

Killing for Blasphemy and the Ghost of al Qaeda in Bangladesh

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Abstract

While Islamist terror outfits like HUJI (B) and JMB resorted to indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians up to 2005/2006 to establish an alternative Islamic order, the vicious attack on Humayun Azad in early 2004 – purportedly by Islamists for his blasphemous anti-Islamic writings – signaled a new pattern in the realm of political assassination in Bangladesh. Afterwards assassins have killed five people for blasphemous writings against Islam. This paper sheds light on the problem of killing for blasphemy against Islam, with a view to drawing a line between ideologically motivated target killing of “blasphemers” by Muslim fanatics, and indiscriminate killing of total strangers by ideologically motivated Islamist terrorist groups. Although target killings or assassinations of “blasphemers” could be acts of terrorism, but there are compelling reasons not to assume that the ongoing killing for blasphemy in the country are acts of terrorism. In the backdrop of inadequate information, contradictory, over-simplified reports, and the dubious role of government agencies vis-à-vis the so-called Ansarullah Bangla Team (“al Qaeda affiliate”) attacks in Bangladesh, one believes there are lots of delusional cries of “Wolf” behind the curtain.

Keywords: *HUJI (B); JMB; Islamic/Islamist; Bangladesh; killing for blasphemy; Ansarullah Bangla Team; al Qaeda.*

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Introduction

There is nothing new about political violence in Bangladesh since the pre-Liberation days. There has been an unprecedented rise in political violence after the Liberation. Both state and non-state-actors kill political rivals in the name of restoring order and preserving freedom, or establishing alternative orders – Islamic or secular – respectively. Tens of thousands of people have had violent deaths in the country – including two of its heads of state –since its emergence in 1971. The process has not come to an end. The country has indeed become a “legacy of blood”, as Anthony Mascaranhas has used the expression.

The extra-judicial killings by government agencies, which began in the early 1970s, got further momentum and legitimacy after the BNP-Jamaat Government had formally introduced the state-sponsored death-squads called the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), which since then have killed hundreds of Bangladeshi civilians – suspects, criminals and innocent people. Political assassinations by non-state actors – mostly by ruling and opposition political party supporters – have become quite normative as well. These selective killings by RAB, political activists and extortionists may loosely be defined as state- and non-state actor-sponsored “terrorism”.

Bangladesh has not yet witnessed well-coordinated and large-scale terrorist attacks having international links and sponsorship. We have no reasons to believe that al Qaeda or any other international terrorist outfit ever sponsored the terrorist attacks on political rallies, movie theaters, cultural shows, law-enforcers and judges from the late 1990s to 2006. We also do not believe that the recent killings of secular bloggers in Bangladesh have anything to do with al Qaeda and its ilk. Some local terrorist leaders’ wishful thinking of having support from al Qaeda is one thing, and translating this into reality is another. Then again, pro-Awami League politicians, media, intellectuals and others have been untiringly portraying the BNP-Jamaat coalition as “pro-al Qaeda and terrorists”; we believe out of sheer political vendetta and expediency.

We know there are more than a hundred definitions of terrorism. However, the most acceptable definition of the syndrome is indiscriminate killing or terrorizing of innocent civilians with a view to realizing – or giving publicity to – an ideology or socio-political or economic cause, religious or secular. Most importantly, terrorism is not an end in itself; and unlike criminals, terrorists love to own their violent acts, and promise further attacks, even on larger scales.¹ However, terrorists also resort to target killing and assassinations *a la* Nizari Ismaili assassins in medieval Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Iran.²

Of late, we learn from media reports about a relatively new Islamist outfit called the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), also known as Ansar Bangla and Ansarullah Bahini, as the main sponsor of violent attacks on blasphemers and secular bloggers in Bangladesh. The ABT is believed to be an al Qaeda affiliate / franchise in South Asia, an offshoot of Al Qaeda in South Asia (AQIS). Interestingly, the assassins have so far only used meat cleavers (*chappatti*, in local parlance) to kill their victims, which seems to be a departure from the traditional al Qaeda methods of killing victims, firstly, indiscriminately; and secondly, with bombs and fire arms. One wonders, why professional and well-endowed terrorist outfit like al Qaeda would resort to meat cleavers to kill people. Lastly, why would al Qaeda shy away from owning its “achievements”, is very enigmatic!

This paper aims at understanding a) the concept of blasphemy in Islam with a view to understanding if Islam sanctions violent attacks on blasphemers; b) if al Qaeda and its ilk kill blasphemers; c) if we could agree with the Government version of the story (dittoed by pro-Government media and analysts), that the BNP-Jamaat coalition and Islamists and the so-called “anti-Liberation forces” are linked with al Qaeda and behind the killings of blasphemers in the country's) if we could agree with the Awami League version of the story that the BNP-Jamaat people simultaneously also belong to al Qaeda and its presumed affiliates in Bangladesh.

Conversely, we may argue that since the killers did not kill total strangers indiscriminately – as terrorists would do – but killed selected victims, mostly active

supporters of the War Crime Tribunal, did Jamaat-e-Islami workers avenge the trial and execution of some top leaders of the party as “war criminals”? We may also raise the following questions in this regard: a) Were these attacks by-products of apolitical Islamist/Islamic zealotry? b) Is Ansarullah Bangla Team an al Qaeda affiliate? And finally, c) in the backdrop of inadequate and contradictory information and reports, and the dubious role of Bangladesh Government agencies vis-à-vis the attacks, one may assume there are lies and half-truths, and lots of delusional cries of “Wolf” behind the curtain.

Blasphemy, Islam and Muslims: Bangladesh and Beyond

Although the Quran and Hadis do not sanction killing of blasphemers of Islam, given the opportunity, Muslims react violently against blasphemers, and do not hesitate to kill them. Killing for blasphemy is not a new phenomenon among Muslims; they killed blasphemers in every age, long before the birth of Islamist terrorism in the late 20th century. However, after the killing of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in November 2004 by a Dutch-Moroccan Muslim terrorist,³ and al Qaeda affiliate’s taking credit for the killing of the editor and cartoonist of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris in January 2015, for the offensive cartoons of Prophet Muhammad,⁴ people in the West started assuming that only Islamist terrorists kill blasphemers of their religion. However, there are innumerable examples of ordinary devout Muslims’ resorting to killing actual/alleged blasphemers of Islam. Soon after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, an al Qaeda affiliate in Yemen claimed responsibilities.

However, some counterterrorism experts in the West registered their reservations about the claim. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence in the US considered the video clip claiming responsibility as genuine, but had not reached a conclusion “on whether or not the claims being made in the video are valid.” The same office is skeptical about the claim that al Qaeda Chief Ayman al-Zawahiri had personally ordered the attack.⁵

The killing of Pakistani Punjab province’s Governor Salman Taseer by his devout Muslim bodyguard for the Governor’s opposition to the Blasphemy Law in Pakistan in 2011

is a glaring example in this regard. The assassin Mumtaz Qadri was not linked to any terrorist group but was an ardent follower of a Sufi School of Islam in Pakistan.⁶ While the killing of the Governor for his alleged support for blasphemy against Islam is shocking, the grassroots support for the killer among Pakistani Muslims is even more intriguing. Some Muslim clerics and their followers even refused a funeral for Taseer for his opposition to the Blasphemy Law.⁷

Popular Islam as believed and practiced by the vast majorities of Muslims everywhere – in urban and rural areas, and among highly educated and not so educated and illiterate adherents of the faith – favors death for blasphemy against Islam. One may mention Islamic parties' and individuals' demand for enacting blasphemy law in Bangladesh in this regard. At least a couple of Bangladeshi atheist writers – Daud Haider and Taslima Nasrin – had to flee the country to save their lives during the past four decades. While atheist and ultra-secular writers and bloggers in Bangladesh live in fear for their lives, five of them were hacked to death in the last two and a half-years.

One observer has aptly appraised the prevalent ambivalence of the Bangladesh Government about blasphemy law, human rights and the freedom of expression:

Although there is no blasphemy law in Bangladesh, the country follows an old British colonial act against blasphemy. Though in theory a secular democracy, the ruling government has frequently given into pressure from Islamist parties, and continues to prosecute atheists and others on malicious charges for “insult to religion” and related crimes. Section 295A of the penal code states that any person who has “deliberate” or “malicious” intent to “hurt religious sentiments” can be imprisoned and this has been used in practice to prosecute and imprison atheist and secularist activists. Similarly, the Code of Criminal Procedure includes several clauses (99a-f) that state “the government may confiscate all copies of a newspaper if it publishes anything subversive of the state or provoking an uprising or anything that creates enmity and hatred among the citizens or denigrates religious beliefs [emphasis added].”⁸

Islamist parties and individuals belonging to various pro-Islamic socio-political and cultural organizations in the country have been occasionally demanding death penalties for the blasphemers of Islam and so-called *murtads* (apostates) or freethinking intellectuals, since the 1970s; and the introduction of blasphemy law, as well. The demand for blasphemy law in Bangladesh – as raised by Islamist political parties, quasi-political groups and individuals in Bangladesh, the Jamaat-e-Islami, Movement for Islamic Constitution, clerics of Lalbagh (in Dhaka) and Hathazari (in Chittagong) madrasahs for example – has not always been religiously motivated defensive strategy to safeguard the sanctity of Islam, but it has mainly been politically motivated offensive stratagem against secular political parties, constitution and legal system in the country.

These groups often demand the tiny minority of Ahmadiyya or Qadiyani Muslims in Bangladesh be declared a non-Muslim minority community, a la Pakistan. They often attack members of the Hindu minority community, defile idols of their gods and goddesses, and destroy temples to force Hindus to emigrate to India to grab their properties, mainly in small towns and rural areas.⁹ As one report indicates, Muslim mobs destroyed several Hindu temples at Ashuganj in Brahmanbaria District in November 2014 “following an allegation that a Hindu person had defamed Muhammad on Facebook. Abuse of the ‘Blasphemy’ law to attack minority population is frequent, often in connection with content reportedly posted on social media”.¹⁰

During the mass rally at the Shahbagh Square in Dhaka by tens of thousands of Bangladeshi youths who demanded death penalties for the “War Criminals of 1971” in 2013, thousands of Islamists also took to the streets of Dhaka demanding death to the atheist bloggers. One atheist blogger Rajib Haider (aka Thaba Baba) had posted extremely offensive and vulgar postings against Islam, Prophet Muhammad and his companions, and some Islamists hacked him to death on February 15, 2013, during the beginning of the months-long Shahbagh rally. Interestingly, immediately after the killing, local media in Bangladesh revealed that some Jamaat-e-Islami activists had killed the blogger;¹¹ however, within a

month the media circulated a different version of the story, which was the Government version that implicated al Qaeda's local agents in the killing of Rajib Haider.¹² The killings of blasphemous bloggers and writers have signaled the beginning of a new dimension to the state of Islamist intolerance in Bangladesh.

As I am going to explain later, the Awami League since the 1990s has been using the bogey of Islamist terrorism, earmarking its main adversaries – the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami – as the main sponsors of terrorism in Bangladesh, the recent killings of atheist bloggers, allegedly by Islamist terrorists, have further enabled the party (which is in power since 2009) to curtail the freedom of expression in the name of countering Islamist terrorism. The latest amendment of the Information and Communication Technology (Amendment) Act (ICT Act) in Bangladesh in 2015 has further empowered the police to make arbitrary arrests of people criticizing the Government or any religion, in print or online. The convicted people could be jailed for 14 years, without any provision for parole. However, despite the amendment of the ICT Act, officially there is no blasphemy law in Bangladesh.

The overwhelming majority of Bangladeshi Muslims are very tolerant, liberal and dead against installing any Islamist party like the Jamaat-e-Islami to power. Only a miniscule minority of them has any soft corner for al Qaeda, Taliban and their ilk. Several studies have already established this fact.¹³ However, thanks to the persistent Islamization and Arabization of the polity, many Bangladeshi Muslims have tacit support for killing for blasphemy of Islam. Pakistan and several Muslim-majority countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Afghanistan and Iran have draconian blasphemy law. A brief appraisal of the Blasphemy Law in Pakistan may be an eye-opener for many.

Pakistan's Blasphemy Law is a legacy of a British colonial law introduced in 1860, but very different from the original act. While Pakistan's Blasphemy Law carries a potential death penalty for anyone who insults Islam, the maximum punishment under the 1860 law ranged from one year to 10 years in jail, with or without a fine. The British law made it a crime to disturb a religious assembly, trespass on burial grounds, insult religious beliefs and

intentionally destroy or defile a place or an object of worship. General Zia's Islamist military regime in Pakistan took full advantage of the Hate Speech Law, which was an amendment to the 1860 Act (Section 295 - A) made in 1927.¹⁴

Zia ul-Haq's administration added a number of clauses to the Law between 1980 and 1986 to further Islamize Pakistan, marginalize the Ahmadiyya community, and persecute opponents in the name of Islam. More than 1300 people – mostly non-Muslims – were accused of blasphemy during 1987 and 2014 for alleged desecration of the Qur'an and insult of the Prophet; more than 100 people were killed for committing "blasphemy"; 50 "blasphemers" got killed during their trials; and as discussed above, fanatics also killed Punjab Governor Salman Taseer and a Federal Minister Shahbaz Bhatti for their opposition to the Blasphemy Law in the recent past. Further amendments to the Law provided life sentence for desecration of the Holy Qur'an, and death penalty for blasphemy against the Prophet of Islam. The Law provides protection to only Islam and its scripture. In sum, many Pakistanis – especially members of non-Muslim minority communities and liberal Muslims – are potential victims of the draconian Blasphemy Law or murder by over-enthused "protectors of Islam".¹⁵

We know millions of Muslims throughout the world came out on street, publicly demanding death for Salman Rushdie for his grossly offensive and blasphemous writing against Prophet Muhammad, his family, and the Qur'an in *The Satanic Verses*, soon after the publication of it 1988. In February 1989, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued the famous – or "infamous", as one might take it – fatwa-to-kill not only Rushdie but also all those involved in the publication of the book for blasphemy against Islam. Although Rushdie escaped violent death for blasphemy (and the Iranian government withdrew the fatwa years after Khomeini's death), Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses*, was not that lucky. Fanatics killed him and two other translators survived murder attempts, narrowly.¹⁶

Despite worldwide condemnation of the fatwa, intolerant Muslims throughout the world welcomed the proclamation, killed many blasphemers and have not since looked back. However, many Muslim scholars considered the fatwa unjust for not allowing the accused an opportunity to defend themselves in a court of law. They held that a blasphemer of the Prophet could be killed only during the lifetime of the Prophet. However, as Khomeini has spelled out, other Muslim scholars believe that even if a blasphemer repents and becomes a pious Muslim, it is incumbent on every Muslim to kill a blasphemer of the Prophet.

Meanwhile, Islamist zealots have killed several European writers, filmmakers and cartoonists for defiling Islam, its Prophet and the Holy Qur'an, their latest victims being people associated with the Leftist satirical weekly magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, for publishing satirical and offensive cartoons of the Prophet, on January 7, 2015. Two Islamist gunmen entered the Paris headquarters of the magazine and killed 12 people, including the cartoonist.

In the backdrop of growing intolerance among uneducated and highly educated Muslims globally – having no qualms with killing blasphemers of Islam – we must not misconstrue this bigotry as a post-Rushdie or post-9/11 development. One is tempted to cite the example of the killing of Rajpal, the Hindu publisher of *Rangeela Rasool* (The Promiscuous Prophet), a book written in Urdu (and later in Hindi) by an anonymous Hindu writer in Lahore, in 1929. One Ilm-uddin, an illiterate Muslim carpenter, killed Rajpal in April and was hanged in October 1929. Thousands of Muslims attended his funeral in Lahore, and is still remembered as a hero and defender of Islam, as many Pakistani Muslims consider Qadri, the killer of Punjab Governor Taseer, a hero.¹⁷

As evident from the *Rangeela Rasool* episode in British India, Muslim support for killing for blasphemy predates Khomeini's fatwa against Rushdie. However, the Qur'an does not prescribe any punishment for blasphemers of Islam in this world, let alone death penalty. And we know the Qur'an supersedes the *Hadis* literature, local traditions, and *Shariah* law. It is noteworthy that even at the city-state of Medina – where Prophet Muhammad was the head

of state and government – we do not see any Qur’anic verse in support of severe penalty or death for blasphemers of Islam. One may cite the following Medinan verses (revealed in Medina) in this regard:

“...when you hear people denying and mocking the signs of Allah, do not sit with them until they engage in a talk other than that ...” [4:141]. “Indeed, those who abuse Allah and His Messenger - Allah has cursed them in this world and the Hereafter and prepared for them a humiliating punishment [after death]” [33:57].

The Qur’an also forbids insulting non-Muslims, their idols and religion. The following Meccan verse is very clear about it: *“And do not insult those whom they [idol worshippers] worship beside Allah, lest they, out of spite, revile Allah in their ignorance...” (6:109).*

“Killing for Blasphemy”: Some Unresolved Issues

Yet another atheist/freethinker blogger in Bangladesh was hacked to death for alleged blasphemous postings against Islam on August 7, 2015. Niladri Chattopadhyay aka Niloy Chattopadhyay was hacked to death at his home in Dhaka. In 2015 alone, four atheist bloggers got killed in the country, including the fourth victim, Niloy Chattopadhyay. On May 12, assailants hacked Ananta Bijoy Das, a blogger for Mukto-Mona website, while on his way to work in the city of Sylhet. On March 30, another secular blogger Wyasiquir Rahman got killed at the hands of three killers in Dhaka, who also hacked him to death with cleavers. Avijit Roy, a prominent Bangladeshi-American blogger, was the first victim of the year. On February 26, unknown assailants killed him while walking with his wife outside Dhaka University, not far from armed police guards in close vicinity, and in front of hundreds of onlookers.¹⁸ Avijit Roy’s widow Bonya Ahmed blames Bangladeshi police inaction for the death of her husband: “While Avijit and I were being ruthlessly attacked, the local police stood close by and did not act”.¹⁹

It appears from some eyewitness account that armed police guards in close proximity could have saved Roy's life and arrested the assailants. Then again, there are contradictory stories about the possible identity of the killers. While the victim's father Ajoy Roy blames the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh for the killing of his son, the police arrested one Shafiur Rahman Farabi, an Islamist blogger and member of a proscribed Islamist party in Bangladesh, the Hizbut Tahrir. Farabi had posted a threat against Mr. Roy on Facebook in 2014, writing: "Avijit lives in America. It is not possible to kill him now. But he will be killed when he will be back in the country."²⁰ This, however, does not prove Farabi was the killer.

There was another puzzling information in media about as to who had killed bloggers Avijit Roy in 2015, Rajib Haider in 2013 and a couple of "blasphemers" in Pakistan. According to the *New York Times*:

In a nine-minute video posted on jihadist forums on Saturday, the leader of the branch [Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent or AQIS], Asim Umar, said followers of his group were responsible for the killing of several people he called blasphemers: Mohammad Shakil Auj, an Islamic scholar fatally shot in Karachi, Pakistan, in 2014; Aniq Naz, a Pakistani blogger; Rajib Haider, a blogger killed in a machete attack in Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital, in 2013; and Mr. Roy [emphasis added].²¹

However, as mentioned above, some counterterrorism experts and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in the US are skeptical about al Qaeda's involvement in the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris, despite al Qaeda's claiming responsibility for the attack through its video clips. Similarly, we have reasons to question the veracity of the claim made on a video clip by Asim Umar of the al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in May 2015 that an AQIS franchise in Bangladesh, the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) killed Avijit Roy and Rajib Haider. The AQIS circulated the video in May, three months after the killing of the blogger Roy in February.

The ABT also claimed it was behind the killing of Ananta Bijoy Das in May 2015 in Sylhet, who was a blogger and an organizer of local *Gana Jagoran Mancha*, which spearheaded the youth movement for the rapid trial and execution of “War Criminals” in Bangladesh. One Bangladeshi media outlet reveals: “A Twitter profile claiming to be of extremist group ‘Ansar Bangla 8’ said the al-Qaeda in Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) claimed responsibility for the killing. A purported AQIS message warned of killing of more ‘atheist bloggers’. ‘We don't forget and we will NOT forget others who insult our beloved Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Allah (S:),’ the message read.”²²

Then again, unlike media in Bangladesh, Western media and established literature on terrorism and counterterrorism hardly mention the so-called Ansarullah Bangla Team or ABT. We find only one link on the Internet, which gives a very short account of the ABT as an “al Qaeda inspired Islamist extremist group in Bangladesh”. It is noteworthy that the group is not known as an “*al Qaeda affiliate*” but as an “*al Qaeda inspired Islamist extremist group*”. The group came into being in 2007 as the *Jama'at-ul Muslemin* (Party of Muslims), funded by various NGOs. We also learn from the link that: “The group ceased to operate when funding ended. It resurfaced during 2013 as the ABT”. We also learn that: “On 12 August 2013 Bangladeshi authorities arrested the leader of the ABT, Mufti Jasimuddin Rahmani, with 30 members from Barguna (south western district in Bangladesh) for inciting a jihad at mosques. ABT is a banned”.²³

It is interesting that despite its obscurity as an Islamist terrorist group internationally or regionally across South Asia, thanks to the Government and media publicity of the ABT in Bangladesh, it appears to be a formidable terrorist group in South Asia. And we know, very similar to the ABT, (which is an “al Qaeda inspired” terrorist group) two al Qaeda-inspired terrorist outfits – not al Qaeda affiliates – in Bangladesh, the *Harkat-ul Jihad* Bangladesh (HUJI-B) and *Jamaat-ul Mujahedeen* Bangladesh (JMB) made random bomb attacks and killed several people in the country, in the last decade.

There is nothing so unusual about the latest spate of attacks on atheist bloggers in Bangladesh. In February 2004, Islamist zealots attacked Bangladeshi freethinker, writer-cum-academic Professor Humayun Azad with meat cleavers, who later died in Germany. Blasphemy against Islam seems to be the only reason why fanatics attacked Azad. Islamists would have killed Daud Haider and Taslima Nasrin for their anti-Islamic writings. As the Bangladesh Government could not ensure their safety, both of them had to leave the country in absolute haste, Haider in 1973 and Nasrin in 1994.

As international terrorism experts suspect the authenticity of the so-called AQIS video (oddly came out three months after the killing of Avijit Roy) that claims its “Bangladesh affiliate” ABT’s involvement in the killing of bloggers, so do Western media and think tanks raise some pertinent questions in this regard. A U.S.-based Search for International Terrorist Entities (SITE) – a private intelligence group – has already rejected the AQIS claim as farfetched. As a *New York Times* reporter is skeptical about the veracity of the so-called AQIS video,²⁴ so does a reporter of the *Los Angeles Times*:

Ansarullah Bangla has also claimed responsibility for Roy’s death, using a Twitter account *that police have not been able to verify as genuine....* Lt. Col. Abul Kalam Azad, director of the intelligence wing of Bangladesh’s Rapid Action Battalion, a police anti-terrorism unit, said *his force was unsure of the video’s claims. “We first need to check from where and which link the video was uploaded and to see if it is a fake ID”* [emphasis added].²⁵

In view of the above, we can only be skeptical about the authenticity of the so-called AQIS video. We have reasons to assume that: a) the video cannot be authentic; the claim was phony, al Qaeda did not kill the blogger; b) the AQIS’s taking credit for killing someone with meat cleavers would have smacked of its weakness, not strength; c) it is least likely that al Qaeda – which staged the 9/11 attacks – is desperately trying to get some publicity, and that too two months after the killing of a blogger in Bangladesh; and c) some vested interest group might have produced the video to get some dividends by raising a false alarm about al

Qaeda's presence in Bangladesh. We may perhaps raise the question if the purported AQIS video was another political ploy or a false flag operation!

There are other loopholes in the stories narrated by law-enforcers and various other government agencies in Bangladesh about various aspects of the killings of blasphemers, identities of suspects, dates and places of their arrests as they are sometimes contradictory, sensational and unbelievable. The following examples may be cited in this regard.

From a RAB press release it appears that it arrested three people – members of the proscribed Ansarullah Bangla Team – in connection with the killings of Avijit Roy and Ananta Bijay Das, and that the planner Touhidur Rahman is a British citizen.²⁶ People also learned from the RAB press release:

A British man has admitted planning the murders of two secular bloggers who were hacked to death in Bangladesh, according to the country's antiterrorist organisation. Touhidur Rahman, 58, admitted that he was an active member of the outlawed Islamist group Ansarullah Bangla Team and had "planned" the killings of Avijit Roy in February in the capital city Dhaka and Ananta Bijoy Das in May in the Northern city of Sylhet.²⁷

However, another news report reveals that Nasera Begum, a sister of the arrested British citizen Touhidur Rahman in a press release contradicted the RAB story. She insisted her brother had been arrested not in August but in May 2015, and his family had already filed a general diary with Dhanmondi Police Station in Dhaka that very day and lodged complaints with the local police station, and the National Human Rights Commission about this abduction/arrest of Touhidur Rahman. The National Human Rights Commission Chairman Mizanur Rahman backed her claim, saying that he had received the complaint over a month ago. The RAB, however, insisted that they had arrested these people on August 18, 2015, days after the killing of Niladri Chattopadhyay in Dhaka.²⁸

The arrests of three lawyers on charge of financing terrorism in Bangladesh are also examples of police and RAB highhandedness and harassment of people without substantial

evidences to implicate them in terrorist activities. On August 18, 2015, the RAB arrested two Supreme Court lawyers and one judge court lawyer, Shakila Farjana, Liton Hasan and Mahfuz Chowdhury, on charges of “militant funding”, as they had deposited a total of TK 10.8 million to one Muniruzzaman’s bank account. The account holder is alleged to be a past member of an Islamist terror outfit called Shahid Hamza Brigade. The prosecution told journalists that the accused had “in their statements indirectly confessed to their involvement in financing a militant outfit”. However, the defense alleged “several breaches of law” before taking its clients’ “confessional statements”. The accused were not allowed to talk with their attorneys and “were escorted by a good number of Rab and police personnel”.²⁹

The London-based International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU)’s skepticism in reacting to reportage on the process of justice in Bangladesh is very significant. The IHEU urges *caution* “regarding information coming from Bangladesh media and authorities on the killings”:

It should be noted that: the arrests since Niloy Neel’s murder are said not to relate to this case but to previous cases of the murders of Avijit Roy and Ananta Bijoy Das; information on why any of these new individual arrests were made, on what evidence, how or even whether they are linked to any of the other individual arrests, is very scarce; some individuals previously arrested in connection with the murders and “paraded” for the media have subsequently been released without charge; no individual held in conjunction with any of the blogger murders has been convicted or even put on trial; the infamous Rapid Action Battalion (which has a reputation as a government “death squad”) have variously arrested disparate individuals in connection with the murders of Ahmed Rajib Haider (only this year, though he was killed in 2013) and the case of Washiqur Rahman (when two men were caught at the scene). In these cases the authorities are quick to “parade” those arrested, photographing them flanked by police figures and exhibited in the media....The burden is on the Bangladeshi authorities to demonstrate, fairly and lawfully, that any of these arrests is credible and justiciable [emphasis added].³⁰

In the above backdrop of contradictory and hyped up police and RAB statements on the killings of bloggers, arrests of suspects and the portrayal of the ABTas an al Qaeda affiliate are anything but credible, convincing, and “justiciable”, to paraphrase the IEHU report in this regard. We may take these reports as by-products of the present Government’s desperation for legitimacy. One may just add two news reports and statements of two renowned Bangladeshi citizens from mere two issues of a national daily to highlight the prevailing situation in Bangladesh, where violence has almost reached its peak, the freedom of expression is fast disappearing, and there is no accountability of the law enforcers, and the judiciary is anything but neutral and free.

The *Daily Star* of Bangladesh reports, the High Court has rejected a petition to revoke the contentious Amendment to the ICT Act in August 2015, especially the draconian Section 57 of the Act. In the same issue of the daily, we find renowned jurist Dr Kamal Hussain registering his concern at the level of violence Bangladesh has been going through in recent years: “Violence has reached epidemic proportions in our country today. Women, children and innocent people are falling victim to this violence”.³¹ We also find in the same issue of the daily BNP Chairperson and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia’s appeal to the United Nations to probe the “disappearances” of people in Bangladesh.³² Of late hundreds of Bangladeshis – mainly leaders and activists of opposition parties and ordinary people – have “disappeared”, and most of them never return to their families. One may cite another renowned Bangladeshi economist, Professor Rehman Sobhan, who is very worried about the fast disappearing freedom of expression in the country. He states publicly that he is worried about the state of unfreedom in the country:

*Today when I write an article, it takes me one week and five readings of censorship before I am ready to publish it. I have to think of every word I write today as everyone else in independent Bangladesh. But when we were fighting the martial law we could sit on the desk and write in two hours [emphasis added].*³³

Now, one may consider Khaleda Zia's statement politically motivated, hence not objective and credible. However, one cannot brush aside Kamal Hussain's and Rehman Sobhan's statements as subjective or politically motivated. Most Bangladeshis across the board – irrespective of their political affiliations – consider them highly respectable, patriotic citizens of the country. They may be considered as two of the most honorable founding fathers of Bangladesh. And their assessments of the country as one of the most violent with declining freedom of expression help us understand the problem of killings for blasphemy in the backdrop of the prevalent crises of identity, governance, and legitimacy of the Hasina Government.

In view of the prevalent political chaos, and the questions people raise about the legitimacy of January 2014 parliamentary elections that brought the Awami League to power, it is hardly surprising that the ruling party would raise the bogey of al Qaeda and “impending” terrorist attacks in Bangladesh for the sake of legitimacy; and for diverting people's attention elsewhere. Again, the over-polarized polity of the country – sharply divided between the pro- and anti-Awami League camps – in accordance with the political culture of Bangladesh, also promotes mutual name calling of political rivals as terrorists and gangs of killers. Hence, the portrayal of the BNP-Jamaat leaders as “al Qaeda agents”! This, however, is not a new phenomenon in the country.

The Awami League Government made three amendments to the Information and Communication Technology (Amendment) Act (ICT Act) in 2009, 2013 and 2015. Section 57 of the amended Act of 2015 criminalized “publishing fake, obscene or defaming information in electronic form” as “non-bailable” offense, and the maximum penalty was extended to 14-year imprisonment, and the maximum fine could be as high as Tk 10 million. Hasina's Information Minister Hasanul Haque Inu recently warned people to “be careful” about hurting religious sentiments and breaching privacy of people in Bangladesh in the name of exercising their freedom of expression.³⁴ The Act is, however, not going unchallenged. Human rights activists, lawyers, intellectuals, journalists and politicians

belonging to the Opposition have challenged certain provisions of the Act – especially Section 57 – unconstitutional. One accused has recently appealed against the Act to the High Court.³⁵

It is noteworthy that although Prime Minister Hasina had been opposed to enacting a blasphemy law, in August 2013 – following the Islamist demand for blasphemy law to take harsher measures against blasphemers of Islam – her government amended the Information and Communication Technology (Amendment) Act (ICT Act), which amounts to creating a de facto blasphemy law in the country. Section 57 in the Amendment of the Act in 2015 has given the police unprecedented and excessive power to arrest anyone for making “disparaging remarks” on the Prime Minister and the Government, and for hurting the religious sentiment of people, in print or online. The highest punishment for offences covered by the law would be increased from 10 years to 14 years under the amended Act. In addition, the offences would be considered as non-eligible for bail. The Geneva-Paris based World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), the Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), a human rights organization in Bangladesh, among others, urged the Bangladesh Government to repeal this hurriedly enacted law.³⁶

One wonders if the recent surge in blasphemous / anti-Islamic online postings by bloggers and the spate of fatal attacks on blasphemous bloggers in the country have precipitated the controversial amendment of the ICT Act; or, if the Government quite expediently took advantage of the blasphemous postings and killings of blasphemers to justify the amendment of the Act! Unfortunately, we do not have any clue. We need a satisfactory answer to the questions if some new Islamist terror group, an offshoot al Qaeda or ISIS, has been behind all the killings of atheist and anti-Islamic bloggers in Bangladesh; or if the country is witnessing the same old cat-and-mouse game between the state machinery and civil society on one side, and some delusional local terrorist groups like HUJI (B) and JMB on the other!

In sum, there is no room for appraising the killing of blasphemers of Islam in isolation; merely as a by-product of “growing” Islamist militancy in the country. We simply cannot understand these attacks in isolation as Islamist terrorism, let alone, al Qaeda-sponsored ones. They are by-products of the prevalent political crisis, and symptoms of the uncertainties the country is heading towards, further intensifying state- and non-state-sponsored terrorism and violence. Thanks to some foreign and Bangladeshi journalists’, academics’ and politicians’ unsubstantiated and motivated writings and statements, people within and beyond Bangladesh perceive the country a fertile breeding ground of Islamist terrorism, or “a cocoon of terror”, as Bertil Lintner used the expression in his sensational and grossly motivated article in 2002.³⁷

On the Brink of a Neo-Islamist Chaos!

As discussed above, there is hardly anything new about the violent attacks on blasphemers against Islam in Bangladesh. Thanks to the IT Revolution, there has been a proliferation of anti-Islamic writings in the Internet. Bloggers and computer savvy young atheists and Islamophobes have replaced their counterparts in the yester years, writers like Daud Haider, Taslima Nasrin and Humayun Azad. However, one who intimately knows the various facets of Islamic and Islamist movements in Bangladesh in historical and contemporary, socio-political and economic perspectives, experiences a strange déjà vu moment; there seems to be some striking similarities between the present state of political crisis and what the country went through in the 1970s.

Since the installation of the military-led Caretaker Government in January 2007 – which was actually a military coup with tacit and active support from some politicians, bureaucrats, and members of the civil society – Bangladesh is confronting new problems and challenges, and certain unexplainable maladies. While the problems in the 1970s were problems of food shortage, poverty and civil-military relations; since 1980s, the crises of identity and governance --aggravated by unbridled corruption in the public and private

sectors – have turned Bangladesh into one of the most turbulent and unpredictable countries in the world.

It is noteworthy that ever since the installation of the Awami League-led Government in 2008, the country has experienced unprecedented levels of state- and non-state-sponsored violence, perpetrated by law-enforcers, students, and supporters of various political parties. Meanwhile, the unprecedented brutal killing of 57 Army officers, including a major general, purportedly by BDR troops on February 25, 2009 remains a mystery. As discussed earlier, while the Government has recently amended the ICT Act to introduce more restrictions on the freedom of expression, even in the social media, sections of intellectuals, civil society and journalists are getting restless. Meanwhile, the civil society, teachers, journalists, students and others have also been sharply polarized between pro- and anti-Awami League camps.

Certain unnecessary controversies created by the Government since 2008 have brought the country on the threshold of an uncertain future. Democracy, accountability and the rule of law have almost disappeared from the country. One may mention the following events and developments in this regard: the hasty amendment of the Constitution to scrap the provision for a caretaker government to hold the parliamentary elections; the formation of the so-called International War Crime Tribunal, especially the controversial trial process and the “Skype-Scandal”; the disappearance of hostile witnesses; mass arrests of opposition politicians on flimsy and unprovable charges; closing down of pro-Opposition newspapers and TV channels; disappearance of opposition leaders; and last but not least, the holding of the farcical Parliamentary Elections in January 2014 and the formation of a tame and loyal Opposition Party – former military dictator Ershad’s wife as the Leader of Opposition in Parliament. Rehman Sobhan has aptly elucidated the situation in the following manner:

Instead, we have built a more inegalitarian society than we inherited, where the fruits of independence have been appropriated by a narrow elite who have come to dominate the economic and political life of contemporary Bangladesh. For such acts of betrayal to the ethos of the liberation struggle, we remain condemned to an era of political divisiveness and social

unrest which has compromised the sustainability of the democratic process in contemporary Bangladesh.³⁸

Rehman Sobhan's above observation is not particularly applicable to what Bangladesh is experiencing since the formation of the Awami League-led government in 2008 or 2014. Not long after the Liberation, Bangladeshis across the board started witnessing the sharp decline in the law and order situation, mass poverty and the "appropriation of the fruits of independence by a narrow elite", as Rehman Sobhan has used the expression. No sooner had the Pakistani occupation army been defeated than the "narrow elite" – who usurped the Liberation War – became dominant socially, politically and economically. In view of the unprecedented and unbridled corruption by ruling elites, businessmen, bureaucrats, police, and members of the judiciary – paradoxically, in the wake of the overthrow of the corrupt dictatorship of General Ershad in December 1990 – the country may be compared with what an American economic adviser thought of chaotic Greece in 1946: "corruption is rampant and the civil service is a farce ... the wealthy escape taxes and the [prime minister] is inept. There really is no state here in the Western concept, only a loose hierarchy of politicians who care only about their power struggles and lining their pockets".³⁹

The violent overthrow of the first civilian government by the military, in alliance with sections of the ruling party stalwarts in August 1975, signaled a new beginning in Bangladesh – socially, politically, and economically. While Islam re-emerged as the state ideology, socialism and secularism practically disappeared as integral parts of the four-pronged State Ideology of the country. "The failure of the welfare state", or the promised utopia of Golden Bengal, due to several domestic and international factors (well beyond Sheikh Mujib's ability to alter or influence), brought political Islam to the forefront as the main state ideology, along with capitalism and democracy.⁴⁰ However, the trial and error process to introduce a hybrid democracy by accommodating Islam and military rule under the generals (Zia and Ershad) did not democratize Bangladesh but Islamized and militarized the polity, to a large extent. We need to understand what followed the emergence of Bangladesh up to the end of the Cold

War – within and beyond Bangladesh – for an understanding of Islamization and over-polarization of the polity of Bangladesh.

The period between 1973 and 1990, between the Arab-Israeli War and the end of the Cold War in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was eventful and interesting, globally and with regard to Bangladesh. It was the period of the ascendancy of the petro-dollar in the Arab World, and the rise of political Islam under the aegis of America and its allies in the West and East to fight the Soviet occupation army in Afghanistan. In Bangladesh, the Awami League was fast losing ground and popularity, and eventually lost power in August 1975; the secular/socialist forces were either joining the BNP or remained divided and marginalized; and Islam-oriented parties and people – many of them were erstwhile collaborators of the Pakistani occupation army in 1971 – swelling the ranks of the BNP and re-organized the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Islamist vanguard party of South Asia. For the Awami League and the “leftist” elements in the party – who in late 1972 created the JSD (National Socialist Party) as an alternative to the Awami League – the period was one of despair and desperation. Most importantly, the “secular/socialist” Awami League and JSD were marginalized, leaderless entities with frustrated and renegade followers, until the end of the Cold War.

The end of the Cold War signaled the end of America’s interest in Islam, Mujahedeen and Jihad. The West was gradually distancing itself from political Islam. The ascendancy of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1996, and Pakistan’s emergence as the first nuclear-armed country in the Muslim World in 1998, shocked America. India also considered these developments as security threats. The 1990s came as a period of rejuvenation for the Awami League. Although the party failed to capture power through the elections of 1991, it polled enough votes to challenge the BNP Government under Khaleda Zia. The 1990s ushered in the period of political polarization between the supporters of Islam-oriented BNP and the relatively secular (and perceived as pro-Indian) Awami League.

After Khaleda Zia became the Prime Minister – for the first time in 1991– thanks to

Sheikh Hasina's refusal to accept the election results gracefully, the Awami-BNP cleavage widened further; and Bangladesh since then is an over-polarized country. The vast majority of people here consider their respective party or leader superior to others. Every party is a conglomerate of factions led by their respective faction chiefs or patrons a la village or peasant communities. And the major parties like the Awami League, BNP and Jatiya Party of Ershad are like tribes. While giving mere lip service to democracy, leaders of these parties behave like tribal chiefs, and their followers like tribesmen, although not with unflinching loyalty or permanent commitment to the leaders. Opportunism or pragmatism – hardly any ideology – which may be translated as prospects of getting due or undue favor from the patrons keeps the patron-client relationship alive. The bond between the leaders and their followers of Islam-oriented parties and groups, the Jamaat-e-Islami, Khilafat Majlis and Hefazat-e-Islam, for example, is more ideological than opportunistic or pragmatic.

Since elections in Bangladesh at local and national levels are not always credible to analysts and experts at home and abroad since the Parliamentary Elections in 1973, democracy has remained dysfunctional. People lost faith in the entire election process, from the preparation of the voters' list to the polling and counting of votes. Although the introduction of the provision of a Neutral Caretaker Government in the Constitution to hold parliamentary elections in the country in 1996 improved the situation, yet those who could not get elected to power, questioned the fairness of the polling process and counting of votes. The abrupt removal of the Caretaker provision from the Constitution by the Awami League Government in 2010 has further aggravated the situation. As reported in Bangladeshi and foreign print and electronic media, the parliamentary elections of January 2014, which the major opposition parties, including the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami boycotted, were preceded and followed by countrywide violent protests, arson and killing of hundreds of people by law-enforcers and political activists. The Elections were one-sided, hence farcical. The Election Commission declared more than 50 percent of candidates – 153 out of the total 300 – elected unopposed. They belong to the ruling Awami League party and its coalition partners. The elections were followed by scores of *hartals* (general strikes), and violent

killings of people by law-enforcers and rioting mobs, up to March/April 2014 and on the first anniversary of the Elections in early 2015.⁴¹

Meanwhile, since the beginning of the process of the trial and execution of “War Criminals” (mostly belonging to the Jamaat-e-Islami) of the 1971 Liberation War began in 2010, Islamists became agitated against the Awami League-led Government. As discussed above, the offensive anti-Islamic online postings by atheist bloggers further agitated Islamists and anti-Awami League people across the board. The meteoric rise of an Islamist movement, called the Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh (Movement for the Defense of Islam in Bangladesh) under the leadership of Allama Shafi, a leading Islamic scholar from Hathazari Madrasah in Chittagong almost paralyzed Dhaka city in May 2013. The alleged killing of hundreds of Hefazat supporters (mostly poor and orphan madrasah students and teachers) by law-enforcers in the wee hours of May 5 2013 and the killing of anti-Islamic blogger Rajib Haider further polarized the country. The period between November 2013 and March 2015 was one of anarchy and it seemed the country was on the verge of a major civil war.⁴²

The dysfunctional state of Bangladesh has become a breeding ground of Islamist anarchy and terrorism. The frequent cry wolf by some local politicians and foreign journalists and analysts about the bogey of al Qaeda in Bangladesh has convinced many that the country is almost ready for an Islamist takeover under al Qaeda or the Islamic State. Some Bangladeshi politicians and intellectuals joined Western media and analysts who had manufactured the bogey of Islamist takeover of countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh in the wake of the Cold War in early 1990s. After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 1996 – on the pretext of some Bangladeshi Islamist’s wishful thinking about staging a Taliban-type revolution in the country⁴³ – hyped up fear mongering about an “impending” Islamist takeover of Bangladesh became a political gimmick and publicity stunt of some politicians in the country. An elucidation of why the Awami League and its allies are playing the Islamist card is essential to understand if “Islamist takeover” of Bangladesh is real or just an imaginary threat! We need to raise the question if the Awami League and its allies portray the

BNP-Jamaat Alliance as a harbinger of Islamist takeover of the country is a political ploy to marginalize their political rivals to legitimize themselves as the only alternative forces to save democracy and secularism in the country, or there is some truth behind this allegation.

Western analysts like Bertil Lintner and Eliza Griswold were among the leading alarmist journalists/analysts in the last decade, which loved to portray Bangladesh as a country on the verge of an Islamist takeover, Christine Fair and Seth Oldmixon, among others, are the new alarmists. Fair suggests that since Islamist militancy in Bangladesh draws very little attention of scholars and policy analysts in the US, the State Department does not pay any attention to the existence of the HUJI and JMB in the country. Fair and Oldmixon even cite a recent article that suggests Bangladesh could be infected by the Islamic State (ISIS). They also cite a PIPA sample survey of 1,000 Bangladeshis (done in 2009), suggesting that around 59 percent of Muslim Bangladeshis believe Islam and democracy are not compatible.⁴⁴

Prime Minister Hasina seems to be persistent that while the BNP-Jamaat Alliance is in cahoots with al Qaeda and its ilk, her party is the only antidote to the Islamist fanatics. Nevertheless, she and her followers never mention that in January 2006, the Awami League leadership signed a memorandum of understanding, which was a political alliance to contest the 2006 Parliamentary Elections (which did not take place) with a view to ensuring Shariah law in Bangladesh, with an Islamist party, the Bangladesh Khilafat Majlis. As per the agreement, an Awami League-led government would enact laws declaring the Ahmadiyya community a non-Muslim minority; a Blasphemy Law to protect the sanctity of Islam; and make fatwas (decrees from Muslim clerics) legally binding.⁴⁵

The Islamist Threat: Real or Imaginary?

A cover story by the *Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER)* in April 2002 is another reflection of the alarmist view about Islamist takeover of Bangladesh. The *FEER* story did not comfort the liberal democrats and secular people. According to Bertil Lintner, the

Thailand-based Swedish journalist:

A revolutionis taking place in Bangladesh that threatens trouble for the region and beyond if left unchallenged. Islamic fundamentalism, religious intolerance, militant Muslim groups with links to international terrorist groups, a powerful military with ties to the militants, the mushrooming of Islamic schools churning out radical students, middle class apathy, poverty and lawlessness—all are combining to transform the nation.⁴⁶

Citing the indifference and complacency of the Bangladeshi middle classes and government about the “impending threat” of Talibanization of the polity, the report considers the electoral success of the Jamaat-e-Islami, having seventeen seats in the three-hundred-member parliament and two ministers in the cabinet of the BNP-led coalition government, ominous. However, no sooner had Sheikh Hasina of the opposition Awami League blamed the BNP-Jamaat coalition government for the “prevalent terrorist image” of Bangladesh than Prime Minister Khaleda Zia blamed Hasina’s party for “planting” the FEER story.⁴⁷

A similar sensational report came out in the *Wall Street Journal* (April 2, 2002) titled, “In Bangladesh, as in Pakistan, a Worrisome Rise in Islamic Extremism.” “Militant groups with links with international terrorists” and “powerful military with ties to militants” are said to have mobi- lized Islamic militants in the country. One wonders if there is a link between such sensational writings and what Sheikh Hasina and her party had been telling the world, vilifying the BNP and its allies as “Islamic fundamentalists” and as local agents of Osama bin Laden. Curiously, the report portrayed the Awami League as “left-leaning and secular,” ignoring how the party since the early 1990s had been projecting itself as a champion of Islam and how Sheikh Hasina donned the Islamic hijab on the eve of the 1996 parliamentary elections. The pro-Awami League sympathy of the reporter was further reflected in the writer’s corroboration of Sheikh Hasina that the BNP- led coalition government, which came to power after “ousting,” not “defeating” the Awami League, had established “a reign of terror across the country.” The reporter blamed the BNP-led government as “anti-Hindu” and “pro-fundamentalist.” It is curious that he blamed the Harkat-ul-Jihad al Islami behind the

threats against Taslima Nasrin in 1993 and for “the attempted murder” of popular poet Shamsur Rahman in 1999.

One has reasons to agree with Enayetullah Khan, the late editor of weekly *Holiday*, that the so-called attack on the poet was a sham and that he had “lost his face as a tool of propaganda.” Khan pointed out Bertil Lintner’s “Indian connection” for embellishing his article “with Indian intelligence quotes as credible evidence of the Harkat-ul-Jihad nexus between Pakistan and Bangladesh through the intermediation of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan.”⁴⁸ In an editorial, the *Daily Star* (Bangladesh) considered the *FEER* article prejudiced, one-sided and highly irresponsible.⁴⁹ Among several Western observers, Mary Anne Peters, U.S. ambassador to Bangladesh, was very critical of the *FEER* and the *Wall Street Journal* for publishing such biased articles on Bangladesh, “a liberal Muslim” nation. She felt that investigation was essential to find out the truth behind the story.⁵⁰

Interestingly, Sheikh Hasina publicly stated in 2001 that two cabinet ministers belonging to the Jamaat represented the Taliban. She told this to a BBC reporter in the United States. Another Awami League leader, former foreign minister Abdus Samad Azad, told the same thing to the visiting British Prime Minister Tony Blair in Dhaka.⁵¹ However, one cannot single out the BNP as an ally of the Jamaat, as the Jamaat and Awami League were together against the BNP government during 1991 and 1996.

It seems plausible that the circulation of an English booklet on the eve of President Clinton’s trip to Bangladesh in March 2000 by the Awami League Government was another attempt to vilify the BNP-led opposition group as “Islamist terrorist,” a *bête noire* to the United States. It was also an attempt to establish the Awami League as the only liberal democratic alternative in the country. The booklet contained sensational information about the “impending threat” of terrorist attacks on Clinton by Islamic militants. One is not sure if this led to the cancellation of the President’s scheduled trip to a village around 30 kilometers off Dhaka to meet female members of a local NGO. It is also widely believed that the Awami

League Government resorted to the same trick immediately after September 11 (on the eve of the parliamentary elections of October 2001) by pasting posters on city walls in Dhaka, portraying BNP leaders as “pro-Taliban,” and “friends of Osama bin Laden”. Senior Awami League leaders and ministers often lambast the BNP, Khaleda Zia and Jamaat-e-Islami for their alleged links with al Qaeda, Taliban and Islamist militancy in Bangladesh in the Parliament.⁵²

It seems the major “liberal democratic” parties of Bangladesh have been competing against each other to prove their Islamic credentials. Again, contrary to conventional wisdom, Islamism is no longer the monopoly of the mullah. In Bangladesh, the bulk of the Jamaat-e-Islami cadres, if not the leaders, are not madrasah-educated mullahs, but are from the various petty bourgeois classes representing the middle and poor peasantry, petty businessmen and shopkeepers, school teachers and other underemployed and unemployed classes.⁵³ The BNP and Awami League, on the other hand, use the Islamic card firstly to neutralize the Jamaat; and secondly to appease the vast majority of God-fearing and anti-Indian Bangladeshi Muslims for the sake of political legitimacy and leverage against the Awami League, popularly perceived as “pro-Indian”.

On February 14 2014, an old podcast by Ayman al-Zawahiri surfaced in Bangladesh. It was vitriolic toward the Awami League (AL) Government for its “anti-Islamic” and “pro-Indian” policies, and for its alleged killing of “thousands” of Muslim clerics in Bangladesh in the recent past. Zawahiri urged Bangladeshi Muslims to organize an Intifada, or violent mass protest, against the Government, to establish an Islamic state in the long run.⁵⁴

Interestingly, days after the circulation of al Zawahiri’s podcast on Bangladesh, homegrown Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) terrorists are said to have re-emerged with full vigor and ferocity in the country. This is what we have been hearing from the government since February 23rd. The story has two parts. The first part tells us that on February 23rd several JMB gunmen attacked a prison van on a highway in Mymensingh District, and killed one policeman, seriously injured three others, and rescued the three JMB

convicts who had been on their way to a court in Mymensingh to testify in another trial. All three had been sentenced for their terrorist acts, committed in 2005. The second part beats the imagination of the most imaginative Bollywood playwright. Good actors played their role while the plot was weak, and direction lousy. We hear that soon after the commando-style attack on the prison van (mysteriously, guarded by only four policemen), the gunmen fled with the three convicts; and unexpectedly the police arrested one of the rescued prisoners, Rakib Hasan on the same day. Then, we learn, the convict was killed in a gunfight with police near Tangail on February 24th.⁵⁵

Then again, people within and beyond Bangladesh know the so-called “cross fire” or “gunfight” is a euphemism for state-sponsored extra-judicial killing of suspects through “death squads”. We think the Government circulated this incredible story; weeks after the Awami League had come to power through a farcical and uncontested Parliamentary Elections on January 5, to divert people’s attention from the opposition demand for fresh elections.

However, the most startling part of the story is about some local Awami League leaders’ involvement in the ambush of the prison van to rescue JMB convicts. This turns the Government version of the story into a fairy tale. In a crowded press briefing at Uttara RAB Headquarters in Dhaka one of the arrested suspects of the abduction of JMB prisoners case, Kamal Hossain alias Sabuj told the reporters that he was involved with “Awami League politics”, an Upazila-level (upazila is an administrative unit) Jubo League (youth front of Awami League) leader, and that he had arranged the escape of JMB’s kingpin in Mymensingh. He also told the press that Ataur Rahman Kamal, Joint Secretary of Bhaluka Upazila Jubo League, had formed a team of six people to snatch away Rakib, the JMB “kingpin” of Mymensingh district.⁵⁶

Then again, the resurgence of the JMB could not be just a figment of the imagination. This Ahl-e-Hadis Islamist terror outfit, similar to the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) of Pakistan, is not dead but dormant. It has around 1,000 active workers, mostly in the “Ahl-e-Hadis belt” in

North Bengal and Greater Mymensingh. Its current strategy is to re-build the outfit into a Taliban-like organization to take over a district in northwest Bangladesh to establish a Shariah-based state. It does not share Jamaat-e-Islami's non-violent means to capture state power, and considers the Jamaat a deviant, anti-Islamic force. However, JMB's al Qaeda connection is yet to be proven.

Conversely, one may argue there could be vested interest groups within the Government (well-beyond its control), which could stage this "JMB-Police Drama" as a desperate bid to legitimize the government both at home and abroad – especially in the eyes of Washington. However, it appears that Dhaka has miserably failed to convince Washington – once again after 2000 when President Clinton visited Bangladesh – that JMB is posing any impending security threat to the

Political instability, growing inequality, and the faulty education system that creates employable and unemployable graduates are the root causes of terrorism in countries like Bangladesh. Blaming political rivals for the alleged "homecoming" of the JMB, and circulating unbelievable stories about encounters with JMB militants could fetch short-lived political dividends for politicians; but in the long run, such moves are likely to backfire to the detriment of the nation as a whole.

As some ruling party leaders are finger pointing their political rivals in the BNP-Jamaat camp for "manufacturing" the tape to organize an ant-Government movement with the help of Islamist militants, some BNP-Jamaat leaders, on the other hand, are blaming the Awami League Government for "fabricating" an "unauthentic" podcast by Ayman al-Zawahiri to draw American support and sympathy for the Government, and thus get a stamp of legitimacy to the controversial Elections that brought the Awami League to power. BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia even blamed the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's son Sajib Wazed Joy as the "mastermind" behind the al-Zawahiri podcast.

However, there is no reason to assume that al Qaeda is just another Islamist terrorist group like the Lashkar-e-Taiba, HUJI or JMB. It is neither an Islamist political organization like the Muslim Brotherhood or Jamaat-e-Islami. It is a global movement and a franchise like McDonald's. It can open new branches anywhere. No country, including Bangladesh, is off limits to its operators. It loves to explore new opportunities to recruit fighters from trouble spots, especially from Muslim underdogs within and beyond the Muslim World. From al Qaeda perspective, politically turbulent and socially fractured Bangladesh is an "attractive" place. The trial of "War Criminals" (and the execution of Abdul Quader Molla in December 2013), and the killing of several Deobandi-Wahhabi Islamist activists (there are contradictory figures of casualty) belonging to the Hefazat-e-Islam by law-enforcers in May 2013, may be mentioned in this regard. Given the opportunity, al Qaeda would love to exploit the resentment of the aggrieved people who think the Government, only because of their Islamist ideology, has unjustly victimized them.

It is noteworthy that although al Zawahiri has singled out America and its "allies" among the ruling classes of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar as the main enemies of Islam and persecutors of Muslims, his main focus is on the "ongoing" killing of "thousands" of Muslims by Bangladeshi law-enforcers. He wants Bangladeshi Muslims to embark on their own Intifada, which stands for rioting, protest and resistance to shake off tyranny. Ominously, even though Intifada is not identical to terrorism or "violent jihad", nevertheless this audio message reminds us of the video-podcast he issued in February 2012, which was an appeal to Syrian, Turkish, Iraqi and neighboring Muslims, to fight and topple the Assad regime in Syria. And we know what followed the appeal. Al Qaeda and its Islamist associates have been fighting the Assad regime, Syria is bleeding, and so far more than a hundred thousand Syrians have died in the ongoing civil war.

In the backdrop of what al Qaeda has been doing in various trouble spots in the Muslim World; Bangladeshis have no time for complacency, let alone playing the blame game against each other. Unless Bangladesh resolves its political crisis by holding fresh

elections to stabilize the country and institutionalize democracy, people having a soft corner for terrorism and anarchy are likely to be drawn to al Qaeda and similar terror outfits in the coming days. Pragmatism demands a line be drawn between various Islamist organizations and movements. Instead of painting every Islamist organization with a broad brush, politicians must stop harping on the old and stale theme that the Jamaat-e-Islami is synonymous with al Qaeda. Last but not least, Bangladeshis should not waste time on debating the credibility of the Zawahiri podcast, and blaming each other for “doctoring” the audio for reason X or reason Y.

In September 2014, al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri announced the formation of an Indian branch of his militant group that he said would spread Islamic rule and "raise the flag of jihad" across the subcontinent. He asserted Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) would rescue Muslims there from injustice and oppression. Maulana Asim Umar, one of the two prominent leaders of al Qaeda's South Asia unit is the chief of AQIS. Al Qaeda has claimed responsibility for the murder of several writers critical of Islam in Bangladesh and Pakistan, but while Al Qaeda and its supporters bear direct responsibility for these murders, the Center for Inquiry maintains that a contributing cause is the placation of Islamic extremists and the crackdown on freedom of expression by governments in the Muslim world.⁵⁷

The Bangladesh Government must not pay heed to sensational writings by some Western and Indian analysts, who since the end of the Cold War has been manufacturing stories about al Qaeda's “impending attacks” in Bangladesh. Bhaskar Roy in his recent sensational posting to the South Asia Analysis Group (SAAG) – a well-known Indian blog on security studies and terrorism in South Asia – has claimed that some al Qaeda leaders in Bangladesh, “reportedly assisted by the Jamaat-e-Islami” are actively engaged in financing and arming Bangladeshi Islamist terrorists. He has also blamed the BNP-Jamaat Alliance for the promotion of Islamist extremism in Bangladesh.⁵⁸

Conclusions

In view of the false flag operations, overblown al Qaeda and Islamist terror threats, the culture of vilifying political opponents as al Qaeda agents, and the tendency to generalize all Islamist parties and movements, including the BNP and obscurantist *Jamaat-e-Islami* as Islamist terror outfits linked to international terrorist outfits out of ignorance of how international terror groups operate, and to gain political leverage, it appears that Bangladesh is not going to recover from the endemic political crisis and social unrest in the foreseeable future.

The upshot being the state of perpetual uncertainties in the country, there has been rapid erosion in the level of civility, democracy, accountability and transparency of the government machinery. Since the nation has already created so many Frankenstein's Monsters collectively – through sham elections, compliant bureaucracy, police and security apparatus and highly ineffective Election Commission – it does not need al Qaeda to destabilize it further. Our political leaders must be extremely careful while linking local terror activities with international terrorist outfits. It does incalculable harm to Bangladesh. Politicians and their followers frequently publicize sensational stories about the rise of al Qaeda – and even the Islamic State (ISIS) – in Bangladesh, mostly to vilify their political rivals as agents of Islamist terror outfits.

And we know, as politics is often negatively correlated to the truth, so is terrorism, which unlike ordinary crime is politically motivated (ideology-driven) publicity seeking violence against total strangers and innocent people. Margaret Thatcher, as early as 1985, rightly asked the open society in the West to deny the terrorists any “oxygen of publicity”. Bangladesh would do better by not giving any publicity to terrorist propaganda, let alone using terrorist threats against political adversaries.

Interestingly, while criminals hide their crimes and deny committing any, terrorists publicly brag about their crime, make false claims, and threaten people and governments of further violent attacks in the future. The ISIS claim, “the gunmen were our soldiers”, in the

wake of the 4th May shoot out at an exhibition of Prophet Muhammad's cartoons at Garland, Texas, is possibly a false claim. Then again, White House's skepticism about any ISIS links to the attacks is an example of good counterterrorism (CT) operation.

We want similar mature behavior from our government, politicians, analysts and experts. There is an acute shortage of well-versed CT experts in Bangladesh. Some of those who think they are not free from political bias against what they write and talk about terrorism. Watching some "terrorism experts" exchanging verbal slurs at each other on television is not amusing at all. These are all signs of lack of CT expertise in the public and private sectors. Politicians, journalists and analysts seem to be busy drawing dividends from imaginary and exaggerated terrorist threats from al Qaeda and other Islamist terror outfits.

The cry wolf in Bangladesh about "terrorists are coming", or "terrorists are already here" predates 9/11 attacks. Although fear mongering has not yet fetched any political dividends, but drawing the synonymy between Bengali collaborators of Pakistan (during the Liberation War) and "terrorist sympathizers" in Bangladesh today has grossly divided the polity. The ploy is also horribly counterproductive to effective CT operation. Nothing could be more counterproductive and dangerous than projecting Bangladesh as a safe haven for terrorists, or as Swedish journalist Bertil Lintner classified the country as "a cocoon of terror" in 2002.

Thanks to the hyped up cry wolf about the "impending" terrorist attacks in Bangladesh – before and after 9/11 – by sections of the Western media and Bangladeshi politicians, President Clinton had to cancel his scheduled visit to an NGO-run rural development project in the outskirts of Dhaka in March 2000. This episode not only gave a bad name to Bangladesh but also emboldened some terrorists to orchestrate country-wide bomb attacks and the August 21 grenade attack on an Awami League rally in Dhaka in 2004, that left 24 dead and 300 injured, including Sheikh Hasina, the present Prime Minister.

Al Qaeda is not as usual criminal group run by gangsters, smugglers and criminals, as we watch in Hollywood and Bollywood movies. Ayaman al Zawahiri is not a mafia boss, and al Qaeda has not run out of sophisticated weapons and bombs that it would need to resort to meat cleavers to kill people, especially those not known beyond a small circle of people. Anti-Islamic bloggers could be prime targets for some fanatic groups or individuals in Bangladesh, but they would not fit the profiles of prime al Qaeda targets for assassination. Al Qaeda and mega terrorist groups believe in mass killing or assassination of VIPs for drawing global attention to their cause.

Those who understand terrorism and al Qaeda know how terrorists operate. However, many terrorism experts possibly do not know, Bangladesh is among few other countries where politicians use the bogey of terrorism for the sake of legitimacy and political leverage. Most importantly, it is possibly the only country where politicians demonize their political rivals as terrorist sponsors or in cahoots with al Qaeda or homegrown terror outfits like HUII (B), JMB, and the ABT. Surprisingly, the alleged “terrorist-sponsors” are not leaders and followers of certain clandestine entities but belong to duly registered and legitimate political parties, which regularly participate in elections and get elected.

Last but not least, there is no point in giving credence to people like Bhaskar Roy, Bertil Lintner, Eliza Griswold, Christine Fair, Selig Harrison, B. Raman, Hiranmay Karlekar et al whose sensational writings on “impending al Qaeda/Taliban takeover” of Bangladesh are anything but objective. Nothing could be more alarmist and devoid of any truth and objectivity than what one finds in Karlekar’s book. He wrote in 2006 that the headquarters of Islamist terrorism was shifting from Afghanistan to Bangladesh.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, sections of Bangladeshi politicians, intellectuals and journalists follow and cite their sensational writings, mainly to divert people’s attention from problems of bad governance, corruption and poverty, and to get short-term gains and publicity. However, we know crying “Wolf” does not help anyone at the end of the day.

Those who portray particular leaders and political parties in Bangladesh as promoters of the JMB and their ilk, should pay attention to what an Indian intelligence report has revealed in the wake of the Burdwan Blast (in West Bengal in 2014). According to the report, the “Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) was plotting a terror attack on Bangladesh to assassinate Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia”.⁶⁰

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