

Bangladesh: Attempting a siege - the Hefazat-e-Islam

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The terror campaign by jihadi elements indicates that the Bangladeshi state is under attack by the same forces that opposed the country's independence.

WHEN NADIA SARMIN, a reporter of ETV, was assigned to cover the post-“long march to Dhaka” rally of the Hefazat-e-Islam at Shapla Chattar in the Motijheel area of the capital city on April 6, little did she realise that she would become the target of the recently floated radical Islamist organisation's ire for violating one of its prime demands: a ban on women mixing with men in public. In the presence of thousands of rallyists, frenzied activists of the Hefazat, comprising mainly students and teachers of madrassas, beat her mercilessly for daring to join the men-only rally. Fellow journalists rescued the grievously injured woman and admitted her to a hospital.

The Hefazat was floated to “protect Islam” and demand death sentences for the “atheist bloggers” of the Shahbagh movement and the enactment of a blasphemy law. Shahbagh Square in central Dhaka was the venue of a massive rally on February 5, launched to demand capital punishment for all those charged with committing crimes against humanity during the 1971 Liberation War and a ban on the Jamaat-e-Islami. The call to build a democratic society where religion is a private affair was given by Blogger and Online Activists Network.

Attacks on mediapersons by fundamentalist cadre are not uncommon in the country. At least 16 journalists have been attacked in recent months across Bangladesh by activists of the Jamaat and its students' wing, the Islami Chatra Shibir. But the attack on Nadia becomes different because it was made to emphasise one of the 13 demands made by the Hefazat (see box [1]). The group has threatened to lay siege to Dhaka on May 5 to force the government to accept its demands.

Since January 21, when the International Crimes Tribunal in Bangladesh awarded the death penalty to Abul Kalam Azad, a former leader of the Shibir, Jamaat cadre have been resorting to widespread assaults on law enforcers. They have burnt or destroyed scores of vehicles, houses, shops and public and private installations in a bid to stop the ongoing trial. The mayhem has resulted in the death of more than 80 persons, including policemen and activists of the Jamaat and the ruling Awami League, and left hundreds of people injured. The emergence of the new brand of radicals to oppose the “atheist bloggers” has intensified the tension.

The rise of the Hefazat is linked to the spread of madrassas. In the post-1975 era, madrassas witnessed a phenomenal growth, especially under the patronage of military and pseudo-democratic governments. These institutions, called Qawmi madrassas, are not under the government's education board. They get financial support from overseas and from local and foreign charities. They recruit students mainly from poor rural backgrounds and make them jihadis. Enjoying the support of the Jamaat and the main opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP), the Hefazat has virtually declared a war on the state, challenging the secular polity and propagating a philosophy of life that is inimical to the nation's long-held tradition of communal harmony.

Bangladesh's Constitution says: "The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth and women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life." But its "successful" April 6 march has made the Hefazat aspire to political influence. If its 13 demands are met by the government, liberals say, women's empowerment, democratic polity and the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution will be severely hindered.

Jurists, rights activists, educationists and artists view the Hefazat's demands as a recipe for turning Bangladesh backward. "There will be an end to Bangladesh as we know it today if the demands are met," a leading actor said.

Women are increasingly becoming the driving force in the nation's economic and social sectors. The country has over 3.2 million women in its workforce. Hailing mainly from rural areas, they work in the ready-made garment sector, which contributes the lion's share of the country's foreign exchange. Leaders of the Shahbagh movement fear that if any of the 13 demands are met, Bangladesh will become another Afghanistan. The Hefazat's demands not only seek to undermine women's right to work outside their homes but are aimed at pushing the nation back into an era of darkness, they aver.

Despite its massive show of strength in Dhaka, where the madrassa-based organisation made its aspiration to become a national alternative clear, the response of the general public is somewhat defiant. Women from various walks of life were seen on the streets as usual. Many women journalists, who now constitute almost half of the nation's workforce in the booming electronic media, said the Hefazat's demands were nothing but "barbaric".

New brand of Islamists

The emergence of the new brand of Islamists has happened when Bangladesh is confronting a well-designed terror campaign by the Jamaat-Shibir. Liberals see the formation of the Hefazat as a "shrewd move" by the Jamaat and its ally, the BNP, to stop the war crimes trial and block the ruling alliance's re-election. (The ninth Parliament's term ends on December 29.) They allege that the "political concessions" given to the Hefazat by the government (which it, however, denies) may encourage the radicals to do more harm. Minister Sheikh Hasina rejected the Hefazat's demand for the enactment of an anti-blasphemy law. She maintained that the existing laws were sufficient to punish anyone who attempted to insult religion. She, however, said that the government would examine the demands and accept those found appropriate.

But the radicals are determined to "compel" the government, which, according to them, is practising "double standards" by patronising "atheists". Hasina, who would not compromise with those who wilfully insult religion, defended her government's decision to arrest several bloggers on the suspicion of harming religious sentiments.

The arrests prompted sharp criticism, with liberals accusing the government of yielding to Islamist pressure. Independent observers say that the patronage given to the Hefazat by the Jamaat, the BNP and even the Jatiya Party, an ally of the ruling alliance, shows how much they are banking on the new incarnation of the Taliban on a soil that is traditionally tolerant. They also feel that tackling the new radicals may be a crucial test for the country.

Going by the Jamaat-Shibir's systematic terror campaign against law enforcers, public and private installations and the transport systems in the past several months, it may not be unjustified to conclude that the state is under coordinated attack by the same forces that opposed the nation's independence. Besides, activists of the Jamaat-Shibir have unleashed unprecedented terror on the

minority Hindu community. In more than 14 districts, they have targeted the minorities, in some places in collusion with BNP workers. The violence that Bangladesh has witnessed in the recent months will surely bring to mind the rampage by the Pakistan Army and its local cohorts during the Liberation War. Using crude bombs and Molotov cocktails, the radicals have frequently attacked policemen, killing or injuring several of them. Khaleda Zia, the Leader of the Opposition, however, found no reason to condemn the fundamentalists' fury. On the contrary, she termed the deaths in police action as the "cruellest mass killing in history", equating them with the "genocide" committed by the Pakistan Army in 1971. She also vowed to try Sheikh Hasina in a tribunal for committing "genocide".

The Jamaat's mayhem adds more statistics to its Liberation War crime records and provides fresh evidence of what its old leadership stood for. The party, whose leaders and activists constituted several auxiliary forces of the Pakistan Army, has been able to gather power, money and political backing in the past few decades.

The war crimes trial is not only a political, but a moral and historical obligation of the state to ensure that a long-overdue process of justice is completed. The violent path that the Jamaat has taken to foil the trial might have terrorised Bangladeshi society, but this in no way can force the government to abandon the judicial process, independent observers say.

Meanwhile, envoys of 10 Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Iraq and Kuwait, have been trying to find a negotiated settlement for the political crisis. They want to create the right atmosphere for holding credible and peaceful parliamentary elections. The government appears to be ready for a dialogue with the opposition parties but will not agree to restore the system of installing a non-party caretaker government to oversee the elections. In June 2011, the Hasina government removed the caretaker system by an amendment to the Constitution. The BNP and the Jamaat would not participate in any election unless a caretaker government is installed.

Many analysts do not rule out a major backlash by secularists if the Jamaat unleashes another round of violence and the Hefazat flexes its muscles again. The situation in Bangladesh may be termed civil war or a second Liberation War. It is too early to predict the result of this confrontation.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 28632), [Bangladesh: The 13 demands raised by the radical Islamist Party Hefazat-e-Islam](#).