

Bangladeshi Fundamentalists Riot Again

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A fresh outbreak of violence in Bangladesh followed a tribunal that sentenced a top Islamist opposition party politician to death. But those radical Islamist groups currently challenging the government, experts say, pose a wider regional threat.



Clashes were reported in Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong and several other major Bangladeshi cities, the Times of India reports.

Activists of the Jamaat-e-Islami party have been hurling stones and handmade bombs at security forces, who were deployed in great numbers in anticipation of a new wave of protests after the hearing.

The verdict against Muhammad Kamaruzzaman, the top member of Jamaat-e-Islami, was the fourth from Bangladesh's war crimes tribunals since January.

Over the last week at least 38 people have been killed, according to official estimates, while the opposition says government forces killed hundreds during the protests on Monday alone.
Liberation war tribunal

The recent surge in Islamic related clashes intensified following the creation of a tribunal by the Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The court was introduced to bring to justice to those who were accused of committing atrocities during the war for independence and a civil war of 1971.

Since then, Jamaat-e-Islami, Islamist political party activists have increased their confrontation with the government forces across the country with many hundreds of deaths and mass destruction of public property with the aim of overthrowing Hasina's government. Historically, Jamaat opposed Bangladeshi independence from Pakistan.

On February 28th the tribunal announced a death by hanging sentence for Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, one of the leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami, for the war crimes over 40 years ago. By March, three Jamaat leaders had been convicted of crimes.

Bangladesh gained its independence in 1971, following India's intervention in a rebellion against Pakistan. In 1991, democratically held elections ended two decades of authoritarian rule in Dhaka and positioned two main opposition forces, the Bangladesh

National Party (BNP), which now forms the opposition coalition, and the leading party, the Awami League (AL). Jamaat-e-Islami and indirectly its radical wing of Hefajat-e-Islam (Protectorate of Islam) is a key partner in the opposition coalition. Bangladeshi fundamentalist Islamic groups are believed to be responsible for the recent clashes with police.

At least seven more verdicts are expected to be announced in the coming months. The high profile cases include Jamaat's current leader, Motiur Rahman Nizami, as well as the party's head in 1971, Ghulam Azam. If the defendants are found guilty, then top leadership of the Jamaat will be eliminated.

Following deadly Monday's clashes, the police indicted 194 Hefajat-e-Islam activists with various crimes.

It is also this group that since 2011, possibly empowered by the Arab Spring protests across the wider Muslim world, led violent demonstrations against the women's equal rights policy of the government.

In 2013 this group warned the government with a 13-point charter, demanding the government to introduce a new blasphemy law, reinstate the role of Allah in the constitution, make Islamic education mandatory and ban women from mixing with men. Bangladesh has rejected the Hefajat-e-Islam demands.

Opposition terror links

One of the organizers of the latest violence is Maulana Habibur Rahman who claimed to have been to Afghanistan in 1988 and revealed his involvement with Osama Bin Laden and another banned Islamist militant organization Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami most active in South Asian countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India since the early 1990s.

BNP's coalition also includes an Islamist party, the Islamiya Okiya Jote (IOJ) which is rumored to have connections with Al-Qaeda after some of its members fled to Bangladesh in the aftermath of US war in Afghanistan.

Other groups linked with Al-Qaeda are also active on the ground in Bangladesh. Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) is said to be active in the country's north-western region. The Government of Bangladesh has classified JMJB as a terrorist organization.

Regional threat

All of these militant elements inside the country pose not only a domestic security threat but also a regional danger, especially with the ties to Pakistan and the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Fundamentalist activism in Bangladesh flourished in 2001 after a four party coalition led by the center-right Bangladesh Nationalist Party and including two fundamentalist parties - Jamaat-e-Islami and the Islamic Oikya Jote rose to temporary power.

"Jamaat and Islamic Oikya Jote are not just fundamentalist organizations. They support and have links with the Taliban and al-Qaeda and both parties have supported the terrorist activities," writes Sudha Ramachandran from the worldsecuritynetwork.com.

The BNP led government reign coincided with the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the loss of training camps in Pakistan.

"Their bases were disrupted by counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan, so al-Qaeda fighters were forced to look for new nests. Bangladesh emerged as an attractive sanctuary," Ramachandran writes.

"These fundamentalist right wingers who oppose the independence of Bangladesh conspired from the outset of the country. They could not reconcile with the fact that with the demise of Pakistan they never accepted the secular identity of Bangladesh," Bidit Dey from the University of Northumbria told RT.

In the past, Bangladeshi nationals have been linked to terrorist schemes abroad. In October of 2012 a Bangladeshi man was arrested for allegedly trying to blow up the United States Federal Reserve building in New York City. In 2010 British citizens of Bangladeshi origin were arrested in the United Kingdom for plotting to attack during the Christmas holiday season.

The Islamist conglomerate in the country are now in opposition of Hasina government as her Awami League official stands has had a vision of freedom and democracy.

"They are trying to convert it to another state like Pakistan. They are trying to make it an ungoverned state by creating anarchy," Dey says.

Today Muslims in Bangladesh account for approximately 148.6 million people, some 90 percent of the total population, so the recent Muslim driven protest in Bangladesh can also be attributed to self-identity.

"The whole Muslim identity question affects Muslims much further afield as well. It has surfaced in Indonesia, and it has become an issue in the Middle East since the Arab revolts of 2011," Dr Carool Kersten, lecturer in Islamic Studies at King's College in London told RT.

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