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Bangladesh: A fragmenting nation?

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Bangladesh has been facing political turmoil since October 2006 when a caretaker government assumed power followed by a takeover by the military in January 2007. Initially hailed by the Bangladeshi people as a blessing from the corruption and nepotism that had pervaded Bangladeshi politics, increasing human rights abuses by the government coupled with a poor economy, devastating floods and threats from rising Islamist sentiments in the country threaten to fragment the nation. However, the political and security situation in Bangladesh is not as dire as it may appear.

Birth of a nation

Bangladesh was carved out of East Pakistan in 1971 as a consequence of the third India Pakistan war. Weighed down by the history of a bloody partition with Pakistan and plagued by domestic constraints, Bangladesh can be described as an adolescent nation still in search of its identity. The quest of developing a strong sense of nation exists side by side with the challenges of state building. These state-building challenges range from widespread corruption, weak government institutions, radical Islamist terrorism to endemic poverty and drought.

Bangladesh expected to elect a new administration into power in the general elections that were to be held on 22 January 2007. When the impasse between the political parties began to reach boiling point, the Army stepped in and asked President Iajuddin Ahmed to declare a state of emergency and suspend elections. Many in the western media have viewed this as a 'soft coup'. Elections were indeed postponed and Fakhruddin Ahmed, ex-official at the World Bank and former Governor and the Bangladesh Bank, was appointed the head of the caretaker government.

The question now is whether there will be a 'return to democracy' with the Awami League (AL) led by Sheikh Hasina and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) led by Khaleda Zia returning to competitive secular politics or whether there will be an increasing 'filling in' of political space by Islamic groups? In other words, is Bangladesh heading towards an increasingly radical Islamic political system or does the coup herald a new era in Bangladesh secular politics?

Islam in Bangladesh

With nearly 90% of its 150 million people being Sunni Muslim, Bangladesh was once considered the largest Muslim democracy. Often compared to Pakistan – both for its military-political nexus and its majority Muslim population – some analysts have gone so far to state that, in the future, Bangladesh may become what Pakistan is today because of both its instability and its emerging radical Islamic militancy.

The truth however is much more complicated. Unlike Pakistan, Bangladesh has a secular orientation to its core national identity. After gaining independence in 1971, the new nation was molded to be a secular democracy. Even though the constitution was amended in 1976 to replace the term ‘secularism’ with ‘absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah’, political Islam, unlike social Islam, has never been an independent force in Bangladesh. Hence, although never totally divorced from politics, Islam has nevertheless remained disconnected from it. This is perhaps where the crucial difference between Pakistan and Bangladesh comes into play - Islam is arguably the core identity of Pakistani political nationalism while secularism is part of Bangladeshi nationalism.

The Political Actors

Since independence, Bangladesh has experienced a political process hovering between democracy and authoritarian rule between the two main political parties – the AL and the BNP.

Besides the AL and the BNP, the main Islamic party, the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) had 17 seats in the Parliament and was part of the former BNP government from 2001-2007. The JI demands the implementation of *Shari'a* (Islamic Jurisprudence) and the establishment of a theocratic system in Bangladesh. The other Islamic groups and allies of the BNP are the Islamic Chhatra Shibir (ICS) and the Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ). IOJ had two seats in the last parliament though it does not enjoy ministerial portfolios.

Although a majority of Bangladesh’s population does not support the JI due to its opposition to Bangladesh’s independence, the humanitarian work done by the JI in the absence of an effective government response to the disastrous cyclone in 1991 and 2007 coupled with increasing poverty and hardships for the common populace has led to support for JI from various sections of the population. This situation together with the polarized political situation has led to a disproportionate political influence of the Islamic parties.

Games of power - a minus-two solution?

To move Bangladeshi politics along, the military has proposed the minus-two solution. This solution envisions Bangladeshi politics without the presence of the two warring ‘leaders’ - Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. Although the solution may have once had legitimacy, deteriorating economic and human rights conditions have eroded support for the military’s approach. Moreover, this proposal has not gained traction as the proposed National Security Council – which would grant even greater power to the military – and poor election preparations, have increased popular skepticism of the military and its proposed minus-two solution.

Meanwhile, Western governments and donors who backed the generals' secular stance and tough opposition to Islamist extremism are increasingly concerned with the deteriorating situation. As the military government slowly loses support and mainstream political parties are weakened, Islamists, both the mainstream and of a more radical margin, may profit from the political vacuum and growing economic discontent.

Security Implications

This political instability when linked with the geo-strategic location of Bangladesh serves to underscore the importance of working out the political process. Bangladesh is a 'link state' between South and South East Asia.

Due to lack of border control and porosity of the border, Bangladesh has become the logistical hub of transnational extremist groups like the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) of Myanmarese Rohingya Muslims demanding an autonomous Muslim region in Myanmar's Arakan state. Militant groups based in Pakistan and Kashmir, like the Harkatul-jihad-e-Islami and the Lashkar-e-Toiba, have established operational links in Bangladesh, alongside a number of militant secessionist groups like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) which operates in northeastern India. Recent terrorist attacks in Delhi, Bangalore and Varanasi in India have all revealed that Bangladesh is a conduit in the operations and it has a definite footprint in the Islamic militant network in South Asia.

Conclusions

Bangladesh has been viewed by many as the next frontier of terrorist activity after Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although the situation is still very much in control, an unstable Bangladesh would make an already volatile South Asian environment even more explosive. If extremism is allowed to metastasize, it will contribute to the increasing religious extremism and militant violence in South and South East Asia.

However, in spite of all the negative developments, it is possible that free and fair elections will herald a push for democratic secularism in Bangladesh. There is widespread belief that given a fair poll, one of the mainstream parties with the backing of the Army will come into power. A government with people such as the present Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed or the Nobel laureate Prof. Muhammad Yunus at the helm would be ideal for stability. There is, however, understandable concern about the suitability of such a system in a large and complex society such as Bangladesh.

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