

A new reality for Bangladesh

On July 1, 2016, a terrorist attack on an upmarket café in Dhaka not only upset the tranquillity of a leafy part of the crowded town, but changed the way the world perceived political violence in Bangladesh. **Shamsad Mortuza** explains how

The victims included nine Italians, seven Japanese, one Indian, one Bangladesh-born American accompanying two locals, and two first responders. The five young attackers were from educated, privileged backgrounds whose profiles did not match those who reportedly carried out a spate of attacks on free-thinking bloggers and ethnic minorities. The men behind the Holey Artisan Bakery Café attack in Dhaka were different from both the radicalised madrasa students and the political opportunists who used petrol bombs and arson attacks to unseat the government. Their foray awakened the authorities to a new reality of homegrown terrorism, where a combination of local grievances attracted international influences, encouraging middle-class youth from mainstream secular education to become a part of transder ideological movements.

The international community responded by issuing colour-coded security alerts, making Bangladesh a potential pariah state. The presence of the Japanese victims in a mega river bridge project linked to the Asian Highway, and of the Italian nationals in the fashion industry, posed a double blow to the country, which was poised to be on a development highway, buoyed primarily by its garment exports. A country already flagged for its climate vulnerability and dangerous work environments could ill afford to have another 'scarlet letter' sewn to its map. Tropical storms periodically lash the coastal areas of the low-lying flood-prone delta, whose existence is threatened by seawater rise in the Bay of Bengal. News of deaths from fire incidents, building collapses and labour abuses in the industrial sectors are other areas in which the country's reputation suffers.

For the government, the timing of the attack was terrible. With Parliament crippled by the absent opposition parties, a terror attack one year before the national election was sure to affect its political future. The Awami League (AL) – the party that spearheaded the independence movement in 1971 – espoused secularism as one of its founding principles, while severing its ties with Pakistan. The military junta that usurped power following a massacre in 1975 reverted to Islamic ideology. In its current leg, the ruling AL's electoral manifesto involved a strategic emphasis on digitalisation, aiming to refurbish the image of Bangladesh as a nation set to graduate as a developing country, leaving behind its aid-dependent 'basket case' and least developed country (LDC) tags.

Bangladesh now supplies the most military personnel to the UN peacekeeping force. It is a Muslim majority country with the highest female labour participation. It has a \$330 billion economy that benefits from remittances sent home by its overseas workers, and

aspires to become the 24th economy in the world by 2030. The Holey Artisan attack almost spoiled this, forcing the government to adopt multifaceted responses to satisfy its development partners and international stakeholders, as well as to secure political and financial stability.

The main challenge became finding a balance between development and democracy; between maintaining economic growth, while negotiating with the voices of dissent. In responding to this attack, the country learned to leverage its economic successes for geopolitical gains to become an influential regional player.

Bangladesh responded to the crisis by re-educating itself. It learned to keep its Islamist extremism in check and attained relatively stable investment and security climates. It tried to address vulnerable groups and engage with them at strategic and cognitive levels. However, addressing the youth in an ideologically divided nation became tricky as the state's surveillance mechanism and repressive policies seemed to undermine democratic norms.

Debunking theories

Background on the Dhaka attack helps to contextualise the issue. All in their mid-twenties, the attackers drew media attention with their charisma and chauvinism. They laid an overnight siege to the café and died in front of the camera, promoting their idealistic cause. The spectacle raised concerns of copycat terror attacks. The mastermind, Taimur Choudhury, was a chemist who claimed to be a Deobandi member. His aide, Saiful Haque Sujon, attended the University of Glamorgan and was considered Dhaka's top cyber expert. Funding came from a London-based computer engineer. The militants on the ground, Nihad Islam, Rohan Imtiaz and Moez Saameh Mahabon, all attended elite private schools and universities. Their privileged backgrounds debunked the theory that only madrasa-based religious education was connected to violent extremist ideologies.

Then again, the exponential growth in the number of madrasas – including females – is a growing concern. The government's statistical wing estimates that there are 9,305 madrasas, hosting 2.55 million students, of which 1.41 million are female. Research shows that students of these institutions, irrespective of their progressive or conservative curricula, are politicised as they all want to see Bangladesh as an Islamic state. Some of the institutions, located in the political hubs of the ruling party, use government bursaries to shield themselves or pose as apolitical.

The government's promotion of female leadership and participation, religious pluralism in the name of secularism and counterterrorism tactics that

target religious leaders, do not sit well with these religious institutions. This is further aggravated by the lack of mainstream job opportunities and social mobility for graduates, with frustrations often translating into violent outbursts. At times, they are blown out of proportion and tarred with the fanatic brush. Take, for example, Benid Lartey's 2002 article, *Bangladesh: A Cross of Terrors*.

The Holey Artisan attack shed light on a different reality. Poverty is not a root cause of extremism. A 2016 Pew poll showed that affluent and educated Bangladeshi men support suicide attacks more than those from economically disadvantaged groups. This is further corroborated by the fact that extremism has increased, despite improvements in food security, healthcare and other basic services. While investigating the causes of the involvement of private university students in extremism, security personnel discovered many fundamentalist sleeper cells. In response, educational institutes were brought under state surveillance. Traditionally, universities have been the platform to promote democracy and revolutionary ideas. The Holey Artisan incident proved them to be places where Islamist and secular ideas would clash.

The problem is enhanced by the reach of the Internet, which allowed globalisation to flourish. Events in Israel or Kashmir can have a butterfly effect in Dhaka. Conversely, those who work abroad, mostly in Middle Eastern countries, are often indoctrinated or exposed to a cultural disparity. They return home with ideas foreign to our local culture of tolerance and mutual respect. The diasporic experience, urbanisation and social unrest all add to the identity crisis of a young person transitioning to adulthood. Their anger fuels international

terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and Daesh.

The government, however, desires the presence of international terror groups and employs its intelligence machinery to deal with radicalisation, extremism and terrorism. It is known for its hardcore handling of extremism and softcore community engagement programmes. It can claim considerable success in containing the aftermath of the Holey Artisan attack. However, there is a growing suspicion that the 'secular' government may deviate from its secular centre to accommodate the religiosity of its voters before the next election. In recent times, the government has shown leniency in upholding secularism and democratic principles, as well as defending minorities, which could spur on religious zealotry. The increasingly polarised environment of the country demands that the government not only monitors the political dynamics constantly, but also develops effective responses to the rise of violent extremism in Bangladesh.

One response must take education into its cognisance and bridge the madrasa/non-madrasa divide. Previous attempts to modernise madrasas prompted a mass protest that nearly toppled the government in 2013. It should aim to make education meaningful and impactful for all. A much more pragmatic outlook is required to instil cognitive excellence in our young minds. Our future generations must be given positive purposes in life so that they can learn to live with dignity and peace. □

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The Holey Artisan attack debunks the notion that poverty and a lack of education are not the root causes of extremism
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