

Extremists' Weaponization of Internet in Bangladesh: A Threat to Rapid Development?

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Abstract: Bangladesh transformed from a war-decimated, famine stricken fledging new state in 1971 to become the breadbasket of South Asia. Beating out India and China in its effort to fight back poverty and hunger, the Muslim-dominant democracy has been a true model of development. The country's focus on education, health, nutrition, and safety-nets for the poor have worked to build a food-secure nation. The home of the first micro-loans, Bangladeshi small holder farms have flourished. The country has been a beacon of light in the region, representing advanced levels of women's empowerment, most notably by electing female prime ministers who have held office more years than males in Bangladesh's fifty year existence. Co-existence between religions is heralded, and the government directly supports the LGBTQ community, even offering financial bonuses to those who hire members. While Bangladesh continues to have large challenges, including intensive political infighting, their bright future is marred by a growing struggle against terrorism. Though leaders have taken a supremely hard line against Islamists extremists, both home grown and international, they are lagging behind in efforts to curtail explosive growth in internet jihadist recruitment that is sewing division and hatred among the population. If leaders are not successful in curbing and reversing this trend, it could undermine or even destroy the herculean efforts of those who have worked so hard to create this jewel of democracy and human rights.

Keywords: Bangladesh, extremism, development, women's rights, internet.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 A Thorn Among the Roses

Pro-democracy, nationalist Bengali's living in East Pakistan yearned for a return to self-rule that existed before European colonialism stole their sovereignty and identity. After being tossed about for centuries by Portuguese and British overlords, then placed under the rule of Pakistan and assigned the name 'East Pakistan', Bengali's had enough and began a fight for independence. The fight was so inequitable that Bengalis' paid a massive debt in lives lost and infrastructure demolished. Despite this, they stayed the course until winning independence in 1971.

As the following sections detail, in the following fifty years Bangladesh has become a success story of major proportions. They cut chronic hunger dramatically and are on target to eradicate it all together by 2030. Ruled by female prime ministers the majority of its existence, the country has excelled in the arena of human development including education, health, and nutrition. Women constitute a vital part of the work force, escalating the garment industry and driving exports. (LaFranchi)

Amidst this success, however, looms a hidden and stubborn enemy: a hidden terrorist network that seeks to undermine this still fledgling democracy. Continued growth in the radicalization of native born Bengalis threatens to derail or reverse their progress. The battle to eliminate terror cells is ramping up, and the outcome may well determine the future of Bangladesh for generations to come.

1.2 From Birth to Blossoming

On December 16, 1971, emerging from a devastatingly brutal war of independence, East Pakistan ceased to be a nation and The People's Republic of Bangladesh was born. However, like all infants born in crisis, the new country was exceedingly fragile and faced enormous odds of survival. The population was traumatized by horrific barbarity that included the Pakistani military's systematic murder of university students and other war crimes so calculated and widespread the UK Sunday Times chose a one word headline for its front page coverage: GENOCIDE. (Mascarenhas) As recently as 2016 the Bangladesh government continued to prosecute military leaders for war crime, executing many who had assisted Pakistan from inside Bangladeshi ranks. (BBC) Infrastructure, too, was ravaged by the Pakistani army to the degree that UN observers described the country as looking "like the morning after a nuclear attack." (Coggin)

From these ashes, the sovereign, democratic state of Bangladesh began finding its way toward survival. The task was immense, and in 1974 a massive famine threatened the entire population. By the time the food shortage eased, an estimated 1.5 million Bangladeshis had perished due to starvation and diseases that resulted from malnutrition. (LaFranchi)

Today, however, fifty years after independence, the country is a stable democracy with the world's eighth largest population. Economic progress has literally transformed Bangladesh from being entirely food insecure to becoming a breadbasket of the region and a model to other nations suffering from hunger. In addition to the economy, Bangladesh has made strides in other areas, from environmental health, to social and human rights, to high levels of education. Their military is robust, and the government maintains close diplomatic and trade relationships with several world powers including the United States, as well with medium and small nations. Like most countries, Bangladesh also has serious challenges including high rates of poverty, income inequality, unsatisfactory quality of education, corruption, and the strains of living between India and China where the impacts of their ongoing conflicts seep into Bangladesh. (Cookson)

1.3 Islamist Terrorists

Since the end of the war of independence, Bangladeshis have largely been a large spared large-scale Islamist terror attacks from inside their own population that many predominantly Muslim nations have suffered, especially in recent years. Part of the reason for that is the strong line the country takes on terror, including ferreting out sleeper cells and extremists networks and executing leaders. Their response has been described as "ruthlessly effective." (The Independent)

The reasons for such a strong response are predictable. A populous country still fighting development battles cannot afford to lose to extremist violence in its midst. The cost is simply too high, the prospects too dire. Bangladeshi police report that more than eighty percent of those arrested for terrorism in recent years were radicalized online and almost sixty percent were university-educated. (Muggah) Terrorist internet recruiting among its population has continued to move in a worrying new direction, as violent Islamist extremist groups are spreading hate speech and misinformation to an ever-widening audience.

1.4 Assessing the Threat

Muslims in Bangladesh represent close to ninety percent of the population, with Hindus comprising most of the other ten percent. When Muslim extremists ramp up online trolling for new followers, the impacts are often felt surprisingly fast. In 2020, when the pandemic drove many Bangladeshi's to increase their internet exposure, the extremists went into high modes of recruitment. Near the end of the year, Hindus homes were destroyed and torched. A librarian was lynched after being accused of desecrating the Quran, Islam's holy book. In general, these types of crimes increased dramatically after the increase in online trolling. (Muggah)

2. ORIGINS OF TERROR IN BANGLADESH

2.1 Afghan War with the Soviets

While fewer terrorists attacks have occurred in Bangladesh during the past five years than in prior years, large-scale attacks are not far enough in the past to bring much comfort. 2016 brought the most savage of attack in the country's history when twenty-people, most of them tourists, were massacred at an upscale bakery in the capital city of Dhaka after a twelve hour siege. (Muggah)

Bangladesh can trace its early incidents of terror back to the 1990's when fighters involved in the 1980's Soviet war in Afghanistan returned to their homes in Bangladesh. Three of these veterans formed the Islamist group *Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh* (also referred to as *Harkat-ul Jihad*) a group that called for Bangladesh to become an Islamic state. The three leaders signed a 1998 fatwa written by Osama bin Laden calling for jihad against the United States and its allies. By 1999 they began carrying out attacks in Bangladesh, including an assassination attack on a leader poet, journalist, and human rights activist, and planted a bomb that killed ten people. (International Crisis Group)

2.2 Joining Forces

The 9/11 attack in the US had a significant impact on *Harkat-ul Jihad*, and the group became more violently active. They joined forces with a group from Pakistan known as *Lashkar-e-Tayyaba*. The terror attacks grew in intensity, and in 2002 they attacked the American Center in Calcutta, the capital of West Bengal, killing five and injuring over twenty people. Two years they attempted to assassinate the British high commissioner to Dhaka. A subsequent grenade attack killed twenty and scores injured at an election rally for a candidate they opposed. The attacks continued throughout the country.

2.3 Expansion of Terror Groups

Another terrorist group, *Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh* (JMB) formed in the 1990's and became active in the early 2000's. Their attacks were vicious and widespread, and in 2005 they detonated 459 low-intensity bombs across the entire country at one time. (International Crisis Group) This event spurred decisive action by the government that involved a massive man hunt, ending with the execution of the masterminds. Their actions drove *Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh* underground, but attacks on the secular government continued.

A military coup happened to occur in Bangladesh soon after, and under the military rule that followed, a redoubling of efforts against terrorists ensued. By training law enforcement officials and directing media, the state run Islamic Foundation, and imams at mosques countrywide to eschew terrorism, the country was able to effectively dismantle the terrorism network and infrastructure.

2.4 Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Join the Fray

By 2013, a new jihadist organization, *Ansarul Islam*, murdered a well-known blogger who's views they deplored. It soon became clear the group was part of *al-Qaeda*, the group responsible for the 9/11 attack on the United States. *Ansarul Islam* demanded thirteen actions from the government that included a blasphemy law for secular bloggers. They were rejected out of hand, but the group succeeded in building a country-wide network and expanded their reach. Today, the group poses an enormous risk to Bangladesh.

Many security experts today believe that a new, younger group of jihadists are affiliated with ISIS, the self-proclaimed Islamic State. This is of dire concern, as ISIS has proven to be even more deadly and barbaric than earlier Bangladeshi terror groups. (International Crisis Group)

3. WHAT'S AT STAKE

3.1 Real World Impact

Violent, extremist ideology online has led directly to multiple real-world incidents. These include recent attacks on liberal writers, digital influencers, and LGBTQ activists. (Muggah) The underlying disruption and brainwashing is more dangerous still. Recent activity by al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent known by the acronym AQIS has demonstrated a growing effort to persuade Bangladeshi Muslims that "real" Islam is not supportive of peace and tolerance.

Online agitators are also preaching strongly against rights of women, calling on followers to "reject sanctions against polygamy, child marriage, and slavery. "They are staunchly opposed to equal rights for women and routinely urge their followers to target blasphemers and secular liberals. (Muggah) Further, they encourage new followers to eschew their current beliefs regarding Islam as a peaceful religion, persuading them instead that so called "real Islam does not support peace and tolerance. Instead they strive to normalize hatred against "atheists" and "blasphemers."

3.2 Counter Ideology

Extremist ideology professed by these Islamists groups stands in stark contrast to Bangladeshi progressive democratic values, social mores and values including women's' rights, LGBTQ rights, and multi-cultural and multireligious inclusion. These diametrically opposed views put the two sides on a direct collision course and spell a battle for Bangladesh's overarching values which have been the basis and guide for economic and social progress.

Should Bangladesh continue to suffer from a growth in effective online recruitment and the resulting violence, the bright future of this successful yet still developing nation could be compromised. That could mean a return to hunger, increased poverty, and a host of other troubling events.

4. GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

4.1 Zero Tolerance with a Bite

The government response to violent, extremists attacks, such as the aforementioned bakery attack that killed five and the coordinated bombing that killed twenty was decisive and harsh. In the coordinated bombing incident, officials quickly determined some of the culprits to be members of the Islamic State, and others to belong to a local Islamist group, *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh*. Scores of arrests were made, and in the end twenty persons were charged. At least seven convicted terrorists were executed and eight more were killed in operations throughout the country.

Consistency has defined Bangladeshi government reactions to terror in their midst. No mercy is spared on those found guilty. Zero tolerance is a fact, not a goal. Employing “blunt and indiscriminate force,” (International Crisis Group) including alleged enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, government forces have succeeded in reducing the actual number of jihadists and weakening their power. These tactics come at a cost, however, driving terror cells underground and undermining officials’ ability to trace and track jihadists.

This brutal over-enforcement is one reason many jihadist recruiters have taken to online recruitment from dark sites the government can’t easily find or disrupt. While successful in the short run at restraining jihadists recruitment and activities, authorities are finding themselves at a distinct disadvantage and beginning to lose progress in the battle against extremism

4.2 Effective Recruitment

The shocking truth about online recruitment is the extensive depth and breadth of the demographics. No longer satisfied with typical recruiting targets, today’s extremist recruiters reach a broad , diverse audiences “from madrassa students to upper middle-class youth at private universities.” (International Crisis Group)

Another facet of online recruitment is particularly troubling in that it successfully connects local Bangladeshi recruitment targets with extremists living abroad who often have more experience in planning and executing attacks. The bakery attack, for example, was planned and orchestrated by a Bangladesh citizen living in Canada, aided by several other foreign-based extremists. So while fiery sermons in local mosques have traditionally been the source of new recruits, they are now emanating from every direction imaginable.

The quality of online recruitment techniques has reached new heights, with professionally produced videos containing violent extremist content. These include “endorsements of armed jihad, glorification of terrorist groups, calls for attacks against liberal activists, and propaganda condemning minorities.” (Muggah) In 2020 alone, the number of interactions per Facebook post increased 250%.

4.3 Foreign Aid

Fortunately Bangladeshi officials do not stand alone in the fight against extremism. Both the United States and the United Nations have joined forces with local leaders to take on the weaponization of social media in Bangladesh. With their support Bangladesh leaders launched a digital peace movement that successfully engaged nearly two million citizens. (Muggah) The program is designed to raise tolerance among young people, aimed to change attitudes and ultimately, behavior.

Social media sites are also ramping up their response, and removing or limiting unfavorable posts. But given the recent unprecedented increase in internet usage overall, the road ahead is long. Efforts to counter new messaging take time, and setbacks are expected.

5. DISCUSSION

The days of cracking down on local clerics stirring up youth, or monitoring madrassas for the violent content of their curriculum, are less effective than ever before, as new online recruits grow exponentially. Authorities believe their messaging must also be delivered online, and it must be effective in helping youth identify, question, and interpret what they read and share on social media. They must find a way to neutralize divisive and hateful rhetoric that has been carefully designed to divide and polarize religions, genders, political parties, and more.

However, the government cannot succeed if it takes an approach that limits freedom of expression. Their hard line tactics, while useful in the short run, have shown to only increase reactive behavior and attract new recruits.

Terrorism is an ongoing problem in nearly every country on earth, but Muslim dominant countries are at extreme risk of local incitement. When one considers the fragility of Bangladesh's democracy and its economic progress, its social inclusion, and its progressive stance on women rights and gender rights, its pluralistic democracy, it is easy to see how quickly progress on all counts could be reversed.

It is incumbent on all progressive, democratic countries to stand by Bangladesh in their battle against extremism, providing aid in combatting hatred and encouraging inclusivity, and providing funds to educate their population on these matters.

The road ahead will continue to be challenging but efforts against extremists rhetoric can be fruitful. Bangladesh will remain committed, and the rest of the world must stand by their side to contribute what it can to the effort. Everyone will benefit, and perhaps a few extremists will be positively impacted as well.

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