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Inside the neo-Jihad Mill: Islamist Mobilization in Bangladesh



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Abstract

Growth of radical Islam and terrorism with ambivalent linkages to global jihadism is now a reality in Bangladesh. Terrorist groups have found it difficult to withstand sustained pressure from the security forces. The neo-Jihadists, however, seem to have found a new mantra to success. Keeping their actions low scale and using social media and 'direct contact' programmes to attract educated youngsters into their fold, radical Islam is exploiting the cleavages in the country presented by polarized politics. This article attempts to throw light on extremist mobilisation, their networks, and recruitment strategies.

On 11 June 2018, Shahzahan Bachchu, 60-year old Bangladeshi writer and publisher, was shot dead by unidentified assailants at his ancestral village in Munshiganj district. The five men, who attacked him outside a pharmacy shop near his home before iftar, had lobbed a crude bomb before dragging Bachchu outside the shop and shooting him.^[1] Bachchu wore many hats. Apart from being an outspoken secularist and publisher of poetry books, Bachchu was a former district general secretary of Communist Party of Bangladesh and had received several death threats from extremist groups. The Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) was blamed for the attack. On 3 March, Mohammad Zafar Iqbal, head of the Electrical and Electronic Engineering Department at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology in Sylhet, was stabbed in the head while addressing an open air programme at Sylhet.^[2] Zafar used to author science fictions and was a known secular activist. His attacker, identified as Faizul Hasan, a madrassa student, was at the same programme. Both these incidents are part of a trend that has unfolded prominently in Bangladesh in recent years.

Intermittent attacks that are part of a process of Islamist radicalisation and consolidation have so far targeted secularists, bloggers, LGBT activists and a Buddhist monk.^[3] The trend continues in spite of tough government measures to stem the rot. Polarised politics and exposure to global jihadism is feeding into it.

How are these attacks organised, is a difficult to question to answer, especially when the state claims to have remained extremely vigilant to clamp down on any such activity by radicals. Diverse groups usually claim responsibility for these attacks, or praise the occurrence of such incidents, making Islamist presence in the country a no-brainer. Some of the recent killings have been claimed by the group Ansar al Islam (AAI).

The AAI initially emerged in 2007 as Jamaat-ul-Musleman. The JuM, however, ceased to operate due to constraints of raising funds. It, however, reappeared in 2013 as Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT). The ABT, which follows the global jihadist Ideology and focuses on silencing or eliminating the critics of its extremist religious doctrines, was banned by the government on 25 May 2015. However, since its origin, the outfit has used cyberspace to recruit cadres among young males^[4]. It is reportedly affiliated with the Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). There have also been claims by the Islamic State (IS) declaring the AAI as their Bangladeshi chapter^[5]. AAI was also officially banned by the government on 1 March 2017^[6].

AAI's chief Mufti Jashimuddin Rahmani, a radical Islamist and spiritual leader, reportedly had a following of more than 4000 who believe in armed jihad. He was arrested on 12 August 2013 along with 30 of his followers for instigating extremism and inciting people to commit violent jihad and is presently serving his sentence. It was from Rahmani that the police recovered a hit-list consisting of 12 names^[7]. Under Rahmani's instruction and tutelage, there has been at least one case of a Bangladeshi origin man attempting to carry out terror attacks abroad. Rahmani indoctrinated 22-year old Quazi Mohammad Rezwaniul Ahsan Nafis, currently serving a 30-year prison sentence for plotting to bomb the US Federal Reserve Bank in New York in August 2013^[8]. Rahmani has indeed been infamous for his capacity to lure youngsters into Islamist jihad. Foyzur Rahman, who attacked Professor Muhammed Zafar Iqbal on 3 March had stepped into militancy listening to Rahmani's sermons and reading contents of "Dawahilallah", a blog run by the AAI's followers. The suspect joined "Dawahilallah" and used to follow instructions from there. Foyzur too had been motivated by his 'Salafist' uncles Abdul Jaher and Abdul Sadi, and elder brother Abul Hassan, all living in Kuwait.



(ABT/AAI chief Mufti Jashimuddin Rahmani being taken to the jail in December 2015, Photo Courtesy: Daily Star)

In March 2017, AAI reportedly shifted its recruitment strategy from ‘online’ to ‘direct contact’. The ‘direct contact’ strategy allows the recruiters to contact the potential recruits directly after picking them up in social, political and religious gatherings. Compared to the online propaganda, the reach is limited, but is considered safe as far as avoiding the intelligence operatives tracking online communication is concerned.^[9]The group has not officially carried out any attacks since the killing of two LGBTQ Rights Activists in April 2016^[10], although on 6 April 2018 Abu Saleh Mohamad Abdul Mazed, a social worker in Dhanbila village of Pabna district allegedly received a death threat through a letter from the ABT. Mazed runs a school at his village for spreading education, organising cultural programmes and creating awareness among the children against militancy and early marriage^[11].

The Neo-JMB, reincarnation of the older JMB, attempts to further the objective of its predecessor. Its main goal is to establish Islamist rule and end ‘anti-Islamist practice’ in Bangladesh. Suspected to be in contact with the al Qaeda, the JMB was responsible for many terrorist attacks, including the one in August 2005 when low grade explosives were detonated almost simultaneously in 63 of the 64 districts in the country. After its proscription on 23 February 2005 and neutralisation of a large number of its cadres by the security forces, the group revived itself as the Neo-JMB. Bangladesh officials have linked many of the Islamic State claimed attacks in recent years with involvement of Neo-JMB cadres^[12]. The JMB’s cadres were madrassa educated boys mostly from rural poor background. The Neo-JMB consists of young men from middle class or affluent families exposed to English-medium education and modern technology. Some of the terrorist attacks listed below provide an indication of Neo-JMB’s attempts to stay relevant.

On 28 March 2017, Neo-JMB issued a threat to bomb Kishoreganj district court and jail. In a letter delivered to Muhammad Mabul Ul-Haque, the District and Sessions Judge, the outfit demanded cancellation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s India visit, removal of Maulana Farid Uddin Masud as the imam of Sholakia Eid congregation and the unconditional release of Huji leader Mufti Hannan^[13]. On 15 August 2017, a Neo-JMB militant was killed as he detonated explosives in his hotel room to escape a police raid. He was planning to attack the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum, which was hosting VIPs on occasion of the National Mourning Day^[14]. On 28 November 2017, three Neo-JMB workers blew themselves in a militant hideout in Chapainawabganj district after being surrounded by the anti-terrorist Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) personnel.^[15] Security force action has forced a large number of neo-JMB cadres to move to India. Intelligence sources reveal that the Neo-JMB has formed at least seven local modules in West Bengal, each having 10-12 members. At least five of them are based in Murshidabad and formed in the past 18 months. Bangladesh also believes that two senior neo-JMB leaders- Mamunur Rashid Ripon alias Jahangir and Shariful Islam Khaled are now hiding in India.

While the AAI and the Neo-JMB may have exposed themselves to the security force actions by their indulgence in terror plots and other attacks, the outfit which has silently grown in strength in Bangladesh over the years is the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT). HuT focuses on the goal of establishing a caliphate through invitation and Jihad. It emerged in 2000 and operated for nine years before its proscription on 22 October 2009. However, the organisation survives. It has an active presence in social media, and recruits members through conferences[16]. The Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, which pushed thousands of refugees into Bangladesh, appears to have provided the HuT an opportunity of consolidation. The group has been secretly circulating leaflets, putting up posters, and using social media to highlight the plight of the Rohingya Community[17]. Although officials have consistently declined to confirm its presence, the posters and leaflets that appeared in the refugee settlements have called for the establishment of a *Khilafah Rashidah* (the rightly guided Caliphate) and expansion of the Arakan (in Myanmar) as the only way “to liberate the Muslims in Myanmar from the clutches of the imperialist Kafir-Mushrik (atheists-idol worshipers) states led by the US, India, and China” (sic). The leaflets also blamed Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for her delayed humanitarian response in allowing the Rohingyas to enter Bangladesh and criticised her diplomatic role. The HuT has also advocated a military solution to the Rohingya issue with the ‘criminal state’ of Myanmar. The intensity of such campaign has led the intelligence agencies to increase their presence in the Rohingya camps.

Analysts differ[18] on why Bangladesh, a country of 146 million Muslims, from where only 100 people have gone to join the Islamic State, continues to witness such growth of radicalism and terrorist mobilisation. The achievements of the security forces against outfits like the JMB and HuJI-B coexist with the upsurge of Islamist political parties, deprivation and poverty as well as the system of mostly unregulated madrassa education. A cocktail of all these factors mixed with exposure to the trend of global jihadism is contributing to the Islamist mobilisation in the country. Polarised politics and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)’s proximity to the Islamists are sustaining the forces that have no hesitation about using radical Islam to bring down the current government.

End Notes

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