

In the Midst of Global Crisis, an Opportunity

by Ramtanu Maitra

As a new U.S. President, Barack Obama, moves into the White House, he inherits a financial system in rubble, and a worst-ever explosion of violence and drugs in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, where almost 50,000 U.S. troops are fighting a seemingly lost war. At the same time, the latest election results in Bangladesh have given the new American administration an opportunity, which must not be squandered at this crucial juncture.

In Bangladesh, the Awami League-led alliance, led by former Premier Sheikh Hasina Wazed, won a landslide victory Dec. 29, garnering 262 out of 299 seats in the parliamentary elections held in late December. The election victory indicates that the 140 million Bangladeshis, represented in this poll, have rejected the violence-ridden Islamic movement which was exploited by any number of outsiders.

However, the door that has been opened will not remain open for long, especially if Washington continues to look at Bangladesh as nothing more than a “geopolitical entity,” and if U.S. policies are run through the overused bureaucrats, whose “viceregal” attitudes in a Third World country undermine the United States and overall stability.

The Opportunity

In dealing with a Bangladesh led by Sheikh Hasina, Washington must keep two things in mind. First, it is not good enough to have good relations with India in the Subcontinent. Neither India, nor the region as a whole, will be able to function ably unless all the nations in the region come to respect the strength and the benefits that can be accrued by all from the recently improved India-U.S. relations. The second thing that the Obama Administration must understand quickly, is that the world has changed significantly, and the only way Washington can earn back respect, is by listening patiently to what Dhaka needs. It is neither possible, nor imperative, for Washington to meet all of Dhaka’s needs, but what is impor-

tant, is to help move Bangladesh's physical economy quickly. That will not only strengthen Hasina's hands politically, but would help millions of poverty-stricken Bangladeshis. While the Prime Minister and her colleagues would be the best judge of where, and how, to begin such a process, it is evident that Bangladesh needs vast improvement of its agro-industries, and development of all basic physical infrastructure that supports that sector. This includes power, water, flood control, mass transportation, health care, education, small industries, and a bank credit system.

In helping Dhaka to formulate such a policy, Washington must bring into consultation India and China, as well as Myanmar—all neighbors. On Jan. 6, the Chinese daily *Xinhua* cited local observers who pointed out that it will not be easy for Hasina's government "to meet voters' expectation as there are some economic challenges awaiting the new government, particularly in the wake of the ongoing global financial crisis."

Prior to the parliamentary elections, a high-level United Nations panel identified the issues of agricultural prices and economy as major challenges for the new government. "At the moment, the world is facing economic downturn. It is going to be extremely difficult" for the government to handle the economic troubles, observed Francesc Vendrell, the head of the three-member panel dispatched by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to follow the polls.

Mustafizur Rahman, the Executive Director of a Dhaka-based think tank, Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD), told *Xinhua* that the government needs to take all-out efforts to upgrade infrastructure and improve the investment climate to achieve higher economic growth and bring down poverty. "The government should immediately form a high-powered taskforce for intensely monitoring the impacts of the global financial tsunami to safeguard the country's economy," Rahman added.



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The landslide victory Dec. 29, of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed, has cracked open the door for urgently needed changes. But that door will soon slam shut, unless Washington begins to help the country address its urgent need for economic development, and assists in crushing London-based Islamic terrorist groups who are wreaking havoc there.

Why Is It Urgent?

The urgency to act in Bangladesh stems from the fact that the western part of the Indian Subcontinent, particularly Afghanistan and the part of Pakistan west of the Indus River, has been ravaged over the decades by a policy, put in place by Washington and London, which saw a huge growth in production of opium, proliferation of jihadis, escalation of violence to an unprecedented level, and the possibility of Pakistan breaking apart. Even if the worst does not occur, to bring back peace and stability in that region will take years. Meanwhile, senseless violence and interference by the old colonial forces will continue.

It would be naive to assume that Bangladesh is free of what is happening in the western part of the Subcontinent. As a poor nation, with an extremely high population density, Bangladesh

is more vulnerable to violent forces than other nations in the region. In fact, Bangladesh is under attack from militants who belong to both East and West.

In 1978, due to widespread arrests and expulsions of Rohingya Muslims by the Myanmar government, about 250,000 fled into Bangladesh, arriving in three waves. Two additional waves of migration took place during 1991-92, and in 1996-97. Bilateral negotiations have so far resulted in the repatriation of some 200,000 Rohingyas to Arakan.

But, the presence of Rohingyas, who are opposed to the Myanmar junta for obvious reasons, provided the Saudis an opportunity to pump in money, and get them to embrace Wahhabism as a counter to "non-Islamic" forces in Yangon. But these rootless Rohingyas are a threat to Bangladesh's security. Gun and drug smuggling are rampant among these "guests" of Bangladesh.

The threat from India's west is much more serious. Over the years, a very strong anti-India, and, in essence, anti-stability force has begun to assert itself in populous Bangladesh, which has a fragile political structure and

is poorly governed. Bangladesh became the target of Wahhabi preaching. The driving force behind militant Islam's spread in Bangladesh is not only receiving financial support from Saudi Arabia and the Arab Emirates, but also the migrant workers—the invisible foot soldiers of globalization. For example, according to the Migration Policy Institute, Saudi Arabia has been one of the largest importers of Bangladeshi laborers, but many Bangladeshi workers have been rendered jobless by Riyadh's desire to "Saudi-ize" its workforce. They return to Bangladesh imbued with Wahhabi/Salafist intolerance; unemployed and with few future prospects. Many of these returnees are ready to promote orthodox Wahhabism at odds with traditional, moderate Bengali practices.

Al-Yamamah Money

In the case of Bangladesh, the Saudis made inroads through the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) group, which considers most of the Bangladeshi Muslims to be tainted by "Bengali-Hindu" culture. Plenty of money was made available to various orthodox Salafi groups, created by the British-Saudi al-Yamamah contract. As *EIR* has uniquely reported earlier, the real story behind the BAE-Saudi oil-for-weapons barter deal in 1985 is much bigger than the billions of dollars in bribes paid to Prince Bandar and a host of other Saudi officials and princes (See "Scandal of the Century Rocks British Crown and the City," *EIR*, June 22, 2007). The real story is that at least \$100 billion in offshore, off-the-books funds have been accumulated since the original al-Yamamah deal was signed in 1985, and those funds have been used to finance covert intelligence operations around the globe—including the Afghanistan "mujahideen" war against the Soviet Union, the Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages scheme, the channeling of Soviet-made weapons to Africa, etc. In December 2006, then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair ordered the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) to shut down its investigation into the BAE-Saudi al-Yamamah scandal, invoking British national security interests. Just before leaving office, Blair inked another deal between BAE and the Saudi Ministry of Defense, worth an estimated \$8.7 billion.

By 2005, it became evident that Bangladesh was already awash with non-native Islamic charities and banks which are closely associated with the Islamist movement. Deobandi and Wahhabi preachers were also increasing their missionary work in Bangladesh. In 2005, a joint report was compiled by Bangladesh's Spe-

cial Branch, National Security Intelligence (NSI), and Defence Forces Intelligence, which concluded that at least ten Islamic charities and NGOs were helping to promote and finance Islamist militancy in Bangladesh.

The Saudis' British Partner

According to one terrorist-watcher, the Muslim Council of Bangladesh (MCB) in the U.K. is the prime controller of the extremists in Bangladesh. It has gained almost unparalleled political power over British Muslims, with the backing of ministers from the Home Office and Foreign Office. The Islamist movement that MCB represents is reportedly heavily coordinated by the Muslim World League (MWL), which is based in Saudi Arabia. It was set up in 1962 to counter the spread of Egyptian President Nasser's Arab nationalism, and communism.

The League was originally based in Geneva but moved to Jeddah in 1969. The organization helps fund Islamist organizations around the world and often invites Islamist leaders to Saudi Arabia to discuss global strategy for coordinating their activities. The late Maulana al-Maududi, the ideological leader and founder of the Jamaat-i-Islami, was a founding member of the organization. Wael Hamza Jalaidan, a Saudi businessman, who is believed to be a co-founder of al-Qaeda, was also a founding member of the MWL.

Another British-based group that provides physical support to the Bangladeshi extremists is the Muslim Aid U.K. Muslim Aid was founded in 1985, and is the largest Muslim charity in the U.K. Muslim Aid has often been accused of supporting terrorism, but it continues to carry on as before, while it is common knowledge that its leaders work closely with the Jamaat-i-Islami movement in Pakistan and Bangladesh. There also exists a close interwoven relationship between Muslim Aid and the Muslim Council of Britain. For instance, Dr. Muhammed Abdul Bari, the current secretary general of the MCB, is a trustee of Muslim Aid U.K., while Sir Iqbal Sacranie, the former secretary general of the MCB is a trustee and a former chairman of Muslim Aid. The majority of the trustees also worked for the Islamic Foundation U.K., which was founded by Prof. Khurshid Ahmed, the vice president of the Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan.

Three Terrorist Groups

On the ground, the British-Saudi-led efforts are carried out by three major terrorist groups, although there are other local operations, also availing themselves of

the generous funding. The three are: Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Harkatul Jihadi al-Islami (HUJI), and the ostensibly peaceful Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) Bangladesh.

JMB has a clear political agenda: It aims to capture power through armed revolution and run the country by a Majlis-e-Shur (Central Committee) under Islamic law. JMB came into the limelight in 2005, when the group fired off a series of explosions in 63 out of 64 districts across Bangladesh, planting 458 locally made bombs. It distributed leaflets which declared, "We're the soldiers of Allah. We've taken up arms for the implementation of Allah's law the way the Prophet, Sahabis [companions of the Prophet] and heroic Mujahideen have done for centuries. . . . [I]t is time to implement Islamic law in Bangladesh" (*Bangladesh Observer*, Aug. 18, 2005).

On the other hand, HUJI was founded in Pakistan in 1980, at the time that President Zia ul-Haq sought MI6 and CIA's help to recruit Mujahideen to fight the invading Soviet forces in Afghanistan. From the outset, HUJI members were trained in arms. Two of the Pakistani Wahhabi groups, Jamiatul Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) and the Britain-headquartered Tablighi Jamaat, set up this organization. Reports indicate that HUJI was later recognized by al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. With blessings from JI and the British-Saudi nexus, HUJI began its activities in Bangladesh in 1992. Of all the militant outfits in the country, HUJI is the strongest and best organized.

The third terrorist group, Hizb ut-Tahrir, is headquartered in Britain, and operates in more than 100 countries. Its Bangladeshi arm operated for a while under the name of East London Youth Forum. According to one British undercover journalist, HT is spending considerable sums of money recruiting Bangladeshi Muslims in the area; taking out full-page, cash-paid recruitment ads in Bangladeshi newspapers.

Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh is reportedly focussed primarily on a takeover of Bangladesh from within, using the financial and political muscle of the Bangladeshi population living abroad.

Threat to the Region

If Bangladesh slips into an ungovernable state, as has happened to much of Pakistan, it would be foolish to assume that India-U.S. relations would be able to benefit either India or the United States. The November attack on Mumbai shows clearly the interest of the old Anglo-Dutch Liberal establishment, using a section of



Dawood Ibrahim, one of the orchestrators of the Mumbai terror attack, is reported to have met in the international money-laundering capital Dubai, with Tarique Rahman. Tarique made several deals with Ibrahim, involving arms smuggling into Bangladesh.

the corrupted security apparatus of Pakistan, the drug money, and gun runners, to create a chaotic situation within India. An attack of a similar kind on India's major cities in the East, such as Kolkata, would weaken India's security further.

In March 2007, a Bangladeshi journalist, Hasibul Haque, pointed out that Tarique Rahman, the son of former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, had been to Dubai and met with Dawood Ibrahim, one of the orchestrators of the Mumbai attack, and an asset of the Dubai-based drug-trafficking and money-laundering network. Tarique was also a senior official in the Begum Zia-led Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Haque reported that the former Bangladesh army intelligence chief, Maj. Gen. Rezzakul Haider Chowdhury, had accompanied Tarique to Dubai. Rezzakul Haider was fired from his job after Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed took office in January 2007, as chief advisor to the caretaker government head.

According to those reports, Tarique made several deals with Dawood in this meeting. "As per the deals, Dawood would smuggle huge caches of arms into Bangladesh for the BNP cadres for the now-postponed Bangladesh parliament elections and run Tarique's business interests in Dubai." The report also claimed that Tarique bought a property in Dubai for \$60 million, and had developed links with money-laundering operations with Dawood. The caretaker government has since put Tarique Rahman behind bars.

These realities suggest that forces within Bangladesh have set up instruments that could lead the country toward lawlessness within a very short period of time. And, if that happens, it could well turn out to be a haven for terrorists and religious zealots.