

ISAS Brief

No. 439 – 4 July 2016

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Terror in Dhaka: Fundamentalism Spreads its Deadly Wings

The extremist attack at a Café in Dhaka, Bangladesh, was an inflection point that raised terrorism in that country to a different paradigmatic level. The article analyses why, and examines a set of possible counteractions.

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

Dhaka has been struck dumb with grief. Bangladesh, a nation of 160 million, is reeling in disbelief. A horrendous act of terror, perpetrated by an unlikely group of well-heeled youth, has shaken this capital of one of the largest Muslim nations, at its roots. On 1 July 2016, on one of the holiest days of the holy fasting month of Ramadhan in the Islamic calendar, these armed young men wrought a devastating blow to the spirit of piety, restraint and abstinence that was meant to mark this period for the Muslim faithful. Ironically this was stated to have been done in the name of Islam, a religion whose essence is said to be surrender to the notion of peace and brotherhood.

The violence cost 28 lives, including those of the perpetrators. They apparently had no demands to make, no points to negotiate and no message to deliver. Yet they sent out a message, loud and clear, for the world to note and learn. It is that the methods and manners of

¹ Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The author, not ISAS, is liable for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

terrorism are constantly morphing and progressively transforming themselves into increasingly more dangerous forms, with the societies of South Asia falling prey to their deadly clutches one by one, like a game of nine-pins. Afghanistan, Pakistan, parts of India and now Bangladesh seemed to have succumbed, one after the other to the regional variant of the global plague of terrorism.

The incident took place in an upscale café in the affluent and leafy suburb of 'Gulshan' in the capital city, which contains a major section of Dhaka's diplomatic enclave, and therefore under greater protective security, the piercing of which reflected sophisticated planning. It followed a pattern that is tragically becoming familiar in our times. A single or a number of zealots of suicidal predilections enter a popular centre of entertainment or amusement, be it a café, theatre or a park, indiscriminately killing as many as they can, or taking hostages, sometimes for negotiating a demand, and at other times for no motives at all except to take some kind of revenge. Thereafter there is usually a confrontation with the authorities, leading quite often to a shoot-out and a bloody finish, leaving the wider population in a state of extreme shock. This is in line with the goals and purposes of an act of contemporary terror. In the case of the Dhaka incident, it was rendered more tragic because the victims were selected and systematically slaughtered for no other reasons than being simply different, such as being foreigners or belonging to a different faith, though some, were of the same ilk. The siege that lasted through the night was finally brought to a close by 'Operation Thunderbolt' launched by commandos flown in from a northern district of Sylhet in the early hours of the following morning, but not before the massacre of 20 hostages, including 9 Italians and 7 Japanese nationals, had taken place within the ill-fated Café.

Once pejoratively described as a 'basket case' by Dr Henry Kissinger, Bangladesh had come a long way over the decades of its independence in 1971. Through those years it seemed to progress, even to prosper, supported by foreign friends, including Japan and Italy, marking a steady GDP growth rate of 6% or so annually, stabilising food production, performing commendably in social sectors such as health, education and women's empowerment, and now focussed on infrastructure building of roads, bridges and ports. The twin characteristics of homogeneity and a common language laid the foundation of a common culture, and the absence of any stark caste system and strident class differentiation helped build a society that was mostly tolerant with some pervasive democratic values. However, across the broad spectrum of the society the nation was deeply dichotomised between those who were prone to

emphasise secularism and an identity based principally on language and others who stressed an identity based primarily on religion, and some aspects of ‘Bangladeshi’ nationhood.

This divide is broadly but not always necessarily reflected in the two major political parties, the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina representing the first set of values, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) whose Chairperson is Begum Khaleda Zia, mainly reflecting the other. The relationship between the two ladies, and their parties, are bitter, to say the least. The left-of-centre parties tend to align themselves with the ruling AL and the right-of-centre ones, including the religious groups, with the BNP. For a variety of reasons, including some of their own making such as boycotting the 2013 elections which left them bereft of any electoral politics or activity, the BNP has become marginalised, and ineffective. Some analysts apprehend that the resultant vacuum is being filled in by the ultra-right Islamist extremists. Historically the Sunni Islam practised in Bangladesh has been syncretic and *Sufistic*, absorbing some broader religious-cultural norms of the milieu. But over time the Islamic fervour has, in some quarters, been deepened by *Wahabi* influence from the Gulf region, whose norms are more austere and far stricter. At times the more extreme of these tend to make common cause with what in today’s political terminology are known as *jihadists* locked in a fierce struggle with the non-believing infidels, or with those Muslims gone, in their perception, astray.

Over the last few months, these fundamentalist groups, including one styled as *Ansarullah Bangla Team* have been engaged in a series of targeted killings of minorities and foreigners, or of those they suspect as being atheists. These incidents are often considered isolated enough so as not to invoke a massive governmental response, individual acts of reprisals or punishment designed to inspire awe but not an overwhelming retaliation by the State. That has been the case so far. But Gulshan should have changed all that.

Sheikh Hasina has vowed to act, and would be considerably under pressure to do so, at home and abroad. This incident, the first of its kind involving hostage-taking and suicidal commitment, would most certainly necessitate a set of urgent responses from the State. Particularly so when so many of the victims have been foreigners, Italians, Japanese and an Indian. Bangladeshi economy is deeply interconnected to all these countries and any withdrawal on their part in trade or development cooperation would deal an irreparable damage to its economy, which it can ill-afford at this stage. India would also be anxious, not

just because the tragedy of having lost a national, but also because of the ramifications for neighbouring Indian States that a spread of terrorism in Bangladesh could entail.

Several measures are essential for starters. First, the debate whether the Islamic State of Iraq and Lebanon (ISIS) is involved or whether the extremists are home-grown is misplaced and should be laid to rest. Whether it is one or the other, the effect is just the same. Indeed, home-grown fundamentalism would be harder to combat as its growth would be less obvious, and like guerrillas, in another kind of warfare, with better local knowledge, as Mao Zedong had famously said better “move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea”. So governmental monitoring would actually need to be redoubled.

Secondly, the catchment area of recruitment to radicalisation has obviously widened as these youth in Dhaka were not ‘run of the mill’ madrassa students (like some of the Taliban in Pakistan) but well-educated from middle class background, globalised and well-connected, and therefore more susceptible to extremist propaganda of external origin such as those of Islamists. Therefore there is greater need to fight ideas with ideas, and hence a powerful counter-narrative to radicalisation must be developed.

Thirdly, in order to be able to do that, there is need for a much greater regional cooperation, with the need to pool the intellectual resources of the region together. Effective programmes have been evolved in countries of Southeast Asia including Singapore and these should be thoroughly examined with a view to replication. The United Nations has a number of important initiatives that must also be tapped into.

Finally, and this is a tactical point, when such an incident occurs, and sadly once it has happened there may be more such, the wherewithal for fast and effective response must be built, if necessary with external assistance. Specially trained commandos and first responders would be key capacities to be developed.

All this will not be easy to do, but much of it must be done. The efforts and struggle to put these in place will be manifold and complex, but absolutely essential. As these are being attempted, authorities must be wary that there is no unnecessary harassment to people, otherwise its very *raison d’etre* would be at risk. It would be unfair to leave the total task to the government alone. The wider community must also be a part of the endeavour. Good governance is a process in which the entirety of the nation must be involved. By definition of course, a greater responsibility will lie with the government which must deliberate, decide

and direct in providing safety and security to the community in consonance with justice and the rule of law.

.