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The Challenge of Radicalisation: Hizb ut-Tahrir in Bangladesh

By Iftekharul Bashar

Synopsis

The announcement of a foiled coup last month underscored the emergence of the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) as a new security challenge in Bangladesh. Despite its aim to overthrow the country's democratically elected government, HT is attracting support for its IT-enabled ideology due to the country's confrontational politics and government's poor economic performance.

Commentary

THE BANGLADESH Army announced on 19 January 2012 that it had foiled a coup attempt to overthrow the democratically-elected government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Some mid-ranking officers and their retired colleagues arrested in this connection admitted their links with the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT).

Even as Bangladesh managed to reduce the security challenge from Islamist militant groups, radicalisation, especially of the youth, has the potential of instigating violent extremism. The HT has already been able to recruit a significant number of youths in the country's main universities. Moreover, as the coup bid demonstrates, HT could be attempting to infiltrate the Army to further its aim.

What explains HT phenomenon?

Over the last ten years Hizb ut-Tahrir has grown in strength and capacity to challenge the democratically-elected government. It is constantly trying to subvert the state institutions and disrupt the democratic system. In spite of being banned in Bangladesh, HT has remained active. The group has a strong online presence. Its website publicises its activities, criticises government policies ranging from the environment to foreign policy and defence, and writes provocative articles to create instability in the Army. It tries to project itself as "nationalist" in order to gain sympathy from the youth who would otherwise not be interested to join them.

One of the major reasons behind the rise of HT is the weakness of democratic institutions in Bangladesh. Domestic politics remain polarised and virulent and the country remains mired in corruption and poor governance. Though there have been some improvements in the social sectors, the country has not been able to create sustainable opportunities for the youth. This has led to frustration among the urban youth who find themselves trapped between the power politics of the ruling elites and economic deprivation. The political parties have failed to reach a consensus on national issues and remain stuck in political feuds.

HT's Narrative and ideology

HT advocates a return to the Caliphate of the golden years of Islam both as a local and global solution to the existing social and economic problems in the country and in the Muslim world. Until it was banned in October 2009 it freely organised seminars and study circles.

The appeal of its narratives and ideology, given their distinct characteristics, has helped the HT to flourish. HT frames its narratives in such a way that they become more credible and create a deep impact on the audience. For example in their effort to ensure credibility HT uses facts and figures on current issues culled from the trusted mainstream national news sources. As a result HT is able to retain a loyal audience from which it draws its dedicated members. With the smart use of the Internet these narratives are spreading rapidly. Therefore in spite of a ban and a strong law enforcement response from the authorities, the outfit has continued to grow.

Some of the simmering issues like the killing of Bangladeshis by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) and India's mega-dam project in Tipaimukh on the common river system have been capitalised by HT to portray India as an enemy state. Many analysts are of the opinion that the tension in India-Bangladesh relations is strengthening the narratives of HT. This will inevitably affect the public image of the current government which has been a strong advocate of good relations with India.

Hizb ut-Tahrir's anti-US rhetoric is also significant. It has criticised Bangladesh for its security collaboration with the US which HT considers an obstacle to establishing the Islamic Caliphate. A segment of the HT membership finds the "nationalist" rhetoric on policy issues even more appealing than the Islamist solution it offers to solve them. Besides, many recruits have joined this Islamist group without the proper knowledge of Islam which this group is using as a potent tool for political mobilisation.

Hizb ut-Tahrir does not overtly support violence, but many of its members do not denounce it. Therefore it will not be a surprise if the HT members with higher level of exposure to extremist ideology opt for violence.

External Linkage

HT was launched in Bangladesh in November 2001 with the support of a small segment of the Bangladeshi diaspora in the United Kingdom. From the beginning UK-based Hizb ut-Tahrir members visited Bangladesh and built organisational capacity for its Bangladesh chapter. Due to domestic legal limitations the UK has not been able to take any effective measures against HT. As a result the Bangladesh chapter is enjoying unimpeded external support.

The recent HT-inspired coup attempt, though thwarted, indicates a deeper crisis within Bangladeshi society. HT seems to have managed to gather a sizable audience through the Internet and online social networks. The deficiency of the government in giving economic opportunities to the youth is increasing the risk of radicalisation. In such a scenario, Bangladesh cannot afford to remain fully reliant on just its operational capacity.

The main fight against HT has to be more ideological and less kinetic – that is, less resorting to force. Effective use of counter-narratives combined with visible and substantive social and economic reforms can help Bangladesh at this critical juncture. Above all Bangladesh needs to create more opportunities for the youth and try to co-opt those who are falling prey to HT's ideology.

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