

Re-Emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan and its Impact on Fundamentalism in Bangladesh

Bibhuti Bhusan Biswas & Dipankar Dey

Abstract

The emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan will reinvigorate fundamentalist and extremist networks in Bangladesh, with whom they share ideological, historical, and operational ties. In the broad term, this paper has examined the four broad areas of fundamentalist activism and its subsequent impact in Bangladesh as follows; a) increased attempts by local militants to travel to Afghanistan for combat or operational training; b) an increased risk of radicalisation among sections of the population; c) a revival and re-configuration of local terrorist groups and networks, accompanied by renewed attempts at fund-raising, resource-sharing, and plotting attacks for publicity; and d) Al-Qaeda's (AQ) growing influence over local militants. However, a new generation of Bangladeshi militants may aim to emulate the Taliban's modus operandi and techniques. Despite tremendous improvements in Bangladesh's counter-terrorism capabilities, the Government of Bangladesh will have to check the regular recruitment and flow of Afghan refugees' fundamentalists' leaders and cadres in Bangladesh and people whom the Taliban's course of action may influence. This paper will also examine the rising Taliban and its impact on Bangladesh.

Keywords: Taliban, Afghanistan, Fundamentalist, Bangladesh, Power Shift and South Asia region.

Introduction

During the Afghan civil war, several groups emerged in Afghanistan in the name of religious fundamentalism. Hence, Taliban has been one of the groups that sustained and ruled Afghanistan for more than a decade. Taliban arose as one of the most significant groups during the Afghan Civil War in 1994. They consisted primarily of students from Pashtun

districts of Eastern and Southern Afghanistan, trained from traditional Islamic institutions. The movement extended throughout Afghanistan under the leadership of Mohammed Omar Mujahid. In 1996, the organisation took control of about one-third of Afghanistan and created the First Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, with Kabul's capital being relocated to Kandahar. The Northern Alliance forces, which seized portions of northeast Afghanistan and essentially retained international legitimacy to continue the temporary Islamic State of Afghanistan, resisted the Taliban's administration.

At the same point, in 1996, Taliban came to power in Afghanistan till 2001. During this period, the Taliban forcefully implemented Sharia (Islamic Law). However, they were highly condemned from across the globe for barbaric acts of massacre against Afghan civilians, human rights violations, severe discrimination against religious minorities, and restrictions on the free movement of women. However, in 2021, once again Taliban came to power and followed up the same rudimentary way of governing in Afghanistan. This power transformation from an elected Government to rising Islamic fundamentalist challenges good governance's democratic setup and values—this re-emerging of Taliban in Afghanistan shows the reverse transformation of democratic process.

Hence, the bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Bangladesh do not have much closer engagement like other South Asia nations have with Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the most common factor is to connect with Afghanistan, i.e., religious angle. Both countries practise Islamic rituals and laws. From a religious point of view, Afghanistan and Bangladesh have shared the religious 'soft power, but from the economic and military perspective, both countries do not have much engagement in the few decades.

Although, the critical assessment of bilateral relations, religious fundamentalists are shifting from Afghanistan to Bangladesh, which creates an ineffective way of governance and challenges to the police force. They were organised and well-armed cadres to easily dominate the Bangladesh society. These Islamic fundamentalists are being systematically placed in crucial positions in the Government mechanism.

Bangladesh is being transformed into an Islamist state within a state in preparation for the eventual takeover of the country as the base for Islamist operations in South and Southeast Asia. More crucially, Islamic militancy is on the rise in Bangladesh, posing a significant threat to India's security and stability.

Bangladesh is on the verge of becoming a hotbed of Islamic militancy. This transformation negatively impacted the foreign policy

of Bangladesh because it would be abandoning the chance of maintaining a warm and cordial relationship with India. Various militant Islamic organisations, such as Jamaat-e-Islami and its fundamentalist allies, for example, gain a foothold in Bangladesh's important governmental institutions and stretch their tentacles deep into the country's society, political, and economy, as well as foment anti-India sentiment across the country.

Bilateral Relations between Afghanistan and Bangladesh

Bangladesh prioritised development in the years that followed, following Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's progressive vision and embarking on a growth journey guided by the values of socialism and secularism. In Afghanistan, however, the Taliban adopted a traditional system of justice and governance in order to enforce their Sharia law, resulting in widespread brutality and destruction in the 21st century.

Both Bangladesh and Afghanistan were at war in the 1970s, with the former fighting Pakistan for independence and the latter fighting a civil war between a communist government backed by the Soviets and anti-communist ideology used by guerrillas' warfare tactic known as the Mujahideen. Whereas, Bangladesh made considerable success in educating the girl child and providing opportunities for women to have a strong voice in the public sphere that to efforts by non-governmental organisations such as Grameen Bank and BRAC and various state undertakings. Bangladeshi terrorists and Afghan jihadists have a long history of cooperation. This link dates back to the Soviet-Afghan conflict (1979-1989) when tens of thousands of Bangladeshis flocked to Afghanistan to help the mujahideen oppose the Soviet invasion. Five mass recruitment also took place in Bangladesh around religious institutions such as mosques and madrassas.

According to various estimates, between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, roughly 3000-35006 Bangladeshi fundamentalists went to Afghanistan to join the battle under the command of Abdur Rahman Faruqi. Many were students from India and Pakistan's madrassas who invaded Afghanistan through Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (redesignated as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). Later on, Faruqi founded Harkat-ul Jihad-al-Islami, Bangladesh (HuJI-B), or Movement of Islamic Holy Battle – Bangladesh, in 1989, which caused the height of the war.

While many Bangladeshi warriors died in the Soviet-Afghan war, some would return home with virulent jihadist doctrine, fighting skills, resources, and a network of fighters in order to pursue an armed

campaign in Bangladesh with the ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic theocracy. With the Soviets vanquished in Afghanistan, the AQ-led fundamentalist movement in that country would spread its operations worldwide. Bangladesh was listed as one of the nations where the Rohingya Muslim population, many of whom had fled to Bangladesh after being pushed out of Myanmar, may launch a terrorist campaign.

Al-Qaeda has been expanding its network through HuJI-B in the South Asian network since its establishment. Between 1999 and 2005, the Al-Qaeda and HuJI-B were responsible for at least 13 attacks in Bangladesh, killing over 100 people, including 12 intellectuals, religious and sectarian minorities. They were mainly targeted by attacks on political leaders, officials of the embassy, and cultural gatherings. HuJI-B has also carried out several high-profile attacks, including an attempted assassination of the then-opposition leader (current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina) and the then-British High Commissioner in Bangladesh (Bashar, 2021). The group's main objective was to expel Bengali culture and secular politics from the country, which they considered roadblocks to establishing an Islamic state modelled after the Taliban.

HuJI-B also sent their fighter to western Myanmar's Arakan State (Rakhine State) in the early 2000s to help Rohingya militant groups such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO). It has also given financial and logistical assistance. With this motivation, they try to expand their network throughout the region.

Traditional ties between Bangladeshi jihadi groups and those in Afghanistan, mainly the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, have reawakened fears in local security circles that the Taliban's ascendancy may lure a fresh wave of regional militants connected with both Al-Qaeda and IS to the Afghan theatre. In the recent event of clashes with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, many Bangladeshis have died in the combat situation, while the exact number is unknown. However, a large number of Bangladeshi and their descendants still believe in staying in Afghanistan. Even during the United States' two-decade military presence in Afghanistan, some Bangladeshis managed to flee to the country to join the terrorist cause.

Hence, In July 1996, the Islami Oikya Jote organised a strike to protest against the restrictions imposed on the fundamentalist groups by the Government of Bangladesh. During the strike, protesters raised slogans "we shall be Taliban and Bangladesh will be Afghanistan". Most surprisingly BNP backed the strike and Begum Zia met the chief of Jamaat Prof. Golam Azam to discuss various national issues. The BNP

defended its collaboration with the fundamentalist groups, especially the Jamaat, by arguing that all opposition parties had the responsibility to oust the Government.

The bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Afghanistan are having long history. The 'soft power' instruments have dominated both countries' foreign policy. Because Religious sentiments and diaspora have tremendously impacted bilateral relations, apart from that, the other sectors like economics and investment do not heavily influence both countries. For instance, according to the Observatory of Economic Complexity, in 2019, Bangladesh exported \$7.15 million to Afghanistan. Although from 1995 to 2019, Bangladesh has increased their export capacity by 2.46 per cent, whereas Afghanistan to Bangladesh exports has increased by 1.69 per cent from 1997 to 2019. According to the Economy Complexity Index, Bangladesh ranked 111 in exports to Afghanistan (-1.19), and 52 ranked the total exports (\$41.2 billion) in 2020. In contrast, Afghanistan ranked 109 in exports to Bangladesh.

This economic engagement has also reflected that both countries' export and import capacity have been constantly increased, not by a considerable margin. Perhaps, it can argue that Governmental changes break down the growth of the economic partnership. Recently, re-emerging of the Taliban and taking the power of Afghanistan has also severe concern over the South Asia region, particularly Bangladesh.

Talibanization in Afghanistan: Retrospect of Historical Context

The Taliban movement was started in 1993-1994 by Afghan Sunni Muslims, particularly clergy and students, who are largely from rural Pashtun areas. They were anti-Soviet fighters commonly known as Mujahideen. A civil war broke out between mujahideen parties after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the subsequent fall of the Soviet-supported Afghan Government in 1992. Taliban beliefs on the strict traditional practices of the Pashtuns, who represent a plurality (though not a majority) of Afghanistan's ethnic practices and have to want traditionally dominated the country.

Three decades ago, the Taliban had originated as an armed organisation that arose from Afghanistan's civil conflict in the 1990s. By 1996, they had taken control of the majority of the country. However, they were toppled in 2001 by the United States-led NATO and Afghan forces. The Talibani organisation quickly launched what would become a nearly two-decade insurgency. They governed Afghanistan again in 2021,

probably to a larger extent than in the 1990s. The Taliban's history may help comprehend the emergence of the re-establishment in 2021.

A Critical Understanding of Taliban and its Relation with Fundamentalists in Bangladesh

Violent extremism and fundamentalist ideology constitute a significant security risk for Bangladesh. As a result of the Taliban's ascendancy, scholars argued that there is a chance that homegrown extreme Islamist groups will resurface. Radical organisations misrepresent or misinterpret the many parts of the occurrence through digital tools and social media. Many people have expressed sympathy for the Taliban on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, and many have linked the occupation to the "triumph of Islam" (Sabriet, 2021). It has been examined that many fundamentalists attempted to travel from Bangladesh to Afghanistan via India to "give their services" to the Taliban administration. For example, it is believed that Afghan returnees formed the first Islamist militant organisation in Bangladesh, Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islamic Bangladesh (HuJI-B), following the end of the Soviet-Afghan war in the early 1990s. Other transnational radical faith-based violent extremist groups, such as the Islam State-Khorasan (IS-K), have already made inroads into Afghan territory. ISIS-K has claimed responsibility for the recent attack on the Kabul airport on August 26, which killed 170 people, including thirteen United States personnel (Giustozzi, 2019).

In Bangladesh, groups inspired by the Islamic State (IS), such as the Neo-JMB faction of the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), have existed for a long time. In fact, several of the young militants of the Neo-JMB gang carried out the 20 attacks at the Holey Artisan eatery in Gulshan, Dhaka. Later on, the IS claimed that responsibility.

In the news report, 22 people had killed in the tragedy, including a few foreigners. As a result, the August 29 US drone strike on a suspected suicide bomber at Kabul airport has re-energized anti-West or anti-American extremist sentiments across South Asia (Giustozzi, 2019). However, the refugee influx stemming from Kabul's political shuffle is a significant source of concern. Bangladesh has turned down the United States' proposal to house thousands of Afghan refugees. Dhaka has been dealing with 1.1 million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar for quite some time. The international community has been unable to find a solution to the situation, and the repatriation process has not been sped up. Despite Bangladesh being one of the world's most densely populated countries, the Government opened its borders to refugees for humanitarian reasons.

Emerging Radical Fundamentalists and It's Impact on Governmental Process

The Taliban recruited many fighters from other nations, particularly Bangladesh, in the 1980s. These terrorists brought back the Taliban's hardline heritage, which demands strict adherence to Sharia law for administration, which in practice translates to a mediaeval and often inhumane system of justice.

These returnees formed Harkat-ul Jihad-al-Islami, Bangladesh or HuJI-B, a local radical network with financial assistance and strategic instruction from the Taliban, in order to transform Bangladesh into an Islamic State. The radical organisation has been blamed for multiple terror incidents across Bangladesh since its establishment in the 2000s. They conducted the Ramna bombings in 2001 during the Bengali New Year, which was broadcast live on television. Three years later, in 2004, the HuJI assaulted an Awami League function, murdering 24 members of the party and injuring over 500 others. At the time of the occurrence, Sheikh Hasina (now Bangladesh's Prime Minister) was the opposition leader. The Bangladesh National Party-Jamaat-e-Islami coalition's top executives were found guilty of using the HuJI to target the Awami League in a subsequent Dhaka court verdict (Bose, 2021). The top commanders of HuJI's have also assisted in the formation of the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, Bangladesh (JMB) by establishing a link between one of the JMB's chiefs, Siddiqur Rahman, also known as "Bangla Bhai," and Shaykh Abdur Rahman, one of the prominent leaders who had returned from Afghanistan. Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh represents prominence in Bangladesh saw a series of attacks in the mid-2000s, including the attempted assassination of progressive writer Humayun Azad in 2004 and mass-coordinated explosions in 60 districts throughout the country in 2005. The JMB, like the Taliban, sought to construct an Islamic society based on the Holy Quran and Hadith, and so fought Bangladesh's democratic government violently (Bose, 2021).

Bangladesh's government, led by Sheikh Hasina since 2009, has adopted a "zero-tolerance to terrorism" policy in response to the mounting threat posed by these Islamist organisations., which became particularly apparent following a 2016 attack on a restaurant in Dhaka that killed 23 people, including 18 foreigners. The Government tries to resolve the radicalisation problem in order to the destruction of the JMB and also eradicate the HuJI. The recent development of the Bangladesh Police achieved the new momentum to establish the specialised unit of Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime.

It has confirmed that Bangladesh has concerned about the political situation and is committed to the possible way to restore peace and stability in the South Asia region. Anyhow, Bangladesh does not respond to the Afghanistan crisis; rather, they prefer a “watch and wait” policy.

Hence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh said: *Bangladesh feels that the only way to ensure the country's peace and growth is for its people to choose a democratic and pluralistic Afghanistan. Bangladesh sees itself as a possible development partner and ally of Afghanistan in this regard* (The Hindu, 2021).

However, The Taliban's capture of Kabul has sparked a social media celebration of the event as an Islamic victory among the fundamentalists in Bangladesh. Bangladeshis have praised the Taliban on social media. One of the social media users, S. Islam from Sylhet in the north-eastern of Bangladesh, recently wrote on a Facebook page that fundamentalists from Bangladesh trended their posts as *Go ahead (Taliban), the future world is waiting for you to lead i* (Islam, 2021).

In the same way, the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, On August 17, 2021, A.K. Abdul Momen stated that the government would be cautious. Since they were “identified and uprooted,” however, there has been little sign of action among Afghan-trained fighters in Bangladesh. Hassan (Hassan, 2021). While it is true that Bangladesh has dismantled much of the network established by Afghanistan returnees in the early 2000s, new radicalization poses a threat (Rajagopalan, 2021). Bangladesh's counter-terrorism forces would be wise to keep an eye on the potential threat that emerging radicals without any linking to larger international terror networks could represent to the country.

Conclusion

Bangladesh is one of the South Asia region countries that got independence in 1971. Since its independence, Bangladesh has constantly focused on poverty, life expectancy, eliminating crime and so on. In which Harkat-ul Jihad-al-Islami, Bangladesh and other organisations have the overwhelming support of Taliban and ISIS. Due to these radical ideologies, Bangladesh has faced several problems like attacks, bombings and riots over the year. It has obviously serious challenges for the development process and maintaining the democratic values in Bangladesh. Once again, the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in 2021, which not only boosted the rising radicalisation but also impacted the South Asia region, particularly in Bangladesh. The re-emerging of the Taliban would influence the rising fundamentalists in Bangladesh.

In this regard, Bangladesh Government needs to identify the necessitated meticulous planning, adequate border security, and monitoring cooperation on a regional and worldwide scale of mutual legal assistance and intelligence exchange. Because Taliban issue is unlikely to culminate in a direct attack on Bangladeshi soil, the country must be vigilant against the re-emergence of extreme Islamist ideologies. It is obvious that re-emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan has boosted the moral of the fundamentalists in Bangladesh. Whereas Bangladesh has the history of eliminating much of the network set up by the Afghanistan returnees of the early 2000s, nevertheless there is the danger of boosting radicalization. Hence, Bangladesh needs to be more careful and vigilance in terms of dealing with any fundamentalist groups as opposition has always linked with such groups. Bangladesh-India may strengthen its counter terrorism policy by cooperating with each other and sharing intelligence inputs for stopping further escalation of any radical activities.

References

- [1] Bashar, I. (2021, September). Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 13(4).
- [2] Doyle, S. M. (2019, October). Profile of Islamist Militants in Bangladesh. 13(5), 1-19
- [3] Bose, S. (2021, September 09). Brewing Apprehensions: Bangladesh Watchful of Taliban. New Delhi : Observer Research foundation . Retrieved May 24, 2022, from <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/brewing-apprehensions-bangladesh-watchful-of-taliban/>
- [4] Fink, N. C. (2010). *Bombs and Ballots: Terrorism, Political Violence, and Governance in Bangladesh*. International Peace Institute. Retrieved from https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/e_pub_bombs_and_ballots.pdf
- [5] Ganguly, S. (2006). *The Rise of Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/3D/3DE02D6343721969DC38B80861DE5DBE_sr171.pdf
- [6] Giustozzi, A. (2019, August 28). The Taliban – ISIS Relations Amidst a Peace Deal with US in Afghanistan. New Delhi : Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved May 24, 2022, from <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-taliban-isis-relations-amidst-a-peace-deal-with-us-in-afghanistan-54859/>
- [7] Hassan, A. M. (2021, August 30). Implications of the Taliban Victory for Bangladesh. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved April 30, 2022, from <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/implications-of-the-taliban-victory-for-bangladesh/>

Re-Emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan and its Impact on...

- [8] Hossain, A. A. (2012, May). Islamic Resurgence in Bangladesh's Culture and Politics: Origins, Dynamics and Implications. 23(2), 1-35
- [9] Islam, A. (2021, August 25). Bangladesh: Islamists Emboldened by Taliban Win in Afghanistan. Deutsche Welle. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from <https://www.dw.com/en/bangladesh-islamists-emboldened-by-taliban-win-in-afghanistan/a-58979606>
- [10] Islam, M. (2015). Limits of Islamism: Jamaat-e-Islami in Contemporary India and Bangladesh. Cambridge University Press, New Delhi
- [11] Maizland, L. (2021, September 15). The Taliban in Afghanistan. Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved May 24, 2022, from <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/taliban-afghanistan>
- [12] Mishra, A. (2012, October 31). Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia: A Comparative Study of Pakistan and Bangladesh. *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, 68(3), 283-296.
- [13] News, O. (2022, March 1). Sheikh Hasina's Toughest Challenge-Defeating the Rising Tide of Islamism in Bangladesh. Retrieved April 2, 2022, from <https://ommcomnews.com/indianews/sheikh-hasinas-toughest-challenge-defeating-the-rising-tide-of-islamism-in-bangladesh>
- [14] Parvez, S. (2019, October). The Khilafah's Soldiers in Bengal Analysing the Islamic State Jihadists and their Violence Justification Narratives in Bangladesh. 13(5), 1-18.
- [15] Rahman, M. M. (2018). Triangular Confluence: Islam and Modernity in Bangladesh. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 53(6), 1-14.
- [16] Rajagopalan, R. P. (2021, August 13). Implications of the Evolving Situation in Afghanistan. New Delhi: The Diplomat. Retrieved May 24, 2022, from <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/implications-of-the-evolving-situation-in-afghanistan/>
- [17] Sabriet, N. R. (2021, September 08). The Taliban Takeover: Afghanistan-Bangladesh Relations During this Period of Transition. Observer Research Foundation . Retrieved from <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-taliban-takeover-afghanistan-bangladesh-relations-during-this-period-of-transition/>
- [18] The Hindu. (2021, August 16). Taliban takeover will impact South Asia and beyond: Bangladesh. New Delhi. Retrieved May 21, 2022, from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/taliban-takeover-will-impact-south-asia-and-beyond-bangladesh/article35945074.ece?homepage=true>
- [19] Vaughn, B. (2007). *Islamist Extremism in Bangladesh*. Congressional Research Service.