BANGLADESH'S QUEST FOR A MODERATE MUSLIM STATE

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"No country is safe from the scourge of terrorism. People of evil intent can be found among all nationalities, religions, and strata of society" - George W. Bush

Introduction

Security in the current literature is defined as an integrated concept where the quest for democracy is linked closely with the quest for modernization and identity. The essence of this new security paradigm is built on protecting individuals, groups and communities from a wide range of threats perpetrated by state and non-state actors. The background of the new frontiers of security was underpinned by the lack of alternative ideology in the post-Cold War era in defining conflict and cooperation in world system and, in such a vacuum, the fragmentation and diversity of people came in the limelight. Religious identity was reasserted in many parts of the world, including the Muslim countries. Islam as a religion took a new form as an instrument of politics and public policy with an abundant use of its imagery and symbolism.
The 'fall-out' of the Afghan war further complicated the situation. The 'Islamic Jihadists' or "Mujahideen", created during the American long 'Proxy-war' in the 1980s against the Soviets, turned into a 'liability' in the fragmented global order. The 'politico-strategic context' that emerged in the region bordering Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Central Asia became a new security concern for the United States. In the aftermath of 9/11, the American rage that transformed into a global war on terrorism finds its target in the region. There has been a tremendous erosion of the image of Islam as a religion in the aftermath of the severe nature of this terrorist attack and the perceptual clashes seemed to be real as transmitted by the print and electronic media. In fact, today, the great religion of Islam is on the dock, Muslims have become suspect of terrorism, and Muslim countries are increasingly being portrayed as anti-democratic and regressive.

Current Predicaments of the Muslim World

Today the Muslim world is faced with a deep crisis of image and disunity engendered by internal as well as external forces. Both Muslims and non-Muslims find it very disturbing when they witness a highly conservative manifestation of Islam as evidenced in the case of the 'Taliban' in Afghanistan. They become equally concerned at the 'revolutionary Islam' as obtained in Iran since 1979. And they are most anguished when they saw 'terrorist faces', who in the name of Islam perpetrated the most heinous acts of 9/11 or 7/7 in the United States and the United Kingdom respectively. In the wake of such violent acts, people in general and the West in particular raise concerns as they try to understand Islam as a religion, its theoretical construct, its implications for the modernization process, and the ways to engage with Muslims who constitute about one-third of the humanity. In fact, Muslims and non-Muslims alike have stakes and interests in mitigating
extremism and violent acts of a 'few' who seem to distort, hijack and reinvent Islam as a radical ideology.

**Major Issues of Concern**

The major issues that come to intellectual discourse relate to First: Islam's pan-Islamic idea and thought. Many Islamic scholars emphasize that Islam as a religion is not only a faith and practice, but also serves as a common identity. This provides Islam with a global character. Indeed, it is one of the main reasons, for which Islam could spread across such diverse and vast regions and cultures of the world. Second: it may be noted that the Islamic civilization has been one of history's most powerful civilizations that sustained over thousand years. The deepest underlying source of Muslim anguish today, therefore, is in the dramatic decline of this leading civilization that has become a disunited, scientifically backward, politically disoriented and badly governed community. Indeed, Muslims today lagged behind Western civilizations as well as the emerging ones in the East.

Third, poverty and injustice characterize most Muslim countries from the Atlantic to the Pacific, notwithstanding the fact that 60 percent of world's oil reserves are in the Muslim countries of the Middle East. Non-Middle Eastern countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Nigeria are also endowed with natural resources. But these could hardly be tapped for the benefits of the common people. Fourth, nationalism in most countries of the Muslim world, including the Arabs, emerged on Islamic loyalty as well as territorial identity. Most political leadership promised to synthesize western modernism with Islamic values and national culture. But this synthesis did not materialize. The political leadership in most countries, including the best known ones like Egypt under Anwar Al-Sadat, Tunisia under Habib Bourguiba, Iran under Reza Shah Pahlavi, Morocco under King Hassan II, Pakistan under the military-civilian rule, and Indonesia under
Suharto, could not deliver. All of the regimes came under fire for being too materialistic, secular or authoritarian and tied to the West.

Fifth, the rise of 'Political Islam' thus began in most of the Muslim countries. Beginning with 'Wahhabism' as a movement in Saudi Arabia, the surge of Islamic revivalism took a more autonomous and active strand and spread to other countries like Egypt, Syria and Iran. In Egypt, for example, this activist strand of Islam was initiated by 'Tkhwanul Islam' or Muslim Brotherhood, which came under increasing repression as they tried to establish a full-fledged Islamic State. Sixth, the next phase of 'Political Islam' started with the Iranian revolution in 1979. These Iranian religious leaders combined the rhetoric of Islamic awakening with the Third World anti-imperialist slogan directed mainly against the United States. Indeed, the success of Iranian Islamic revolution created a brand of 'Political Islam' that influenced the formation and expansion of Islamic parties in many Muslim countries to compete for power and influence in the governing process – democratic or otherwise. In fact, the evolution of 'Political Islam' takes varying formation and character in Muslim countries, particularly in Algeria, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh.

The current phase of 'Political Islam' in the aftermath of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq took two different forms: One, those who are politically motivated and want to participate in the democratic or quasi-democratic processes through Islamic parties, movements or network-groups. These formations operate on the assumption that "in Islam there is no difference between politics and religion; and that Islam is compatible with democratic process". They usually try to define and advance the core content of Islam and try to push them through their political project. These Islamic parties are increasingly asserting their voice and participation as can be observed in the activities of Hijb-Al-Amal, Jamaat-I-Islami,
Jamiah Islamiah, Islamic Salvation Front, and many others who have strong foothold in populous Muslim countries.

The other strand of 'Political Islam' is transformed into militant or radical Islamists – the ‘fallout’ of the Afghan war. These Muslims, who thought to be rightfully waging armed struggle against the communists, took a new turn. These new ‘Jihadists’, in the name of al-Qaeda that was formed in the late 1980s, tried to advance their goals through violence and terrorism. They also produced serious ‘demonstration effects’ on local Islamic militant groups in different Muslim countries, including Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Context

Against this background, this paper addresses the major areas of Bangladesh’s shifting security concerns that are interlinked with the nation’s quest for democracy, development and identity. First, Bangladesh’s history, geopolitical situation, Islamic orientation, economic potential and state of democracy directly impinge on its security. And since her independence as a nation, Bangladesh had been facing a host of complexities arising from its modernization process, domestic politics, regional environment and global imperatives.

The evolution of the nation in the past three and a half decades has been traumatic as well as promising. The first decade witnessed extreme volatility in politics, violent changes of governments and military coups. The second decade, with a brief interlude of civilian–democratic regime, was marked by a long period of authoritarian rule. The dawn of the 1990s witnessed changing notes – the transition to democratic governance from 1991 rekindled hopes and expectations among people for better life. The continuation of democratic rule for the past fifteen years even amid serious power conflicts signified Bangladesh’s success in sustaining a democracy, however flawed it might be. Today, Bangladesh’s
security agenda has expanded further to include not only to sustain its democratic governance, but also to cope with the challenge of retaining its identity as a 'moderate Muslim State' against adverse realities and continuing with its development strides in a globalized world.

**Concept of Moderate Muslim State**

The concept of Moderate Muslim State is less developed but is crucial in understanding the role of Islam in conjunction with democracy in a predominantly Muslim state like Bangladesh. There are misperceptions and inadequate understanding of Islam in most Western countries. Two antagonistic perspectives emerged over the past decades. One perspective represented by authors like Samuel Huntington, Bernard Lewis, John Kelsay, Francis Fukuyama who more or less argued in the same vein that Islam was a constant source of religious and communal violence, anti-democratic and that its clash with Western civilization was inevitable. This perspective got a tremendous boost from the 9/11 episode. The other perspective represented by long-time scholars and experts in the field like John Esposito, Edward Said and James Piscatori thought that Islam was against all sorts of violence and that it was compatible with democratic values and norms.

In recent years, some thoughtful Western writers like Amitai Etzioni and Graham Fuller are trying to promote a moderate version of Islam with more constructive engagement with the United States. These Islamic scholars are encouraging a moderate and inclusive interpretation of Islam that is compatible with democracy.

**Composite Identity of Bangladesh**

Bangladesh proved to be fortunate to enjoy unique homogeneity as a nation in its twin identities of language and religion: Almost 98 percent people speak in the same language and 86 percent of people are Muslims. This composite
nationalism creates a balance and moderation: while language was a powerful mobilizing force in the war of independence in 1971, the people are deeply attached to the Islamic faith that dates back to centuries. The Islamic identity also played a crucial role in the people’s struggle as part of Pakistan, separate from India. In the aftermath of the 9/11 episode, Bangladesh became a target of aggressive media propaganda—a vested quarter was trying to malign Bangladesh and tarnish its liberal and tolerant Islamic image. A cursory look at some of the sensational and baseless publications points to the challenges that Bangladesh has to cope with in order to project its real identity. These reports, cataloguing all the lines of attack on Bangladesh’s image as a democratic and tolerant Muslim country, testify that the enemies are out to de-link Bangladesh from the goodwill of the international community. The reality is that while Bangladesh suffered some security lapses in a series of bomb blasts and witnessed some incidences of terrorist acts by JMB and other misdirected groups, the nation marches forward as a democratic and moderate Muslim country. The grounds for optimism are inherent in the following characteristics of Bangladesh people, their history, political dynamics and socio-economic changes.

Resilient People with Integrated Identity

One of the greatest assets of Bangladesh’s war against terrorism is the resilience, dynamism and tolerant nature of its people. Historically, the people of this land struggled and survived against many adversities of nature and social injustice. The overwhelmingly poverty-stricken people of this land in different phases of their existence fought natural disasters, like cyclones and floods, as well as man-made crises arising from the follies of political and social leaders. The twin identities of ethnicity (Bengalees) and religion (Islam) proved to be assets as well as liabilities in the context of their mobilization in the hands of leaders. But the people continue to strive for better life with their composite identities. The
politico-intellectual class that thrives on people’s eclectic nature and helplessness often distorts the religious and cultural heritage of the nation—producing disunity and dissension in the social and political arenas. There is, in fact, no clash in the people’s identities if we do not take a short and jaundiced view of our history to be interpreted only in terms of our ‘Bengali identity’ or ‘Islamic identity’. The reality is that the people in general take a more integrated view in reconciling these two identities and marching forward as a dynamic nation to achieve much-needed growth and development.

Islamic Parties: Moderate and Flexible

The emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 through a bloody and bitter struggle was indeed a triumph of ‘Bengali nationalism’. But the overwhelming majority of the people of Bangladesh have also deep attachment with their identity as Muslims. In fact, the heritage of Islam remains a powerful force in political and social life, and becomes more assertive in the context of current global changes. The rise of Islamic parties in Bangladesh may be seen in this context. The democratic politics that ensued in Bangladesh since 1991 in a more ‘free-wheeling’ manner gave further boost to Islamic-oriented parties resembling Hijb al-Amal in Egypt or the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria that based their appeal to the Islamic credentials to go to state power.

The main flag carrier of Islamic parties in Bangladesh is Jamaat-i-Islami, although there emerged over the past years scores of parties under different banners of Islam. But Jamaat is the oldest Islamic party that was formed in 1941 in all-India context. This party suffered its image and witnessed erosion of its support during the liberation war in Bangladesh as it sided with Pakistan. The party was highly organized and ideologically motivated, and could formally come back in the political arena in 1979. The Jamaat began to gain its popularity with a more tolerant view of Islam and conducting
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its politics within the democratic framework emphasizing on social and economic agenda.

The global resurgence of Islam – a kind of ‘Pan-Islamism’ that surged in the 1990s - boosted Jamaat’s following as Muslims became targets of Israeli aggression and persecution and Western propaganda. Jamaat’s ‘hardcore’ support base comes from ideologically-oriented middle and lower middle class groups of Bangladesh society who try to see visible changes in social norms and values in consonant with Islam. They are attached to the values of Islam not only as religion to be confined to private life, but also in the social and political life of the nation. They are moderate on issues of democracy, social and economic development.

The younger generation of Jamaat leaders in colleges and universities, including the Islamic Shibir, is more organized and ideologically motivated to advance the message of Islam through relentless activities. Some of them are well educated, others are more conscious of their duties. However, in most of the higher educational institutions as well as in the media and wider civil society, the followers of Jamaat and Shibir are still seen as a ‘conservative’ and ‘regressive’ force. Students in general often praise the commitment, discipline and hard work of the followers of Jamaat, but they do not see them as forces of change for progress and a liberal society. As a result, the followers of Jamaat and their ‘Rokons’ (members) are still confined to a relatively narrow percentage of electoral population - less than 10 percent. The Jamaat’s following among urban and rural women, affluent middle class and in the new generation of people are less, partly because the ‘Bengali’ tradition often militates against their rise. Moreover, organizational rigidities, principles of leadership and rigor of practicing Islam often do not attract the ordinary ‘Bengali Muslims’ who tend to be more ‘freewheeling’ and liberal. Although the ‘terrorist links’ of Jamaat-I-Islami Bangladesh has not been found, the negative media propaganda adversely
affected the image and popularity of Jamaat in the past few years. Notwithstanding all this, Jamaat-Islami Bangladesh is still a formidable force because of its organizational strength and high motivation for the cause of Islam. The flexibility and moderation in Jamaat's stand on many sensitive religious and international political issues is enabling the party to project its tolerant image and be integrated in the mainstream democratic politics in Bangladesh.

Madrassa Education and Extremism

The education system in most Muslim countries, including Bangladesh, is still in the process of transition to adjust to the modernization and globalization imperatives of our age. Bangladesh has been facing the dilemma in a more complicated way. The country has inherited a dual and parallel system of western, liberal, and Islamic, Madrassa-based education. The Madrassa-based education has a long tradition in South Asia from the advent of the Muslim rule in the 12th century and became the mainstream education at that time. The modernization of Madrassa education was started by the British through institutionalization and patronage in 1920. The Madrassas helped the Muslims of British India to have access to some educational attainments, as they were slow in adapting to the modern education system. It is through the process, we find today two streams of Madrassa education – Aleya Madrassas encouraged by the British to grow, and the Qowami Madrassas encouraged by Darul Ulama of India steeped in more conservative and traditional mode. The funding and support of the two streams came from government as well as local, national and regional charity organizations. Since 9/11, the Madrassas became suspects in some Muslim countries including Bangladesh. Suffice it to say here that there is a need for 'total rearrangement' and 'reorientation' of the Madrassa system of education even though only a few of their students were involved in extremist activities. The Madrassas all along provided an alternative,
cheap and 'last-resort' windows of educational opportunities that served some useful needs of Bangladesh society. However, it now needs 'mainstreaming' to be more functional, modern and liberal to create a skilled and work-oriented force – not an unproductive, nagging and parasitical community with potential of violence and extremism. Appropriate measures need to be taken for restructuring and integrating the Madrassa education in an inclusive manner, but to retain quality and relevance remains a challenge for the future.

Consolidation of Democratic Politics

The most powerful force that influenced Bangladesh evolving as a moderate Muslim state is its march of democratization, however, imperfect it may be. In fact, democratic politics created conditions in which using Islam as the principal instrument of mobilization to come to power or retain power is well nigh impossible in Bangladesh. The people are often critical of the way democracy works in the country, particularly in their views about the credentials, credibility and performance of politicians. But they do not think of any alternative system of statecraft based on religion or force. This has come from their 'historical memories' and from an enlightened interpretation of Islam that is more relevant and meaningful in their social and spiritual life. Notwithstanding all this, Islamic symbolism or imagery appeals to many people, and can be used in political mobilization depending on situation or context. But 'terror in the name of Islam' can never get approbation in Bangladesh society. It is in this context that we can analyze why the Bangladesh government could effectively curb the rise of JMB and other extremist organizations.

Indeed, it can be forcefully argued that the strong wave of democratization flushes the religious extremists whether in the name of Islam or otherwise. The dilemmas of democratic transition and consolidation will continue to exist in a Third World democracy like Bangladesh. But the consolidation of
democratic process in Bangladesh through greater amity among the political parties will serve as the most effective deterrent to the rise of militant face of Islam in the country. The creation of trust in inter-party relations is vital at this stage. Political leadership must show vision and develop a culture to resolve conflicts in peaceful manner. They need to evolve a deliberative democracy through dialogue, negotiations and compromise to reject the evils of extremism and destructive politics.

Overcoming Governance Deficits

Bangladesh made impressive progress in economic development in the past decade. It is rather ironic that, despite many achievements, the country’s image has not been understood properly. One of the reasons for such misunderstood image lies in the governance realm. Analysts may not agree on the precise weight of various problems of governance – some may give more importance to law and public order, some on inefficient public institutions or bureaucracy, some on extent of corruption, and others may attribute the difficulties to distracted politicians. The cumulative weight of evidence, however, suggests that ‘governance deficit’ has become a structural problem rooted in administrative traditions, institutions and political culture. In an age of globalization overlain by American global strategy, Bangladesh needs to effectively address its internal governance problems and enhance its democratic credential. This implies that the country has to conform to certain global standards and practices in its governance efforts for curbing corruption, improving institutional quality for service needs, providing access to justice, reducing poverty and ensuring human rights.

Need for an Integrated Strategy

The global war on terrorism for a country like Bangladesh is a continuous process of engagement to address ‘shifting
frontiers' of security in strategic, political and economic arenas. The need to reconcile global and regional imperatives with domestic compulsions warrants a wide range of policy integration and effective strategy. Bangladesh is gradually evolving such a strategy – creating an effective deterrent against the criminals and perpetrators of violence of any variety, and at the same time engaging constructively with religious groups of our society to meet the menace of violence in the name of Islam. It is in this context that we have to practice an 'inclusive democracy' where religious parties can only operate within the framework of democracy, but must conform to certain conduct not to bring 'emotional religious contents' in the public sphere to take undue political dividend. Indeed, Bangladeshis do not want Islam to be represented by those few who preach hatred, intolerance, bigotry and physical violence.

Today, the 'paradigm of expression' has to be changed and the 'political space' of Islam re-determined. We need some serious reforms in this context so that 'fragmentation', disunity and divisions cannot be created along Shia-Sunni, Ahmedya-Nabuayat or Ahal-e-Hadis- non-Ahal-e-Hadis identities. At the same time, political parties should not also play with religion in the name of "secular politics" or 'Islamic politics' to create antagonism and dissension in the society for political gains. The need for a 'value-framework' or 'code of conduct' in this context is in order for sound democratic politics. The unmitigated and unethical power-conflicts lead to illegitimacy and revengeful violence in the society. Politics must, therefore, be based on ethics and rectify economic and social deprivations towards creating peace and harmony in the society. The national determination to implement such an integrated strategy could be the best response to Bangladesh's war on global terrorism.
References

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