. 11 events in the United States, Bangladesh remains vulnerable to the terrorists and is fast becoming a breeding ground of extremists. The orthodox group Jamaat-e-Islami, whose religious brand of Islam is similar to that of the Taliban, is now a partner in the newly formed government under the leadership of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Although not a great political force itself, Jamaat, like its counterpart in Pakistan, has a strong street presence and is prone to violence.

There are a number of factors in Bangladesh's social and political history and environment which have helped over the years to create the present condition. Born out of a violent struggle in 1971, Bangladesh remained a divided nation. Those who believed that its separation from Pakistan, and from Pakistan's Islamic identity, was a mistake, never reconciled to the new reality. U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's plan to use new-born Bangladesh as a thorn in the side of pro-Soviet India, and Beijing's open support to that policy at the time, boosted the pro-Pakistan and pro-Islamic elements. In the early 1980s, "*Islamiyat*" was introduced in Bangladesh as a compulsory subject from grades 1 to 8, with the option for religious minority students to take similar religious courses of their own.

Victim of Geopolitics

More support for the pro-Islamic elements came from a significant faction within the new Army. This faction was once part of the "destined-to-rule"-oriented military of Pakistan. The bogey, created by Kissinger and Co. in the midst of a bitter Cold War, was the big, "scheming" neighbor India and its alliance with the Soviet Union. Although the Cold War is over, these elements within the Army are very much alive today in Bangladesh.

Although Beijing and the West no longer pursue the Kissinger dictum, Bangladesh remains divided. A significant part of the blame must be shared by the two major political parties—the Awami League and the BNP. The current BNP leader and Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, is the widow of the assassinated former Army Chief and President of Bangladesh, Maj. Gen. Ziaur Rehman. The Awami League is led by Sheikh Hasina Wazed, the former Prime Minister and

daughter of the "founder" and first President of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Sheikh Hasina, largely because of her father's close ties to the Indian leadership at the time of the independence struggle, is often identified as pro-India, although such identification is strongly contested by many. Begum Khaleda Zia, on the other hand, is commonly referred to as the most powerful anti-India political figure in the country. This label is also inaccurate.

But setting aside those labels, there is unanimity that the feud between these two leaders, in effect, determines many political decisions that are harmful for the country. The personal feud between them is based on the two assassinations of their fathers. While President Ziaur Rehman's assassination remains wholly in the dark, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's killing in 1975 was carried out by a section of the pro-Pakistan and anti-India Bangladeshi Army. These personnel were imbued with the Kissingerian concept of geopolitics and personal ambitions of the sort that drives the Pakistani Army to take power from time to time.

Whence the Enmity?

What created further enmity between the two is that the criminal elements, and the coup plotters, who had virtually wiped out the entire family of Sheikh Hasina Wazed, remained at large, and were protected abroad by the Cold Warriors of the West. Sheikh Hasina Wazed never reconciled herself to the gruesome murders of her family and blamed Army Chief Maj. Gen. Ziaur Rehman, who, soon after, became President. Sheikh Hasina went into self-imposed exile in India, and returned to Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital, only after President Ziaur Rehman was himself assassinated in 1982.

The Awami League suffered a humiliating defeat in the general elections of Oct. 1, 2001, with the four-party alliance, led by Begum Khaleda Zia, winning a two-thirds majority. Despite such a clear-cut mandate, Sheikh Hasina Wazed refused to accept the election results, claiming the chief election commissioner had joined in rigging the election. Riding on this absurd allegation and a few others, the Awami League has boycotted Parliament ever since the formation of the eighth Parliament after the elections, making a mockery of the democratic process. The Awami League also claims that the government is harassing party activists and members of

the minority Hindu community. The list of allegations goes on and on.

The feud has led to a deep division within the social and political systems of the country. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda has tried to maintain her image as the pro-Army and pro-Pakistan leader allied with the Jamaat-e-Islami, whose leaders had fought alongside Pakistani soldiers against the independence movement, and had committed massacres. Jamaat today is funded and boosted by Saudi and Kuwaiti sheikhs, who fund all orthodox Islamic groups in South Asia.

The political division has allowed Bangladesh to become a nest of criminal activity. Heroin from neighboring Myanmar, and arms and ammunition from southern Thailand find their way into Bangladesh, where the secessionists of Northeast India, the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, and the Maoists of Nepal and India do their and shopping for narcotics and arms. In addition, Indian intelligence has produced voluminous reports which show that the secessionists and terrorists operating in the region have found a safe haven along the Bangladesh-India border. It is evident that Bangladesh does not have the wherewithal to deal with these terrorists, but what is not clear, is whether it has the political will to do so. From time to time, this becomes an issue between India and Bangladesh. But, by and large, the situation has remained unchanged, while India's "big brotherly" attitude is exploited by the orthodox Jamaat and its friends.

The Rovingyas, a Case in Point

One case in point is the protection provided by Dhaka to the armed Rohingya Muslims, who are demanding an independent Arakan Muslim state within Buddhist-majority Myanmar. Their plan is to join Chittagong in Bangladesh and the Arakan hills of Myanmar to form an independent nation. Bangladesh police during a raid discovered sophisticated weapons, documents, and videotapes which indicate their links to the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Rohingyas are refugees from Myanmar. During the reign of President Ziaur Rehman, and of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, nearly 600,000 Rohingyas entered and settled in the southeastern part of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has almost 500,000 Muslims, who had migrated into what was then East Pakistan, from the Indian state of Bihar around the time of India's partition in 1947, and who, in 1971, had fought vigorously on behalf of the Pakistani Army during the Bangladesh independence movement. Pakistan, however, refused to take back these Bihari Muslims, and it is evident that the Bihari and the Rohingya Muslims, aided by the Saudi and Kuwaiti money, and with protection from a section of the Bangladeshi Army, have become the flag-bearers of Islamic extremism.

What is disturbing to those who oppose extremist politics, is that the extremist elements in Bangladesh now are speaking out more stridently than ever before. Last year, fundamentalist forces staged a rally at Dhaka's Paltan Maidan, under the banner of the Committee for the Implementation of Islamic Laws, vowed to wage *jihad* against the country's highest

court, issued death threats against at least two judges, and promised to wipe out the non-governmental organizations that oppose the regime of *fatwas* (decrees issued by Islamic religious leaders). The Bangladesh High Court had issued a judgment that made the *fatwas* a punishable offense. Opportunistic religious leaders are issuing arbitrary *fatwas* that effectively usurp political functioning proper to the government.

The al-Qaeda Links

The Islamic *jihadi* network under the Afghanistan-based al-Qaeda, had set up its base in Bangladesh as well. These cells were earlier identified by Indian intelligence as the plotters behind attempted bombings of the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi. They point out that Sheikh Abdul Salam Mohammad, Emir of the Bangladesh Jihad Movement, is a signatory of Osama bin Laden's original *fatwas* declaring war against the United States, Israel, Russia, and India. There were consistent reports of Bangladeshi *jihadis*' presence in Afghanistan during the heydays of the Taliban.

During the 1980s, a large number of cadres of the Jamaat of Bangladesh had participated in the fight against the Soviet troops and developed connections to the Arab Afghans. Subsequently, under the clear view of Bangladeshi intelligence, al-Qaeda trained the Rohingyas in Bangladesh. Last year, reports indicated that the Harkatul Mujahideen, a recently banned outfit in Pakistan, had set up shop in Bangladesh. Indian intelligence claims that this was facilitated by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which has many friends within Bangladeshi intelligence and the Army.

The linkage first came into light in 1999 when Bangladeshi police arrested a South African of Indian origin, Ahmed Sadiq Ahmed; a Pakistani citizen, Mohammad Sajed; and two Bangladeshis, Maulana Nazrul Islam and Sradar Bakhtiar. At the time, the Bangladesh police had reported that these *jihadis* had received \$400,000 from bin Laden for recruiting and training cadres. The arrested individuals had admitted the charges, the police reports indicate.

Although those charges have been rejected by the Jamaat, Bangladesh intelligence claims that this network was involved in two alleged attempts to kill Sheikh Hasina, then Prime Minister. Based on these findings, the U.S. Secret Service advised President William Clinton to cancel a visit to a village outside Dhaka during his day-long visit to Bangladesh in March 2000. Intelligence reports indicated that the extremists were waiting to ambush him and his team in a forest along the route.

Indian intelligence says the Pakistani ISI has stepped up activities both in Bangladesh and Nepal, to put together a coalition of anti-India groups, including the terrorist and secessionist groups operating in India's Northeast, the Maoists of Nepal, the *jihadis* of Bangladesh and Myanmar, and the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers. These diverse groups are provided with heroin that flows out of Myanmar and heads south and west, and arms that come in from Southeast Asia, mainly Singapore and southern Thailand.