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Author(s)	Iftekharul Bashar
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Violent Radicalisation in Bangladesh: A Second Wave?

By Iftekharul Bashar

Synopsis

In spite of sustained operational response by the state, radical ideologies continue to spread in Bangladesh especially via cyberspace. The emergence of Ansarullah in Bangladesh signals a second wave of violent radicalisation in a new and borderless radical milieu.

Commentary

THE GLOBAL threat of violent extremism is becoming more dispersed and localised as exemplified by the emerging trend in Bangladesh. A relatively new group named Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) which draws inspiration from the global jihadist movement is trying to revive the local militant outfits in the country. The ABT aims to gain control of at least a part of Bangladesh through an armed jihad.

Bangladesh which experienced the first wave of violent radicalisation during 1999-2005, might be on its way to witness a second one. The emergence of ABT underscores the fact that as the new generation of violent extremists are taking over, cyberspace is increasingly becoming important. It is accelerating the spread of ideology, facilitating networking and proliferating training manuals for terrorist attacks. Above all it is narrowing the gap between local and global militant movements.

Global ideology in local language

The ABT has planned and committed the killing of a Bangladeshi blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider because of his "atheist" views. Haider's throat was slit after he was hacked to death, by ideologically-motivated followers who believed that it was their religious obligation to do so.

On 12 August 2013 Bangladeshi authorities arrested radical cleric Mufti Jasimuddin Rahmani, the leader of ABT, along with 30 of his followers from Barguna, a south western district. Mufti Jasimuddin used Muslim religious institutions like mosques and madrasahs to instigate Bangladeshi youth to wage armed jihad against the state. At least two members of ABT are followers of Al Qaeda and have been detained abroad for militant ties and activities.

What makes the ABT different from other and more known militant outfits in Bangladesh arguably is its propaganda and indoctrination capability. Unlike other groups the ABT has a strong presence in cyberspace, where it is leveraging technological skills of its members. By translating and disseminating the materials

produced by the Al Qaeda network, this group is trying to introduce global jihadist movement in the local language.

Through its cyberspace presence this group has been able to locate and radicalise a small and vulnerable fringe Bangladeshi youth, highlighting the impact that the new media has on radicalisation and violent extremism. Starting as an online group with blogs and websites, Ansarullah emerged as an organisation with a four-stage mission, starting from inspiring people to join armed jihad to the establishment of Sharia-based rule by killing all opposing forces.

Second wave of violent extremism?

The first wave of jihadist movements during 1999-2005 was led by Bangladeshis who participated in the Afghan mujahideen resistance against the Soviet occupation. A number of groups like Harkat ul Jihad al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B) and Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) emerged. However, Islamist militancy failed to take its roots due to the lack of popular support and government's counterterrorism initiatives.

Bangladesh has a zero tolerance policy towards extremism and militancy. The country strengthened cooperation with regional and international partners, brought about major changes in the legal framework to ensure internal security while making it more compatible to international standard. As a result of the authorities' counterterrorism efforts, there has been a decline in the attacks and Bangladeshi terrorist /extremist groups remained weak and in disarray. Interestingly, Ansarullah Bangla Team has surfaced at a time when the law enforcement environment is hostile.

Complex challenges

However the challenges are far more complex than before. Bangladesh will need to continue its zero-tolerance policy towards militancy and strengthen its counterterrorism capabilities. The ABT's emergence is evidence that the violent extremists can and do adapt to changes in the security environment.

As the ground in Bangladesh was hostile, they made the best use of cyberspace to reach their goals. As the current global trend suggests, violent extremists are empowering themselves with information technology and the new media. Bangladesh needs to develop its capability to detect, monitor, prevent and counter online radical activities and their impact on the ground.

With many of the extremist websites being hosted offshore, it is important to ensure that no terrorist group gets cyber sanctuary. Bangladesh needs to develop more international cooperation to deny cyberspace to violent extremists and terrorists.

Iftekharul Bashar is an Associate Research Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.