

Cover Sheet

Name: Major General A N M Muniruzzaman (Retd).

Title and Organisation: President, Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS)

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**ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS OF U.S HOUSE SUB COMMITTEE ON ASIA AND PACIFIC BY MAJOR
GENERAL A N M MUNRUZZAMAN NDC, PSC (RETD) , PRESIDENT, BANGLADESH INSTITUTE OF PEACE
AND SECURITY STUDIES (BIPSS)**

-How is the confluence of political violence, weak governance, corruption, poverty and Islamic militancy threatening impacting Bangladesh and its future relationship with the U.S ?

Political violence, weak governance, corruption, poverty and Islamic militancy have been vividly present in the socio-political domain of Bangladesh in recent times. The country is passing a difficult time fraught together with multiple issues.

Political Violence

The level of political violence was very high in the past year for three main reasons: opposition called protests against the dissolution of the election time Care Taker Government (CTG); Jammata-e-Islami (JI) opposition to the verdicts of the war crime trial, including its call for a fair trail; and orthodox Islamist protests against perceived apostles, atheist and defamers of Islam. The latest cycle of strikes and violence is due to a clamor for the restoration of CTG.

The main parties, the Awami League (AL), Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) have their organization sprouted in every locality of Bangladesh, and the nature of political clashes result in widespread violence and destruction. There were clashes in most cities, towns and even in many villages. The BNP and JI seem to have converged in their protest against the government in demand of a fair election, and that makes the potential for violence much more than what it would have been otherwise.

A serious lack of trust persists between the two major parties and their leaders in Bangladesh. The present crisis originates in the unilateral abolition of CTG system by the incumbent government through the 15th amendment. CTG was an established and well-accepted system in the political crisis-prone Bangladesh. The ruling party has offered their explanation for why they scrapped CTG system, referencing the overstay of last CTG and the Supreme Court dictate. This rationale for the dissolution of CTG through overwhelming parliamentary majority by the government doesn't appear to be a strong and convincing one, and was not accepted by the large majority in the country.

Experience and history in Bangladesh show that the incumbent government in Bangladesh has the record and capacity to manipulate elections. In the absence of a strong Election Commission, a fair election can only be conducted by a neutral non-party government.

The government's heavy handed and repressive handling of opposition political activities has also resulted in reactionary political violence.

In reaction to verdicts of the War Crimes Tribunal, at least 150 people including some security force members have been killed in clashes between January 2013 and October 2013, after the court began

handing down death sentences on accused JI leaders. JIs organizational power to conduct violent protest as well as government's disproportionate use of force was instrumental in such heavy causality. The Hefazat incident in the heart of Dhaka saw 15 deaths as per government sources. The figure is 68 according to the human rights group *Odhikari*.

From January to November 2013, an estimated 120 people died in clashes with police by the protesters and between rival political parties. In one recent strike, 20 people died and 30 people suffered severe burns. Around 265 people were injured across the country due to unremitting strikes on that single occasion. The violence was carried out by both the major parties and the JI. Buses, cars and other transports were also vandalized during strikes. Recent strikes and violence have adversely affected Bangladesh's economy to a great degree. The strikes, violence and turbulence of the past several months have thwarted growth, driven away both domestic and international investment. The situation has created greater risk for existing economic activities and undermined prospects for success. Export and import trade faces setbacks, production and supplies get disrupted, and future investment becomes uncertain in this political culture of 'strike'. Small business enterprises are the worst victims of the 'strike' programs.

Weak Governance

Most neutral economists and political analysts have rated the performance of the government as average to poor in most sectors, and moderately good in some sectors. With high expectation in the people's mind due to lofty pre-election promises by the ruling party, an average performance automatically evokes anti-incumbency sentiment, which exists in Bangladesh right now.

Some notable progress was made in few sectors like power generation, urban communication, junior education, public health and agriculture etc. In most other sectors the performance was average to poor.

State of law and order was poor; crime rates have been on the rise; crime prevention and justice system were pathetically slow despite the handful of high profile cases. Forced disappearances linked to political rivalry were high. Even an influential and well-known opposition leader who was a member of parliament in the last house, Mr. M Ilyas Ali, disappeared a couple of years back and was never found again.

Industrial and labor safety has been in a horrible and appalling state, and no checks or balances have worked. Hundreds of people died in accidents like the ones in Rana Plaza and Tajrin Garments.

Space for civil society has also been reduced due to the incumbent government's deliberate lack of attention to this segment of society.

Free expression by public and media has taken a blow. A journalist couple was murdered little more than a year back. It is believed that they had been investigating a top-level governmental nexus of cronyism, and that the perpetrators are known and linked to the government/ruling party. No progress was made in the subsequent police investigation.

Some TV channels like Channel One, Diganta TV and newspapers like AmarDesh and ShirshoKhabor have been suspended from operating for many months now. For Channel One it has been few years already.

The legal basis for their suspension was not clear. A popular editor was put behind the bars for many months now and the charges against him aren't very clear.

The political approach of the government has established the wrong principle that 'winner takes all' which is a root cause of current strikes. Respect for the government, which commands the support of a sizable proportion of the citizenry, is very low. Political space for opposition activities has increasingly been reduced and hardly any atmosphere has been maintained for good democratic practices.

Although the War Crimes Trials was a priority agenda in the AL election platform, the procedure and conduct of it has remained questionable. Some domestic and international observers have expressed their reservations about the standards of the trial.

There is a divisive streak in the political approach of the incumbent government instead of much needed reconciliatory one. The Bangladeshi Foreign Minister has recently circulated a communiqué to different foreign missions in Bangladesh mentioning that Bangladesh exists in two forms - one liberal and secular, and the other being orthodox Islamist and militant.

Vital constitutional bodies like the Judiciary were also allegedly being politicized. Other important constitutional bodies accused of being politicized are Public Service Commission (PSC), Election Commission (EC), Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), etc. Many crucial state organs like administration, military, police, etc. had also been hugely politicized. This engineered decay of institutions has reduced the state's capacity to act properly, and makes it worse in a crisis situation.

Corruption

The incumbent AL promised for a hard and real time action against all forms of corruption in their election manifesto, but the government has failed to deliver on this. Widespread corruption prevails mostly through cronyism and political favor. Evidence has emerged that senior government figures or party associates were involved in high-profile scams like market share engineering; the Padma bridge conspiracy for corruption; Hallmark Group's and Bismillah Group's corruption with alleged quid pro quo with senior government figures; Destiny multi-level marketing scam; etc.

In the investigation by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), conspiracy of corruption was found in the acts of the concerned Canadian firm and senior Bangladeshi governmental figures. A senior government official, under investigation of his involvement in this scam, is already in Bangladeshi jail. The Canadian investigation also pointed finger towards possible involvement of the Bangladeshi Prime Minister's family members in this.

Proper and honest procedures do not seem to have been followed in awarding governmental contracts. People and firms affiliated with the ruling party seem to have received most of the deals. For example a disproportionate bulk of power generation contracts have gone to Summit Power Company of the current Civil Aviation and Tourism Minister, Farukh Khan, who is believed to be an inner-circle person in the exclusive top brass of the ruling party and its leader.

Since the inception of this government, the student wing of the ruling party had been involved extensively in forcible grabbing of governmental tenders at lower levels, extortion, intimidation, land grabbing and many other crimes.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) Act was amended so that permission of the government has to be sought for investigating and trying governmental officials. This seems to be aimed at creating a

situation to allow for collaborative corruption by the politicians and the bureaucracy. This amendment renders the ACC to be a toothless body.

Politicization of state organs and institutions are an area of major non-monetary corruption. There is a sense in Bangladesh that no organs were spared from politicization beginning with the judiciary, police, military, public administration up to autonomous bodies like never before. Retaining state power at any cost is suspected as the purpose.

Poverty

Despite a reasonably consistent high growth rate above 6%, the government failed to create any mechanism to foster a faster trickle-down effect of this prosperity to the massively underdeveloped class of the extremely poor. Economic progress was confined to a certain affluent section and the associated middle-class.

Activities of NGOs and donor agencies have been instrumental in some poverty alleviation at rural grassroots level. However, the government targeted the largest and most reputable microfinance institution, the Nobel Peace Prize winning Grameen Bank and its main architect Dr. Yunus, the co-winner of that honor. Evidently, the prime reason of such targeting and harassment was jealousy of his fame and curbing his political potential through this unethical trick.

Unnecessary political turmoil and faulty economic strategy has gravely damaged the scope of faster growth and resulting poverty alleviation.

According to the HDR 2013 and UNDP, Bangladesh's HDI value for 2012 is 0.515, which puts the country in the low human development category as usual. No significant improvement has been made in this ranking over last few years despite Bangladesh being dubbed as one of 'Next 11' by Goldman Sachs few years back.

Islamic Militancy

Although the government had operational control over the terrorism situation in Bangladesh, it failed to wipe Islamist militant elements completely out from society. This is evidenced by the recent emergence of Islamist splinter terrorist groups like Ansarullah Bangla Team, BEM, Tamir-ud-Deen, etc.

Government handling of Shahbag- (so called) Atheist/ Defamers of Islam-Hefazat affair was inept and has resulted in some commotion amongst the orthodox Islamist segment of the society. This is perilous and may result in sporadic militancy.

Threat to Impact Bangladesh

All these together are already threatening to destabilize Bangladesh to a heightened scale.

Increased instability in Bangladesh means a hampering of the commercial functions, investment, trade, services and, above all, massive disturbances in normal life and subsistence activities of millions of poor and middle-class of this overpopulated nation of 160 million. Death, injury and destruction follow in big numbers in such situations in Bangladesh.

A destabilized Muslim majority nation is a breeding ground of fundamentalism, militancy and even terrorism. Bangladesh is no different.

In a worst-case scenario, some spillover effect can't be ruled out to neighboring provinces of bordering nations.

Future Relations with the US

The U.S has been consistent on certain foreign policy issues like democracy, human rights, counterterrorism, development of the underdeveloped nations, etc. Same is the case with Bangladesh.

A destabilized Bangladesh may not be ideal for useful partnership from the US in terms of aid, development partnership, security and intelligence cooperation, trade, commerce, etc. Any absence of real democracy would contradict the principles followed by the U.S and thus may create a relationship gap between Bangladesh and U.S. On the other hand, Bangladesh government's inability to handle the majority sentiment may push the U.S to maintain a distance, as the US traditionally prefers to see a balanced and stability focused approach.

-How are the extremist groups expanding their influence and popularity? What implications does this have for Bangladesh's future and spread of terrorism throughout the region?

Bangladesh has been confronted with a serious challenge from terrorism and violent extremism for over a decade. Despite efforts by successive governments to curb the operational abilities and strategic reach of these groups, the threat remains significant. There has also been a lack of strategic countermeasures against these groups. In order to understand the expanding influence and popularity of these groups, it is important to look beyond their ideological pull factor. Akin to terrorist and extremist organizations worldwide, groups such as Harkatul Jihad Al Islami – Bangladesh [HUJI-B] and Jama'at ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh [JMB] promote their ideology in order to attract followers and bolster their ranks. However, they also exploit the socio-economic issues plaguing Bangladesh. Such groups are increasingly talking about the governance deficit and lack of service delivery. In the aftermath of cyclone Sidr that hit Bangladesh in 2007, many extremist groups expeditiously rushed to the affected areas to provide relief. In certain places, they tried to exploit the grievances of the local populace due to the poor service delivery of the local administration.

The strategic intent of these groups is to create a state and society that will be purely theocratic in nature. Our research on JMB and HUJI-B literature has highlighted that they identify the entire state and society as *taghoot*. Loosely translated it means that the entire state and society is corrupt, which according to their ideological belief requires a transformation through the creation of an Islamist state. These groups continue to highlight is the lack of service delivery by the judicial system. Hence, in their target selection judges and symbols of the judicial system such as court houses have always featured prominently. We also need to look at the increasing activity of these groups in the backdrop of the acrimonious political climate that pervades Bangladesh. As the overall political system appears increasingly dysfunctional and creates a sense of disillusionment, groups such as JMB will flourish. It will be erroneous to underestimate the operational capability and strategic acumen of these outfits. They were able to carry out a large number of attacks from the period 1996 to 2007, including major incidents such as the serial bomb blasts in 2005 during which 463 explosions occurred in 63 of 64 districts across the country. Despite the fact that sustained operational measures have resulted in degradation of

extremist groups overall capability, a study of foiled plots will show that they are still active and continue to pose a threat.

In the recent past some major trends have been noticed which also merit attention. Historically the Qaumi Madrasas (which are not regulated by the government) have been the breeding ground for militancy and terrorism. Over the last couple of years, the center of gravity has noticeably shifted to the private universities and other tertiary institutions attended by urban youth. Therefore, the threat of urban radicalization is a new phenomenon in Bangladesh, one that has serious ramifications. Groups such as HizbutTahrir Bangladesh (banned since 2009) mainly operate in the urban space and target a demographic that has not been associated with terrorism. It is important to note that, HizbutTahrir has been quite active despite its ban.

Bangladesh in many ways is quite unique in the sense that the ethno-linguistic identity cohabits harmoniously with the religious identity of its citizens. Maintaining that balance is pivotal towards ensuring Bangladesh's moderate character. Unfortunately, some steps taken by the present government towards enforcing 'aggressive secularization' of the Bangladeshi polity has resulted in creating an imbalance. Such events will also result in reducing the space for the liberal polity and provide a boost to ultra-orthodox elements within society. The rise of Hefazat-e-Islam is a case in point. A group which was unknown even a year ago has now emerged as a major actor within the Islamist political space. Hefazat's rise to its current position is directly attributable to the inept handling of the Shahbagh movement and some other un-pragmatic policies taken by the government.

In order to analyze the national and regional impact of terrorism and extremism in Bangladesh the following aspects need to be considered:

- a. An increase in the level of extremism across society could potentially result in the erosion of the moderate and secular principles of the Bangladeshi state.
- b. Islam in Bangladesh, which is based on a *Sufi* tradition, has borrowed extensively from the overall society and various cultural values. The type of religious practice espoused by the extremist organizations is therefore at odds with the overall nature of the society. Thus, rising extremism has serious societal ramifications.
- c. Bangladesh could be divided into two major fragments exacerbating the divisiveness that already exists in the Bangladeshi state.
- d. As the NATO-led ISAF forces withdraw from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and the wider region are in a particularly vulnerable situation. Unless terrorism and extremism are checked in Bangladesh, it could spill over into other countries in the region, especially India and Myanmar.
- e. A trilateral convergence of terrorist groups in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh could emerge post 2014. The major Islamist groups in these three countries trace their origins back to the Afghan Jihad or the war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Their historical association is manifested in the operational linkages between Lashkar-e-Tayeba (LeT) and groups in Bangladesh.
- f. These groups are fundamentally opposed to the enhancement of relations between the United States and Bangladesh. Hizbut Tahrir in Bangladesh for instance has been vociferous in its opposition for stronger military ties between the two countries. These groups also have the ability to reach out to the masses through their strategic communication techniques and could potentially increase sentiments

against the United States, which is generally quite low. Sowing seeds of suspicion in the minds of the people will set back the process of enhancement of ties between the United States and Bangladesh.

g. The writ of the state needs to be maintained at all costs. Unless these groups are controlled and countered, they could seek refuge in remote corners of the country and a repeat of the situation that prevailed in Swat and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan (before the military operation) could be witnessed in Bangladesh. Due to Bangladesh's geographic contiguity with five states of India, it will pose a direct threat to India's security as well.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to move away from an operational outlook on counterterrorism and towards a non-kinetic approach. A whole of government and a whole of society approach towards counterterrorism along with an overhaul of the national CT architecture are absolutely critical. There is also a need to take counterterrorism above and beyond the political fray and fashion a bipartisan approach towards this issue. Inability to effectively curb on terrorist and extremist activity in Bangladesh could be cataclysmic not only for Bangladesh but for the wider region especially for India and Myanmar. As the NATO led ISAF forces withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014, the region is in a highly vulnerable situation and Bangladesh could be confronted with a renewed challenge from terrorism.

-What are the ramifications of growing level of intra-communal and sectarian violence against the minority Hindu community in Bangladesh ?

The recent violence against the minority Hindus, although isolated in nature, reveals that their persecution hasn't stopped, despite the Awami League government's perceived pro-minority stance. Although some good numbers from minority communities can be seen in some important governmental positions at various levels, the general persecution and discrimination against Hindus at the grassroots level in the society didn't change significantly towards any good. On many occasions, some ruling secular AL party members were also seen usurping minority properties alongside opposition linked or independent communal criminals and Islamist extremists. The establishment is less active in prevention in the latter cases.

The recent riots based on false propaganda against the minorities, both Hindus and Buddhist, are also tying down a significant amount of security forces who otherwise could have been employed in their normal duties or counterterrorism roles. The incident of Ramu where Islamist thugs of all parties, including the AL, attacked and destroyed Buddhist temples and properties, basing their attack on just a rumor. This demonstrates the delicacy and charged up environment in society at present.

In some cases there are accusations that the ruling party is deliberately conducting some communal attacks in disguise on the minorities to defame the opposition. In one occasion a proven arsonist of Hindu property was found to be a ruling party activist, and was seen recently with the state minister for home affairs in an open event. The police have not arrested him.

The violence and resulting suffering or migration of Hindus, although normally confined to few sporadic incidents, is damaging Bangladesh's reputation as a tolerant and moderate Muslim majority country.

-What needs to happen in Bangladesh to ensure that a stable, secure and accountable government develops?

Bangladesh lacks miserably in healthy political culture. Bangladeshi politicians have not developed fair and just rules of the game. Politics in Bangladesh is fraught with unprecedented personal animosity and trapped in the cycle of vengeance. Grabbing power and retaining it by any means appears to be the purpose of the major political parties in Bangladesh.

Development of right political culture and a functional system of power transfer, through a fair and credible election, is imperative. There is also a need to have a clear divorce from past animosity so as to push reform and confidence building measures forward.

Constitutional bodies and important state/governmental organs must be reformed and reorganized with objectivity, and right spirit of propriety has to be injected into those bodies. Indispensable institutions like Judiciary are in a sorry state and measures must be taken to bring back public confidence on those.

Space for freedom and activities of civil society must be expanded so as to allow checks and balances in the system.

Political reforms are required to take place to put Bangladeshi democracy in line with international standards and conventions. Interparty democracy must be a criterion to be in politics in Bangladesh, which will have the chance of ensuring accountability and rational political behavior free of personal disposition and subjectivity.

Political focus should be recast on public welfare, economic growth, services etc mainstream issues, instead of secondary issues and issues of personal interest.

Initiative for all these mentioned 'to do's may come either from Bangladeshi politicians, which is less likely at this point of time, or from civil society, international community and donors working together to push reforms into the system and get the politician aboard quickly or gradually, as practicable.

-Is communal and political violence increasing the risk of an army coup to ensure elections occur?

All stakeholders, domestic or international, in relation to Bangladesh, should put their best effort to make the politicians reach a negotiated political settlement and conduct a fair election under a neutral government.

However, an uncompromising belligerent state and increased political violence may suck the military into the crisis. If the military is asked to act against any popular uprising by the incumbent government, it may arise a heightened public expectation for rescue from the crisis by the military, and could evoke a coup.

In either case, there is likely to be a military backed interim civilian government to hold fair election and transfer power to the elected. Any prolonged stay of such government beyond 6 to 8 months would be harmful for Bangladesh.