

BANGLADESH VIOLENCE: MINORITIES AND ANTI-LIBERATION FORCES

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The recent violence against the minorities in Bangladesh has taken a large number of people by surprise. It is not that violence against the minorities is unknown in Bangladesh, however, it was certainly put in check after Sheikh Hasina came to power. The violence against the Hindu minorities flared up once again in Cumilla this year during the Hindu festival Durga Puja when a miscreant perhaps on instigation of some extremists put the Holy Book Quran in a Puja Pandal.¹ Subsequently, violence also spread to other areas due to rumour-mongering on social media.

In the last decade or so, Bangladesh has managed to prioritise economic progress over religious extremism engulfing a number of other Muslim majority countries. The country grew at a decent pace² even when the whole world was grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic. The growing prosperity of Bangladesh is seen as a major reason behind the strong support of Bangladeshi people enjoyed by Sheikh Hasina. However, the recent violence against the minorities can prove to be detrimental if due measures are not taken by the Awami League government.

After the breakout of the violence, the government placed eight units of Border Guard Bangladesh in various parts of the Chattogram district to maintain law and order. State Minister for Religious Affairs Md Faridul Haque Khan warned people not to take law into their own hands. He stated that the local administration will investigate what really happened in Cumilla. A week later, the Bangladesh police managed to arrest Iqbal Hossain, identified as the key suspect in instigating the Cumilla violence from Cox's Bazar. The civil society in Bangladesh also protested violence against the minorities. They have demanded that Bangladesh government should enact a new law to ensure religious freedom for everyone. However, the situation still remains tense in the country.

After coming to power in 2009, the Sheikh Hasina government took strong measures against the anti-liberation forces, in a large measure represented by Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh. The other extremist groups present in Bangladesh were an outgrowth of Jamaat, as they thought that Jamaat was not being radical enough. The Awami League government carried out war crime trials of the prominent Jamaat leaders. A number of them were hanged for the crimes committed during the liberation war. When the war crime tribunal in Bangladesh gave only life sentence to the Jamaat leader Abdul Quader Molla, a large number of people in Bangladesh were incensed, and it led to the Shahbag movement in 2013, during which the pro-liberation forces demanded hanging of Abdul Quader Molla for his crimes during the liberation war.³

Unfortunately, along with the Shahbag movement, Bangladesh also saw the rise of Hefazat-e-Islam, another radical Islamist movement in the year 2013.⁴ Hefazat-e-Islam ransacked Dhaka when it launched its protest against the organisers of the Shahbag movement. It considered them atheists.⁵ Ironically, subsequently Awami League tied up with Hefazat-e-Islam perhaps to gain electoral mileage.⁶ It has not been easy for any government in a Muslim majority country to follow secular policies. This dilemma was also seen in the policies of Awami League. It acted against the Jamaatis but could not change the status of Islam as the religion of state.

Hasina has also acted against radical and terrorist organisations. Once in power, she declared a policy of zero tolerance against terrorism. This kind of policy was only expected from her as she

was nearly killed in a terrorist attack in Dhaka in 2004 when she was addressing a rally. In this attack, 24 Awami League workers, including one of her close associates, were killed.⁷

Hasina took action against Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), a group which was active in Bangladesh but was also carrying out terror strikes within India. She also took action against other Bangladeshi groups like Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Pakistan-based Islamist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed were using Bangladesh as a transit route. Hasina's tough measures stopped their use of Bangladesh as a springboard for terror activities against India.

India was pleasantly surprised when Hasina took action against the Indian insurgent groups active in North East India. These groups were using Bangladesh as a base for their terror activities in North East India. Previous political and military regimes in Bangladesh had consciously allowed these insurgent groups to operate from Bangladesh. In fact when Sheikh Hasina took action against them and handed over most of their top leaders to India, these forces criticised Hasina for losing an important pressure point against India.⁸ Sheikh Hasina's cooperation with India on counter-terrorism has dramatically improved India–Bangladesh relations and has taken it to a different level altogether.

However, return of Sheikh Hasina to power and her India-friendly policies have not been liked by her domestic and international opponents. Domestically she has faced strong resistance from the main opposition party the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami. Though Jamaat has been deregistered by the Election Commission of Bangladesh for not recognising the legislative power of Bangladesh parliament, it still has significant influence in the country. Jamaat as part of ruling coalition of the BNP-led government controlled two important ministries. During this period it tried to Islamise Bangladeshi society. The influence of Jamaat also increased in army, bureaucracy and police forces of Bangladesh.

Pakistan is one of the important international players which is hostile to the Sheikh Hasina government. When Sheikh Hasina declared her intention to try war criminals, it was not liked by Pakistan. Pakistan had sent Zia Ispahni as its special envoy to dissuade Sheikh Hasina from carrying out the trials. However, since she remained adamant on war crime trials, it is widely suspected that ISI instigated a rebellion in the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), then border guarding force of Bangladesh.⁹ This rebellion nearly upturned the political regime of Sheikh Hasina., but she managed to save the situation though with great difficulty.

Sheikh Hasina's actions against Jamaat and prosecution of the BNP leader Khaleda Zia over the corruption charges have managed to weaken the opposition, but they are still a force to reckon with. The opposition has been out of power for the last three terms, and in order to make a comeback, they would like to create a situation of political crisis in Bangladesh so that either army is provoked to take control of power or to create a caretaker government. The army in Bangladesh has undergone significant changes as now most of the Pakistan-era officers have retired but it still remains an important factor in the polity of Bangladesh. The easiest way for opposition in Bangladesh is to create a political crisis in Bangladesh by inciting communal strife.¹⁰ Perhaps the forces inimical to Sheikh Hasina government are trying to do just that. The Awami League government should remain vigilant to the designs of forces inimical to it and not let them undo the works done by it in the last one decade or so.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.

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